



(Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley, U.S. Navy)

Adm. Mike Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addresses faculty and students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 4 March 2010.

A Rigorous Education for an Uncertain Future

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In a July-August 2015 article in *Military Review* discussing the Army University, Lt. Gen. Robert B. Brown, commanding general of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, states, “Our current [Army educational] system is inadequate for addressing the growing complexity, volatility, and uncertainty of the twenty-first century security environment.”¹ The

Army’s system for professional military education, if not upgraded, will be unequal to the challenges that the Army and its leaders will face in the future. Building an educational architecture to better develop critical and creative thinkers in the Army is not a tax on the force. Instead, it is a long-term investment in the health of the force. It is a critical component for

enabling education, which, in Brown's words, "is the most reliable strategic hedge in investment that the Army can make in the face of an uncertain future."²

The Army's brigade commanders of 2025 are entering the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) this year. Increasing the rigor in professional military education (PME), one of the goals of the newly created Army University, offers a method for building the Army's strategic hedge.³ One element of the hedge is a rigorous intermediate-level education (ILE) that selects, educates, and places officers in a way that maximizes the intellectual capability in the force, beyond tactical training and experience. Doing so requires challenging two tacit assumptions in the traditional system: that all officers can complete ILE, and that board selection is more important than education for assessing promotion potential. As units at lower levels are thrust into circumstances that tactical training and experience cannot answer, a more rigorous ILE would provide those units an insurance policy against the unknowns they will face.

The State of Intermediate-Level Education

The Army has tried various approaches over time to provide high-quality ILE that meets the needs of the force. From 1946 to 2004, attendance at resident ILE was determined by a command and staff college (CSC) board, which selected approximately the top 50 percent of a year group for resident attendance at CGSC, another service college, or a foreign staff college.⁴ The officers who did not get the benefits of that education perceived their nonselection as a negative discriminator, and in turn did not perceive that they had a reasonable expectation of future service.⁵

To address that training disparity and its cultural perceptions, consistent with the recommendations in the 2003 *Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study Report to the Army*, the Army instituted universal resident ILE common core attendance from 2004 to 2012 at Fort Leavenworth and at several satellite campuses.⁶ Officers in their basic branches then completed ILE through the Advanced Operations Warfighting Course, later the Advanced Operations Course (AOC) at Fort Leavenworth or via distance learning, while officers in functional areas completed ILE through their qualification courses. This approach,

combined with the Army's operational requirements, created several challenges to effectiveness.

As the Army started growing in 2004 to meet war-time requirements, increasing demand from the force for field-grade officers resulted in shorter promotion timelines and less-selective promotion boards. Officers had fewer opportunities to pursue broadening assignments. Over time, the constant rotation of forces in and out of combat, while building a solid basis in small-unit tactics and leadership, left little time for most officers to gain doctrinal and theoretical foundations in combined arms warfare beyond the small-unit level.⁷

The separation of the common core and the AOC pushed most of the functional area and special branch officers out to the satellite campuses, and it closed off their access to the additional skill identifier elective programs such as the strategic studies, joint firepower, historian, homeland security, and space operations tracks.⁸ The cross-pollination that formerly came from having varied student populations, with a range of experiences among basic branch, functional area, and special branch officers, was diminished.

Another challenge facing ILE is that it must serve as "a course for the next ten years." Given punishing selection rates for senior service colleges, only a handful of ILE students will attend a war college, making ILE the only strategic education provided to most officers. The Army's true requirements for strategic education, especially in joint task forces and combatant commands, far outstrip the Army's investment to deliver that instruction.⁹ If officers have limited experience above the tactical level before ILE, and then study a curriculum with little or no strategic-level instruction, they will be hard pressed to gain substantive proficiency in military operations beyond tactics. Unfortunately, ILE graduates incapable of grasping the conduct of war above the tactical level are a liability to their future commands.

As of 2015, academic performance in ILE had little bearing on officer placement after graduation. Before 2011, about the time the Army reached its peak wartime end strength, CGSC did not use the "exceeded course standards" rating on academic evaluation reports. Those circumstances contributed to a Gresham's law-like trend of skyrocketing demand for relatively scarce and more valuable graduates of advanced military studies programs (AMSPs) such as the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS). Unlike their



ILE-only peers, AMSP graduates were admitted to their programs through a formal selection process.¹⁰ The demand for those graduates was not an endorsement of AMSPs; it was a tacit indictment of ILE.

The Army can improve ILE to meet the needs of the force, consistent with the goals of the Army University. Creating a more rigorous ILE that will prepare officers for the challenges they will face suggests four changes:

1. An entrance examination for ILE and a Graduate Record Examination (GRE) revised General Test minimum score for those attending ILE at Leavenworth
2. A more selective CSC board
3. An attritional model for ILE
4. ILE as a placement tool

Change 1: An Entrance Examination for ILE and a GRE General Test for Those Attending at Leavenworth

The first proposed change would be instituting an entrance examination for those desiring to attend Leavenworth or a satellite campus (Fort Belvoir, Fort Gordon, or Fort Lee). Such a proposal is not new; the Officer Professional Management System XXI Task Force proposed an examination in 1997, as did former Army Lt. Gen. Leonard D. Holder after retiring as commandant of CGSC, in a 1998 article in *Joint Force Quarterly* coauthored with Williamson Murray.

The rationale for entrance examinations was to tie attendance to academic standards as a prerequisite for professional military education, rather than selecting solely based on assignment patterns, reputation, and evaluations.¹¹

Holder and Murray specifically cited entrenched beliefs that learning at professional military education courses was secondary to attending as a reward for past performance and an opportunity to relax. Such attitudes reflected a culture of anti-intellectualism in many officers attending CGSC at Leavenworth, a trend that recent scholarship continues to observe.¹²

An entrance examination would assess and screen for general military and branch-specific knowledge, skills, and attributes, in addition to basic academic skills. Attendance at Leavenworth or a satellite campus would require a passing score on the examination, which would be administered annually. Those seeking attendance at Leavenworth would have to opt in by additionally submitting GRE scores equal to the advanced civil schooling standard.¹³

Screening students for basic combined arms warfare, academic, and writing skills would reduce the need for CGSC to maintain a remedial writing skills program. It would enable instruction to start from a higher baseline of student knowledge, raising the overall bar for students. This would reduce the supplemental workload on instructors at Leavenworth and its



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College)

Col. Douglas C. Cardinale, director of the Command and General Staff School, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, speaks to the Class of 2016 for the first time on 6 August 2015 in Eisenhower Auditorium, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

satellite campuses, who are teaching baseline skills to students ill qualified for graduate-level work. As part of this change, completion of a master of military art and science (MMAS) degree would be mandatory for all at Leavenworth. By passing the entrance examination and meeting the GRE screening criteria, each student would demonstrate the aptitude for a graduate thesis program, a step toward addressing Brown's observation of a prestige gap between Army and civilian academic institutions. Such a requirement would also provide a greater source of original scholarship to address research in topics of special interest to the Army because more officers would be conducting research.¹⁴

Requiring all students attending Leavenworth to pass an entrance examination and meet a minimum GRE score for admission, and to complete an MMAS degree for graduation, would likely cause some officers to apply to ILE satellite campuses. This would benefit all groups because the resulting distribution of students would encourage cross-pollination among officers from all branches across all campuses, rather than reserving Leavenworth attendance almost exclusively for command-track officers. In addition, the satellites would better accommodate individual scheduling needs if a prospective student could not attend during a given year or start that summer.

Change 2: A More Selective CSC Board

The second change would be to make the CSC board, which was reinstated in 2012, more selective. Rather than current practice, in which a board selects the top 60 percent of a single year group, the Army should select for an elite of capability.¹⁵ The percentage of the eligible population who would attend Leavenworth might be as low as 30 percent, factoring in the two opt-in screenings of an entrance examination and a GRE.

Officers desiring attendance at Leavenworth would be eligible for consideration only after achieving the required scores on the entrance examination and the GRE, with no waivers allowed. The CSC board would then select those officers best qualified for attendance. Such a process would account for academic aptitude as well as performance and potential, as expressed through officer evaluation reports and academic evaluation reports. Such selection is particularly important for career fields such as functional area 48 (foreign area officer), functional area 49 (operations research and systems analysis), functional area 50 (force management), functional area 52 (nuclear research and operations), and functional area 59 (strategist), where even stellar company command is no guarantor of future success.

Officers who do not wish to pursue an MMAS, contingent on board selection, would complete the ILE common core curriculum at a satellite location. Officers attending satellites would be subject to the same entrance examination standard as their Leavenworth counterparts but would not be required

common core, rather than once a year as is the case at Leavenworth. The availability of multiple starts during the year, followed by completion of AOC or a functional area qualification course, would enable a flow of ILE graduates to the force throughout the year. The third, and perhaps most intangible, oppor-



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College)

Students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College participate in a class 23 September 2014 in the Lewis and Clark Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

to submit GRE scores. Some of those students would have gained advanced degrees prior to ILE, while others would not pursue an advanced degree for other reasons. After completing the ILE common core at a satellite, basic branch officers would then complete the AOC through distance learning, while officers in functional areas would be able to start their qualification courses immediately after completing the common core, without having to wait until the end of the AOC.

A leaner CSC board would offer other opportunities. First, it would not preclude an officer's attendance at SAMS or other service AMSPs, which are volunteer courses independent of any centralized Army selection board (and therefore independent of the CSC board).¹⁶ Second, students attending satellites would have greater flexibility in starting the ILE

tunity offered by a highly selective CSC board would be protecting the satellites from being considered dumping grounds for less-qualified officers. Selecting officers who had attended satellite ILE courses through centralized selection boards for command and future schooling would also help preempt potential stigmas associated with such attendance.

Change 3: An Attritional Model for ILE

One method to increase rigor in PME, consistent with one of Army University's goals, would be to substantially reduce the obstacles to disenrolling a student for failure to meet academic standards. Based on experience with multiple staff groups in a two-year period of teaching at Fort Leavenworth and Fort Lee,

I had observed an informal consensus among faculty that some students, in the absence of any screening mechanism, had academic skills well below the standards needed for graduate-level work. The presence of those weaker students sometimes caused instructors to teach to the lowest common denominator of knowledge. This was most apparent during group instruction in subjects such as deliberate planning. The expression of “no-major-left-behind” came into common usage among students, reflecting a widely held perception of absent rigor and markedly less-capable graduates than ILE before 2004.¹⁷

The current CGSC standard places students on academic probation for receiving a final end-of-class grade of C+ (“below average,” ranging from 78 to 79.99) or U (“unsatisfactory,” below 70). An academic review board is required for a third end-of-class grade of C+, or C (“marginal,” ranging from 70 to 77.99) or below, or a second U grade.¹⁸ Any grade of U requires remediation before graduation, but it also places that student at a disadvantage since he or she is attempting to remediate previously failed course material and keep pace with classmates.

Instead of the current system, students receiving any two end-of-class grades of C+ or C, or any end-of-class grade of U at the end of a course, should be immediately disenrolled from that phase of ILE without prejudice. Instead of expending time and energy in academic retention boards to retain borderline performers who may never catch up to their peers intellectually, educationally, or professionally, such boards should occur only in truly extenuating circumstances. Those who desire to complete ILE need to begin their studies with sufficient academic, professional, and communication skills to meet standards, without exception.

The aggregate effects of an attritional PME model, building on rigorous screening criteria for attendance, would challenge students through creating an intellectually rigorous environment to promote greater self-discipline. An attritional model would also contribute to addressing the PME prestige gap that Brown mentions.

Change 4: ILE as a Placement Tool

Another Army cultural norm related to ILE is that the time taken for study is a break from duties, rather than preparation for future responsibilities. One indicator of that norm is the expression “it’s only a lot of

reading if you do it,” a common utterance among ILE students.¹⁹ The prevalence of that expression also reflects the relative lack of importance placed on grading in ILE courses, and it validates Brown’s observation of an “Industrial Age legacy” approach geared to mass production of forces.²⁰

Instead, academic performance should be a key factor in assignments subsequent to ILE. The 2015 *Army Vision* states that the Army must “commit to personnel policies that better develop and manage soldiers and Army civilians in order to optimize individual performance, best meet our manning requirements, and assure the health and welfare of our force.”²¹

Tying academic performance in ILE to future assignments would be a substantive step toward promoting all of those goals, while addressing current cultural norms that devalue grades in ILE. It would also require adjusting personnel policies to account for grading, including redirecting officers should they have significant downturns in academic performance during the year. The friction incurred by implementing such a system would be offset by the gains from matching ILE graduates’ skills and academic performance to the units that need their skills the most. Matching student performance to subsequent assignments would also provide a tangible incentive for ILE students to maximize their efforts during the course.

The Payoff

The challenges of complexity and uncertainty in the security environment now and in the future, combined with the cascading effects of leader development on the rest of the force, require the Army to have the fortitude to prepare officers intellectually to meet those challenges. Revitalizing the place CGSC occupies in PME is a critical step in setting the force for the future, both through its students and its instructors.

Changing the system would offer several immediate benefits. First, an entrance examination and GRE score in conjunction with a selection board would identify, and then best serve, those most capable of benefitting from the unique resources available at Leavenworth. Those attending satellites after passing the entrance examination and board selection would necessarily outnumber those attending at Leavenworth. However, distributing best-qualified officers of all branches throughout all the ILE locations would benefit the force at large. Doing so

would make ILE a true combined arms school for all, not just for those at Leavenworth.

Additionally, spreading talent across the different types of ILE would introduce diversity in the students attending AMSPs. Graduates of those second-year programs have included officers from Leavenworth, graduates of other service and allied CSCs, and officers who completed ILE entirely by distance education. The distribution of AMSP graduates, at first only to divisions and corps, expanded commensurate with expansion of SAMS in the early 2000s. Present-day distribution of AMSP graduates includes almost forty additional requisitions, most of which are individual augmentee positions for joint task forces and theater-level commands. The sustained demand for AMSP graduates, combined with the fact that not all Leavenworth ILE students apply to AMSPs, suggests that AMSPs would continue to draw applicants from all types of ILE.²²

Instituting a baseline quality cut through an entrance examination and then identifying the greatest

talent in the candidate pool through a selection board would pay long-term dividends. Increasing rigor in this manner would distinguish superior officers from the merely competent, while serving notice on officers unprepared to serve above the tactical level. Disenrolling underperforming students from ILE quickly without prejudice would provide a catalyst for students who required remediation to seek it, while debriding from the ranks those who could not meet standards. The long-term return on investment to the Army, in the form of greater intellectual capacity being returned to the force from a more rigorous CGSC, would far outweigh whatever opportunity costs might be incurred in the short term. Implementation would instill a standard of intellectual capability that would benefit the entire force and educate officers to build upon but not be prisoners of their immediate experiences. The true benefit would come over time as graduates of this revamped ILE applied the rigors of their education to lead their units through the challenges of an uncertain future. ■

Biography

Col. Francis Park, U.S. Army, is a strategist assigned to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, Operation Enduring Freedom Study Group, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. He is a graduate of the nonresident Command and General Staff Officer Course, the U.S. Army War College Basic Strategic Art Program, and the School of Advanced Military Studies. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Kansas. His previous assignments include strategic plans and policy assignments at the division and joint task force levels in Iraq and Afghanistan and at the U.S. Army Special Operations Command; intermediate-level education instructor at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; strategy branch chief, Strategic Plans, Concepts, and Doctrine Division, Headquarters, Department of the Army G-3/5; and deputy director, Commander's Action Group, International Security Assistance Force.

Notes

1. Lt. Gen. Robert B. Brown, "The Army University: Educating Leaders to Win in a Complex World" *Military Review* 95(4) (July–August 2015): 19.

2. *Ibid.*, 22.

3. *Ibid.*, 19–22.

4. Hanson W. Baldwin, "Army College Expands: Leavenworth Broadens Scope, Has 496 U.S. Officers and 52 From Abroad," *New York Times*, 17 January 1949, 8, as cited in Michael D. Stewart, "Raising A Pragmatic Army: Officer Education at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College [CGSC], 1946–1986," (doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 2010), 30; Army Regulation (AR) 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 18 December 2009), 71.

5. Officer Personnel Management System [OPMS] XXI Task Force, *Officer Personnel Management System XXI Study* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army [HQDA], 1997), 4–12; OPMS XXI Task Force, "OPMS XXI Precursor Study Issue Paper: Nonselection for Resident CGSC and Its Career Implications," (issue paper, HQDA, Washington, DC, 9 April 1996).

6. U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, *The Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study Report to the Army* (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2003), OS-12–OS-13, ADA415810, Defense Technical Information Center.

7. The need to refocus on previously neglected tasks was one of the Army's training challenges, as described in John M. McHugh and Raymond T. Odierno, *A Statement on the Posture of the United States Army 2015*, presented to the 114th Congress, 1st sess. (Washington,

DC: Department of the Army, March 2015), 7–8. A more immediate example appears in the refocusing of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, in Justin Naylor, “New ‘Black Jack’ Command Team Focused on Basics,” U.S. Army Homepage, 14 April 2010, accessed 15 March 2016, <http://www.army.mil/article/37347/>.

8. The Army War College Defense Strategy Course and the Army G-3/5 (Operations and Plans) Strategic Education and Development Program (formerly the Harvard Strategist Program) confer the additional skill identifier (ASI) 6Z, the same as the strategic studies track. Graduates of the Joint and Combined Warfighting School administered through the Joint Forces Staff College receive ASI 3H, the same ASI as the Joint Planner track at Leavenworth.

9. Requirements for strategic education are laid out in AR 350-1, “Army Training and Leader Development,” 19 August 2014, 77.

10. U.S. Army Lt. Col. Jon Griese, former HQDA G-3/5 (Operations and Plans) functional area (FA) 59 proponent, email to author, 25 August 2015; HQDA G-3/5, periodic memoranda regarding distribution of advanced military studies program (AMSP) students (Washington, DC: HQDA G-3/5, 2005–2013). The FA 59 proponent officer at the Army G-3/5 Strategic Leadership Division is also responsible for distribution of AMSP students after graduation and handles requests for AMSP graduates from the force. The application process for AMSP has been in effect with minor changes since the inception of the course. Harold R. Winton, interview by Richard Mustion, 5 April 2001, U.S. Army War College Senior Officer Oral History Program, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL; School of Advanced Military Studies, *Program Guide AY 2016* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2015), 18.

11. OPMS XXI Task Force, Tab 17, “Officer Education System Revisions,” dated in Annex D, “OPMS XXI Task Force Recommendations,” *Officer Personnel Management System XXI Final Report*, vol. III, prepared for the Chief of Staff of the Army (Washington, DC: Headquarters, OPMS XXI Task Force, 1997); Leonard D. Holder and Williamson Murray, “Prospects for Military Education,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1998): 86–88.

12. Holder and Murray, “Prospects for Military Education”: 90; Charles D. Allen and George J. Woods, “Developing Army Enterprise Leaders,” *Military Review* 95(4) (July–August 2015): 42–49; Jason Warren, “The Centurion Mindset and the Army’s Strategic Leader Paradigm,” *Parameters* 45(3) (Autumn 2015): 28–38.

13. The legacy GRE General Test standard for advanced civil schooling was 500 verbal, 500 quantitative, and 4.0 for writing. Based

on the ETS conversion table for scores prior to 1 August 2011, the current GRE General Test scores are 143 verbal, 147 quantitative, and 4.0 for writing.

14. The U.S. Army War College publishes a list of strategic topics of special interest to the U.S. Army annually as the *Key Strategic Issues List*. CGSC is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools to grant master’s degrees. The component for accreditation that would be affected by an increase in the number of MMAS degrees being conferred is Core Component 2b, “The organization’s resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future,” U.S. Army CGSC, CGSC Bulletin 933, *CGSC Accreditation Program*, 14 July 2011, 16.

15. Merit-based CSC selection boards were reinstated per Secretary of the Army John McHugh, memorandum to Principal Officials of Headquarters, Department of the Army, et al., Army Directive 2012-21, *Optimization of Intermediate-Level Education*, 14 September 2012.

16. The process for application to SAMS involves a written entrance examination lengthier than the GRE verbal or written sections.

17. The “no-major-left-behind” label, a common expression among CGSC students (to include the author’s own) and graduates when universal resident attendance was the norm, owes to the perceived relaxing of standards to accommodate the greater population of officers attending resident ILE in the absence of a selection board. Tanya Biank, *Undaunted: The Real Story of America’s Servicewomen in Today’s Military* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2013), 170.

18. U.S. Army CGSC, CGSC Bulletin 903, *Command and General Staff College Academic Performance, Graduation and Awards Policies and Procedures* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army CGSC, 30 January 2012), 9.

19. Thomas E. Ricks, “A Field Grade Army Officer on What the Problem is with U.S. Military Education,” Foreign Policy online, 11 December 2014, accessed 15 March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/11/a-field-grade-army-officer-on-what-the-problem-is-with-u-s-military-education/>.

20. Brown, “The Army University: Educating Leaders to Win in a Complex World”: 19–20.

21. John M. McHugh and Raymond T. Odierno, *The Army Vision* (Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2015), 7.

22. Jon Griese, email to author; HQDA G-3/5, memoranda regarding distribution of AMSP students.

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