End the Professional Military Education Equivalency Myth

Restructure the Army Captains Career Course Based on Best Practices for Distributed Learning

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Professional Military Education (PME) schools must incorporate active and experiential learning to develop the practical and critical thinking skills our warfighters require … curricula should leverage live, virtual, constructive, and gaming methodologies with wargames and exercises involving multiple sets and repetitions to develop deeper insight and ingenuity … To achieve deeper education on critical thinking, strategy, and warfighting, PME programs will have to ruthlessly reduce coverage of less important topics.

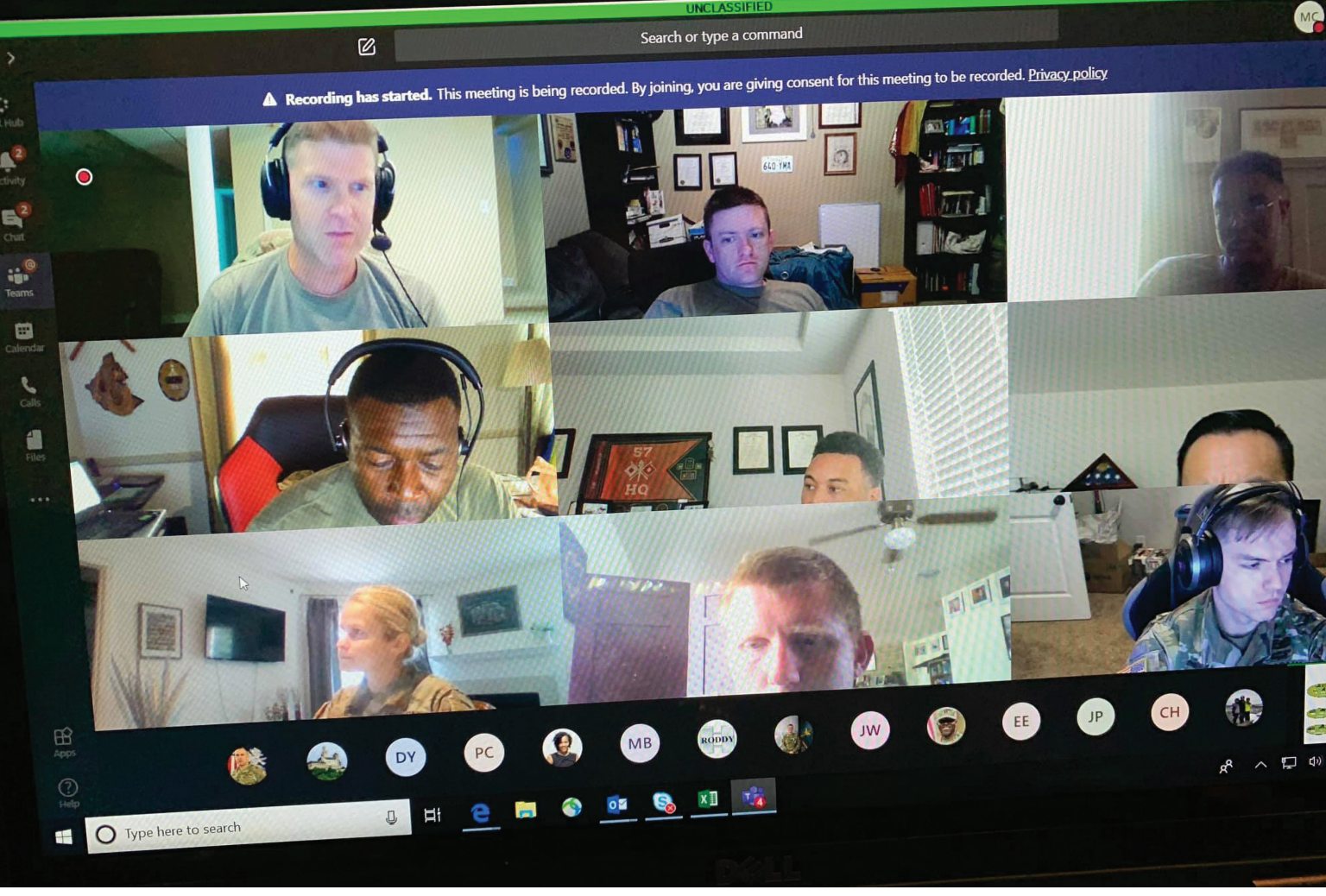
—Joint Chiefs of Staff

The Army Distributed Learning Program (TADLP), which forms the backbone of professional military education (PME) for soldiers in the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) and Army National Guard (ARNG), fails to meet the shared vision established in 2020 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). This deficiency, caused by insufficient course design and counterproductive policies and doctrine, damages the quality of education experienced by both the Regular Army (RA) and Reserve Component (RC).

The Reserve Component Distributed Learning Captains Career Course (DL CCC or RC CCC) is a sample of the broader problem set within the officer education system and, through academic best practices, I suggest relatively low-cost changes to training, personnel, organization, policies, and doctrine. If implemented, these adjustments should improve the training experience for RC and RA officers, reduce existing capability gaps between the components, and better meet the intent of our most senior leaders. It will foster "strategically minded joint warfighters, who think critically and can creatively apply military power to inform national strategy, conduct global integrated operations, and fight under conditions of disruptive change."[1]

Provide the Same Educational Outcomes

Army Regulation (AR) 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*, defines PME as a "progressive education system that prepares leaders for increased responsibilities and successful performance at the next higher level by developing the key knowledge, skills, and attributes they require to operate successfully



Reserve Component captains enrolled in the Signal Officer Captains Career Course participate in a distributed learning remote training session on 20 August 2022. (Screen shot courtesy of the U.S. Army)

at that level in any environment."[2] Within the Total Army School System (TASS), Army officers follow a sequential, progressive list of courses known as the officer educational system, where CCC is defined as the "second major branch school officers attend before company-level command."[3] RA officers attend CCC as a five-month continuous course at an Army base that doubles as one of the nine centers of excellence (COE) for their chosen branch of service.[4] This ensures, for example, that all sustainment officers learn at the Sustainment COE at Fort Lee, Virginia, and are trained by dedicated faculty based at Fort Lee that are experts in logistics.

RA officers receive nearly twelve weeks of job-specific technical and tactical training at CCC, along with an additional eight weeks of "common core" training, for total resident training of approximately eight hundred hours.[5] Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 600-3, *Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, defines common core training as those "subjects (that) comprise the tasks all officers are expected to perform successfully, regardless of branch."[6] For CCC, these subjects include training within units, the operations process, the profession, leadership, and conducting Army operations, among other key topics.[7]

RC officers also attend a CCC, but the duration and time commitments for these mostly part-time soldiers are quite different. RC CCC is a self-paced program that can be completed over thirteen months.[8] This includes two separate fifteen-day resident periods of in-person education at a COE where officers receive lectures, participate in group discussions, conduct practical exercises, and complete in-class examinations.[9] In total, RC CCC officers receive around 240 hours of resident training and between 75 to 150 hours of DL training.[10] On paper, this would constitute under 50 percent of the total training time that their RA counterparts experience.

Understanding what Constitutes Distributed Learning

Distributed learning is defined in AR 350-1 as "the delivery of standardized individual, collective, and self-development training to units, Soldiers, leaders, and Civilians at the right place and right time, using multiple means and technologies, with synchronous, asynchronous, and blended student-instructor interaction."[11] This delivery mechanism, which shapes the composition and structure of RC CCC, constitutes another key difference experienced by Army Reserve and National Guard officers. RC CCC is conducted through multiple phases in a self-paced, blended training model, which may also include a prerequisite phase.[12] Most of the blended training is delivered through the Army's chosen learning management solution (LMS), which is provided by Blackboard. In using the LMS, most of this training is considered asynchronous learning; without the benefit of access to an instructor, this content includes recorded videos, animated PowerPoint slides with voice-overs, and multiple-choice knowledge checks or final exams.[13]

Synchronous learning, which includes "immediate" communications capabilities with an instructor or colleagues, rarely, if ever, happens as a part of the DL phases of RC CCC.[14] Interactions with colleagues in the course are rare until an officer attends the in-person phases.[15] But by focusing on asynchronous training, RC officers have more flexibility to complete the course on their timeline, a positive outcome for both the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the RC officers. For TRADOC, distributed learning creates "cost effective and efficient training."[16] For the RC officers, DL remains in their best interest, as many of them must balance their civilian employment or civilian education programs with their military commitments.[17]

But the course design and lack of interaction appear to have created structural flaws that inhibit educational outcomes for RC officers.[18] While the joint chiefs are urging PME curricula to move from "predominately topic-based models" to approaches that prioritize critical thinking and ingenuity in warfighting, the current DL version of CCC remains focused on topics, with checks on learning during each course based on recall knowledge.

A well-structured distributed learning course, with a deeper focus on learning activities as opposed to digital resources, a defined support system, and refinements to the existing evaluation process, could potentially make up for the time and training gap RC officers experience when compared to their RA counterparts.[19] And according to Dr. Steven A. Petersen, the Midgrade Learning Continuum team chief at Army University responsible for the instructional design of Common Core for CCC, an upcoming redesign of the Common Core curriculum that will launch in fiscal year 2023, may have fixed some of the structural challenges with DL CCC. In a redesigned Common Core portion of CCC, soldiers from all components—active and reserve—will be required to perform the same 75-hour DL prerequisite. While this prerequisite will be additive for the Active Component, component officers already perform a Common Core DL prerequisite. In theory, this will provide the COEs with more time to focus on the warfighting, staff, command, and branch functions critical to success for junior officers.

But as currently designed, the CCC structures may be exacerbating a knowledge and capabilities gap between company-grade RA and RC officers "akin to a virus," which could impact the long-term readiness, morale, and welfare of units.[20] Additionally, this perceived gap may hinder RC officers for the remainder of their

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Capt. Christopher Marty reviews the intelligence preparation of the battlefield and intelligence collection processes with Reserve Component Captains Career Course students on 21 March 2022 at the U.S. Army Intelligence Center, Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Students were later tested on their understanding of military aspects of weather, terrain, civil considerations, and enemy forces with a focus on preparing for large-scale combat operations. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

careers, especially in mobilization, joint, or federal emergency scenarios.

This gap may be worsened through current policy requirements for course attendance that are unrealistic for RC soldiers, as AR 350-1 states that officers have the "flexibility to complete the DL at home station," instead of a soldier's home of record.[21] This in-person attendance at a reserve center or armory is technically required by regulation in order to receive the limited, capped, and unfunded mandate known as educational-based distance learning pay or days accumulated for retirement. This policy forces junior officers to travel to a military facility, which they have limited access to, in a nonpay status. There, they must find an available government desktop of questionable functionality to watch a forty-five-minute prerecorded lecture from Fort Leavenworth that this same soldier could do from home with a personal laptop and a common access card reader. In other words, some soldiers may only be learning from home if they are willing to forgo the compensation that they are rightfully entitled to for their performance.

In another example of the possible capability gap between RC and RA officers, many students, including this author, completed the DL CCC prerequisite that is largely composed of common core subjects in two to three days of online learning through passive video viewing, Google searches, and Quizlet reviews.[22] That's roughly twenty to thirty hours of effort, which is not anywhere close to the nearly two weeks of effort expected by the administering COE.[23] It is certainly nowhere near the approximate

two months of in-person common core time invested in RA captains.

The Army disagrees; current doctrine insists that "the RC CCC provides the same educational outcomes as the CCC (RA)."[24] Thus, both CCC programs should conclude with officers having learned similar, if not equal, concepts regardless of their military component.

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Unfortunately, RA officers scored 21 percentage points higher on their comprehensive common core exam than did their RC counterparts.[25] If equivalency in educational outcomes is an expectation, this data point, the aforementioned improper course design, and the massive time-gap in common core education between the two components for those captains that are about to be the senior leaders in company-level formations suggests that the course is failing to do so.

It is relevant for the Army to determine if equivalency in the educational standards between RC and AC officers should remain an essential goal for PME. While doctrine currently specifies that the commanding general of TRADOC must "ensure course equivalency across [the] One Army School System," no clear explanation as to why "equivalency" is necessary seems to exist.[26] It may be that the real or perceived discrimination of soldiers for promotion, due to their attendance at nonresident courses, is the driving force.[27] If this is the case, it is an overcorrection that could best be fixed with an amended doctrinal policy stating that resident PME will not be viewed, rated, or weighted differently than its nonresident counterpart in determining the promotion of soldiers in each component.

Instead, we have inadvertently created a single education system with unequal outcomes for all our officers. RA captains are deserving of the highest quality PME available to them by the U.S. Army, without the burden of equivalency for their RC counterparts. To maximize the five months of training that RA officers experience, they need focused, disciplined, realistic, and harsh training that is unique to a resident CCC, including active usage of secure facilities in exercise planning, live wargaming based on recent intelligence and lessons learned, role-playing as commanding officers in a forward environment, and receiving and distributing orders to the force. These concepts are nearly impossible to replicate in a DL environment. Thus, the educational gap is experienced by both the RC and RA components and collectively, we fail to meet the PME standards expected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Make PME Accessible to the Force Not in Residence

In their 2020 vision and guidance statement, the JCS note that the design of existing PME does not meet the current demands expected for development on the leadership development continuum, where intellectual overmatch against potential adversaries is essential.[28] With this conceptual vision at the forefront, what follows is a recommended outcomes-based approach that can reduce any capability gaps, increase the quality in CCC educational outcomes, and foster more creative and critical thinking.[29]

The Army should implement a nonmateriel pilot program, prioritizing three central components within the initiative that could begin either concurrently or sequentially. First, a RC PME task force could recommend broad and targeted adjustments to DL CCC. RC CCC adjunct professors could implement synchronous learning opportunities and career guidance. Finally, targeted adjustments to policies and doctrine could unburden the RA force while providing RC with clearance to operate in a post-COVID, work-from-home environment.

Currently, Army University conducts annual PME reviews of TADLP courses to ensure compliance with guidance from senior leadership, which includes the *National Defense Strategy* and associated guidance from the JCS.[30] In reviewing the 2023–24

cycle of RC CCC, TRADOC, in conjunction with ARNG and USAR, would create a multicomponent task force of experts with specialized skills in course design. More than three percent of USAR soldiers have doctorates, so the task force should be primarily composed of troop program unit (TPU) and mobilization day RC servicemembers holding doctorates in education, similar terminal academic degrees, or relevant educational design certifications.[31] Leaders with experience in distance learning educational design should also be mobilized for inclusion in the process, as these military and educational experts are best served to review the existing course and its alignment to expected educational outcomes.

The primary purpose of the RC PME task force would be to deliver a single report with collective tangible and actionable academic best-practices that would be endorsed and implemented on a pilot basis by TRADOC. Some recommendations, which currently appear to be lacking from DL CCC, may include the following:

- "Scaffolding" learning activities, a format similar to a "crawl-walk-run" method, should be considered, as it enables deeper knowledge and critical thinking rather than existing passive learning through doctrine, articles, and slides.[32]
- Academic support is an essential component of online learning.[33] But RC CCC students have little to no direct support while taking the DL component of the course, which would be corrected with the inclusion of TPU adjunct faculty.
- Determine and communicate to all participants the distributed learning model. For example, the resources, activities, supports, and evaluations model popularized by Daniel Churchill, Mark King, and Bob Fox ensures diversification of learning opportunities.[34] All participants in the course should clearly understand the explicit and implicit tasks that would maximize learning.
- Because DL courses are asynchronous, there is no sense of a broader community of officers, knowledge sharing, or networking available to enhance career knowledge or advancement.[35] TPU adjunct faculty would deliver much needed opportunities to learn from practitioners in their RC field of practice.
- Virtual office hours are rarely, if ever, provided for interested students by the Army or civilian cadre during the DL phases.[36] Again, TPU adjunct faculty can fill this void.
- Finally, the RC CCC design team appears to have integrated few active learning best practices within the course. These include, but are not limited to the following:
  - Video lectures, a popular digital resource in the RC CCC model, are flawed. Many provide little more than doctrinal information and case studies and do not synthesize information well or incorporate tactics like bookends, interleaves, and overlays.[37] Video length and size can be reduced and delivered in different formats—podcasts, transcripts, PowerPoint slides, doctrinal excerpts, process maps, and active reading documents—that may further educational outcomes.
  - Students could provide "know-wondered-learned" videos or voice threads that present best practices and lessons learned.
  - Students can be assigned "minute papers" or other short-form response requirements that enable synthesis.
  - The creation and management of discussion boards may be valuable, especially if the student managed an accessible after-course completion.[38]

These are but a few examples of the differences between best practices in online learning that have been peer-reviewed by academics and the more industrial, one-size-fits-all approach focused on recall learning that the Army has adopted for DL courses. The RC PME task force would review the existing RC CCC curriculum for each COE, review existing critical gaps, make generalized and targeted recommendations, and then observe changes over time.

In addition to creating of the RC task force, TRADOC should task USAR with creating a three-year pilot initiative of active management of RC CCC for the entire RC. Existing organizations such as the three training commands (TC) in the USAR are capable of undertaking this pilot mission set. The 108th TC focuses on initial entry education, while the 84th develops and leads combat support command training exercises. That naturally directs the tasker to the 80th TC, which is the RC unit responsible for supporting TASS. Within the 80th TC, the

97th Brigade is responsible for administration of the DL component of the Command and General Staff College (CGSC). The 80th could either create a task force at the command-level or delegate the responsibility to the 97th Brigade. The 97th would then be tasked with providing TPU RC CCC adjunct professors instructors (or course coordinators) to assist with the facilitation of those synchronous learning activities and DL adjustments recommended by the multicomponent RC task force. These officers would serve in a blended role as course coordinators, adjunct professors, or course and career mentors, providing guidance, expertise, and logistical support to RC CCC participants. Creating these opportunities is likely to increase course satisfaction by DL participants as well as reduce the completion times of DL phases while establishing better learning outcomes for participating soldiers.[39]

A resulting labor analysis from the pilot, conducted by Army University or the Combined Arms Center in conjunction with the 80th TC, would determine the amount of additional TPU billets needed to facilitate the synchronous components of RC CCC carried out by the RC CCC adjunct professors. The success or failure of this initiative could result in an organizational adjustment to the mission set for 80th TC and an associated increase in TPU personnel to their table of distribution and allowance. And while the study could choose to recommend additional full-time Active Guard Reserve soldiers to assist with monitoring, revising, and administering the program, they are likely to find that this full-time support would be unnecessary, and better served by either temporary active-duty operational support RC soldiers or simply with additional TPU officers.

If the pilot initiatives prove to be successful, TRADOC will need to amend policies and doctrine to reflect the adjusted TADLP course design for RC CCC, primarily in AR 350-1 and DA Pam 600-3. As they must also consider the guidance delivered by the JCS, the educational outcomes for both sections of CCC are likely to require amendments, necessitating a potential rewrite for both documents.

At minimum, TRADOC should consider removing the equivalency standard from those resident courses with a nonresident counterpart and remove DL requirements tied to specific locations when performance at a soldier's home of record would be an appropriate substitute. Should TRADOC make these changes, they would also be required to draft and deliver clear and consistent guidance regarding the design and execution of DL programs.[40] These doctrinal changes could be informed by the delivery of the first two initiatives in this pilot program.

"TRADOC should consider removing the equivalency standard from those resident courses with a nonresident counterpart and remove distributed learning requirements tied to specific locations when performance at a soldier's home of record would be an appropriate substitute."

Assess, Adapt, and Innovate

The proposed course of action meets the doctrinal criteria established in Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning, in that the option is "suitable, feasible, acceptable … and complete."[41] The initiatives within the proposal are strategically responsive, technologically realistic, and offer actionable adjustments to policy, personnel, and training. As a proof of concept, this initiative could be used as a baseline for modifying other RC DL PME including noncommissioned officer courses and the CGSC program, depending on the findings after the program has been evaluated.

PME reviews and adjustments are regular operational activities within the Army, ensuring that any potential disruptions to the force are minimal and the financial trade-offs associated with the pilot program are a worthwhile experiment. Although the Army's experience in creating and delivering nimble and effective pilot programs has been mixed, the 80th TC (TASS) is

currently running one such program with its management of CGSC.[42] The pilot reduces the time spent in a single phase from eight months of DL to four, which indicates both the capability for change and a willingness to better improve the learning outcomes for the RC officer corps. This CGSC pilot is also likely to positively impact RC personnel readiness, enabling additional time for field-grade officers to develop and plan mission sets essential to the respective component.

If this pilot program successfully meets the desired end state, the resulting increase or stability in learning outcomes would likely decrease the thirty-day resident attendance need for RC officers at their respective CCC. These on-site reductions would generate significant budgetary savings in active duty for training orders, travel and lodging costs, and meal entitlements. It would also generate additional unit-level savings by reallocating force power from PME and back toward mission sets while reducing the overall education and time-commitment burden on citizen-soldiers.

These adjustments may have the second-order effect of higher retention and promotion rates to the field-grade level. Captains in the ARNG, who currently serve as company commanders, battalion staff officers, and functional area leaders, are more likely to be available for state and federal emergencies. And USAR officers will have more on-the-job training opportunities, empowering them with the capability to seek out joint force assignments earlier after company command.

While this pilot program would almost certainly result in an additional cost burden for USAR and potential expansion of the 97th from a brigade to a division, the Total Army could see an overall cost reduction due to a possible requirement reduction for full-time CCC staff and a reduction in the required number of resident attendance days for RC CCC students. If this is unlikely to close the financial gap, Army University and the Combined Arms Center will need to look at reducing the time spent by RA officers at CCC. As the JCS make clear, ruthless reductions in noncore PME also comes with ensuring parity with DL participants to "extend the core mission."[43]

But funding challenges are not the primary force integration functional areas of concern with this recommendation. Instead, those surround manning and stationing. In a difficult recruiting environment across the joint force, force generation is likely to prioritize mobilization and deployment needs. Allocating additional TPU positions for force generation in the TCs may instead need to fall to logistics, medical, and other service and support functions critical to meeting the overall Department of Defense mission set. And yet, as stated earlier in this article regarding impact, a well-structured distributed learning course directed at junior officers entering their RC CCC could reduce the time, training, and readiness capabilities gaps in the existing force structure. If this pilot program is not resourced, those RC officers that remain within the ARNG and USAR and become field-grade officers will be less prepared to lead in a joint environment against near-peer adversaries, in other mobilizations requiring the RC, and in positions of senior leadership.

Prepare for War

In an evolving technological environment, with an Army more integrated into a joint force, the leadership capabilities of our RC leaders cannot be stunted at the company-grade level when they are critically needed to serve and lead in the conflicts to come.[44] RC officers and their unique education and skillsets developed over years in the civilian, corporate, and professional worlds, will be a necessity in any future war rather than an added-value luxury. Where RC soldiers were once called up to fill out unit manning rosters, they are now looked to as individual augmentees, providing new ways of thinking creatively and critically that are unbound by Army doctrine.

Additionally, our RA officers deserve to have the best available training opportunities that place them in realistic scenarios to plan to win the fight. Only by continuing to experiment with new initiatives that take advantage of the unique skillsets that our RA and RC officers have to offer can we collectively meet the requirements of the joint chiefs of producing leaders capable of intellectual overmatch against the enemy. "The driving mindset behind our reforms," they write, "must be that we are preparing for war."[45] We must begin doing so in all facets, including our Reserve Component Captains Career Course education system model and delivery mechanisms. We must deliver engaging, practical education to our junior officers that has the power to positively impact all soldiers in the total force, through our leaders. We must begin with the basics, the foundation of our Army. We must begin with our training. And we must begin now. ■

Notes

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