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Getting the Best Out of Joint Warfighter Development

By Charles Davis, Jeffrey Turner, and Mary Bell

Is the Department of Defense (DOD) producing the best joint warfighters possible? During strategic competition that increasingly ebbs toward conflict, joint warfighting and joint warfighter development are more important than ever. Joint warfighter development is the catalyst necessary for the U.S. military to conduct joint operations.

Joint operations, where forces from different military departments are interoperable and interdependent, convey a marked advantage over potential adversaries and leave them with few military options to counter. Joint operations leverage the unique capabilities of each DOD Service, but they require joint-minded leaders—joint warfighters—who can collaboratively orient toward common objectives rather than fighting separate Service-centric campaigns. The present and future security environments demand warfighters who are truly joint-minded—capable, comfortable, and confident—when operating across joint functions, fighting domains, and cultures.

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Joint professional military education (JPME) is intended to instill joint-mindedness, or jointness, in the minds of graduates and prepare them with practical joint expertise. Failure to develop joint-mindedness, and to practice its practical implementation, risks losing the interpersonal trust and competence that enable the Service forces to operate interdependently.

Joint warfighting is a team effort—we all succeed or suffer defeat together. Many professional military education institutions are making sincere efforts to infuse more joint content into their curricula. The bottom line is that the Joint Staff J7 Directorate (Joint Force Development) requires that JPME programs include joint content to maintain accreditation with Outcomes-Based Military Education standards. The stakes of joint warfighting, however, underscore the need for absolute clarity about what is required to produce truly joint-capable warfighters. A definition of skilled joint warfighter appears in the glossary of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP), but the definition does not address how one develops such warfighters. A failure to adhere to the essentials of joint warfighter development could become inimical, precipitating renewed questions about the relevance of professional military education.

Developing skilled joint warfighters requires a decidedly specific combination of elements within JPME institutions to produce a professional of the highest quality. The three elements include:

- **Balanced representation** from across the Services as well as the U.S. Coast Guard—both faculty and student bodies—to achieve joint acculturation and the resultant ethos
- A competent faculty possessing considerable joint expertise and experience to exemplify jointness and instill practical understanding
- A rigorous, intensive curriculum prescribing substantial joint practical exercise for students as members of a joint planning team.

More than good ideas, these elements were thoughtfully prescribed in the 1989 report by the Congressional Panel on Military Education under the astute leadership of the late Congressman Ike Skelton (D-MO). The elements are even more relevant today. Absent any of the three, any program desiring to produce warfighters who are truly joint and sufficiently skilled in joint warfighting will fall short.

This article describes the importance of each element and how these elements are integrated within the Joint Advanced Warfighting School (JAWS), a war college program in the Joint Forces Staff College at the National Defense University. JAWS was created for the singular and focused purpose of developing skilled joint warfighters.

**Compositional Balance to Instill Jointness**

Jointness is a state of mind underwritten by understanding of and appreciation for various Service cultures, capabilities, and members. It cannot be created by fiat or through a collection of Service platforms. Developing jointness in the minds of warfighters requires joint acculturation facilitated by balanced Service representation across both faculty and student bodies. The OPMEP sets varying composition standards for students and faculty from each of the Services and U.S. Coast Guard to achieve this acculturation.

The OPMEP directs the Service senior-level JPME II programs to maintain a student and faculty body that includes “no more than 60 percent” from the host Service. This is a generous composition standard, as a 60-percent presence still results in the culture of the host Service program being dominant. Furthermore, the Government Accountability Office recently found that the schools “did not always include the required mix of students.”

Proportional or balanced Service representation, as prescribed for JPME Phase II, ensures that a program can instill optimal jointness by acculturating students to the range of cultures, approaches, and capabilities offered by each Service and agency, as well as allied and partner nations. Instilling jointness through genuine acculturation demands thoughtful cultivation, and only through balanced composition can a program avoid the specter of Service culture dominance or parochialism in the seminar environment.

At JPME Phase I, intermediate-level education, students strive toward learning how to function on a joint staff. At JPME Phase II, senior-level education, students strive toward achieving joint qualification and learning to function at the operational and strategic nexus. Both phases facilitate a methodical approach to fostering acculturation. Acculturation—joint acculturation—“is the process by which officers are taught both the merits and the practice of working effectively within a joint context.” Successful acculturation, psychologically, entails overcoming the dogma of Service-centric perspectives and embracing “a more unifying joint ethos.”

Students from different Services develop a joint ethos when bound together within balanced, diverse groups, and when subjected to a rigorous joint curriculum that creates shared experience and robust collaboration. The sine qua non of jointness is trust. Beyond mere appreciation, a foundation of trust ensures that officers from different Services can operate together and interdependently. The powerful organizational cultures of the Services and agencies foster ethnocentrism and parochialism that have beset past military operations. Such Service or department centricity can generate, prior to JPME Phase II, unacknowledged biases, and Service priorities can prove dangerous to the achievement of joint operations objectives. Those same dangers are exemplified by Operations Eagle Claw (the aborted April 1980 mission to rescue hostages from Iran) and Urgent Fury (the U.S. invasion of Grenada). A prerequisite to cultivating trust is the student’s ability to identify, acknowledge, and process alternatives to those Service biases, which enables, when the individual is “purpled,” holistic considerations for military operations. Daily exposure through earnest communication and shared experience in a balanced joint team cultivates the trust and shared values that surmount Service-centric attitudes.
Balanced Service representation is integral to the JAWS student body. Each group of students in JAWS has a proportional composition of students from across the Services and the U.S. Coast Guard and includes students from other U.S. agencies and international fellows—military officers from allied and partner nations. The JAWS faculty also reflects a compositional balance from across the Services, which produces a high degree of joint credibility and competence that reinforces efforts to instill joint attitudes and perspectives in students.

**Faculty Experience Matters**

The ability to produce joint warfighters rests with faculty who possess considerable joint experience and expertise—who themselves are joint warfighters. Joint warfighters are inherently and necessarily joint practitioners, and programs must imbue students with a holistic understanding of not only what jointness means but also how joint fighting is practiced. Faculty possessing substantial joint knowledge and expertise gained through extensive joint education and joint duty are indispensable if students are to move beyond abstract knowledge of joint matters to achieve a functional understanding and appreciation. Such faculty can capably reify joint concepts, doctrine, and processes for students, enabling their knowledge and understanding and their expectations when serving as a member of a joint staff.

All JAWS military faculty are joint-qualified officers, most coming directly from joint assignments and from leading joint planning groups, who infuse recent experience and practical knowledge into the curriculum and seminar discussions. Timeliness of experience ensures relevance and positively impacts the quality of student preparation. The requirement for civilian faculty to have terminal degrees, though not exclusive to JAWS, meets accreditation requirements and demonstrates a faculty ability to achieve the highest levels of academic thought necessary to produce scholarship and develop students possessing the ability to address national security challenges. Most civilian faculty are former joint practitioners as well, and the team necessarily includes accomplished leaders from across the national security community—the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—to cultivate student understanding of interagency and multinational operations.

**Practice and Application Within a Joint Context**

Developing joint warfighters requires students to engage in authentic, challenging joint practical exercises and assessments. Extensive joint practical exercises leverage the balanced student composition to drive intensive collaboration, cooperation, and interdependence within a realistic context. Students from various Services must learn to trust each other. A shared stake in collective success forces the reconciliation of perspectives and approaches that leads to greater understanding and appreciation for the cultures, forces, and capabilities of the various Services. Greater understanding and appreciation reinforce interpersonal trust and the skills in operational art that subsequently generalize to joint duty. Such an outcome cannot be achieved by students role-playing the representation from the other Services.

A joint warfighter is one who can think operationally and strategically while engaging in joint planning to operate effectively at the nexus of the strategic and operational levels of war. Melding the strategic and operational as part of joint practical exercises is an indispensable component; strategy and operations inform bidirectionally. Regardless of the temporal context, joint planning must also be the medium used to focus the practical efforts of future joint warfighters. The responsibilities, activities, and considerations of joint planning lie substantially beyond any Service-level planning process. Joint planning also demands broader context, considerations, and participation; simply teaching officers the joint planning process is insufficient.

The requirement for rigorous, intensive, and extensive joint practical exercise is strongly reflected in the curriculum of the JAWS program, where students must not only master joint planning but also become skilled joint warfighters who are historically informed and strategically minded. While the curriculum is rigorous and deliberately constructed with long-term educational outcomes in mind, the connection of the JAWS program to talent management and billeting ensures the education is relevant to stakeholder needs.

There are 39 joint billets across all combatant commands and the Joint Staff that are coded specifically for JAWS graduates. The graduate placement structure ensures not only relevance to the joint force, but also that the four curricular fields of study understand their contribution toward the JAWS programmatic ends, achieving programmatic unity of effort and action. Long before students are subjected to an intensive and progressive succession of joint practical exercises, they are prepared by engaging in a military theory and history field of study and further equipped by a strategy field of study. Prior grounding forces students to consider theoretical, historical, and contemporary factors and considerations bearing on military strategy that enable them to evaluate national-level strategy and compose theater-level strategy. Only after this do students apply their hard-earned knowledge and understanding during a third field of study focusing on operational design and joint planning, composed of progressive joint exercises encompassing campaign, contingency, and crisis planning contexts.

A final field of study, joint synthesis, drives students to practically reconcile security situations of broader strategic and operational consequence by fusing and then applying the totality of their joint education and understanding to a geopolitical conundrum of strategic interest. Joint synthesis includes the study of strategic and ethical leadership, field research trips, and a Capstone exercise. The field research trip to study operational art at Yorktown, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville, Virginia, is central to ensuring students can synthesize the scale...
and complexity of operational problems requiring the “skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, means, and risks.”

Engagements with senior leaders and staffs at the highest levels of government in Washington, DC—including the National Security Council, Congress, and the Departments of State, Commerce, Treasury, and Defense—facilitate understanding, cooperation, integration, and synchronization across government entities and stakeholders while simultaneously exposing students to the high standard of preparation necessary for engaging with senior leaders and staffs as they will on graduation.

The overseas field research trip to engage combatant command staffs and allied and partner governments and to study the application of operational art in historical campaigns such as Operation Forager (the 1944 U.S. campaign in the Mariana and Palau islands) provides synthesis from across the field of study learning outcomes. The capstone event is the synthesis of all the student learning and development, testing whether students can successfully address the strategic and operational questions that combatant commands pose. Combined, the experiences transform students into skilled joint warfighters who can deliver intellectual overmatch by critically and creatively applying globally integrated military power.

**Taking It Further**

The tremendous challenge posed by the contemporary and future security environments has led to thoughtful approaches to develop the authentic joint warfighters necessary to meet the challenge. Simply educating officers in joint matters and joint planning will not, by itself, be enough. Not only must JPME programs graduate only those prepared with the critical joint warfighting skills, but DOD must also realize a return on the investment through the immediate use of graduates in joint assignments where such skills are brought to bear right away.

Specificity and certainty of graduate outplacement affords precision in a program’s mission, and that precision enables faculty to know exactly what skills students must master for success. Again, this approach is evident in JAWS, the graduates of which are destined for specifically coded billets in the joint force. RAND recently noted JAWS as
a model for developing joint warfighters.\textsuperscript{19} Specifically, the report noted that the connection between education and billeting enables a continuity between stakeholders, ensuring that educational materials address joint challenges and national security objectives and that “graduates are best matched with joint assignments,” per the assessment of the job requirements.\textsuperscript{20} The immediacy of education and placement “holds promise in application to other joint positions . . . [if] promoted in a more-comprehensive manner in the [talent management]-JPME enterprise.”\textsuperscript{21}

It would be difficult, if not impossible, for most programs within the JPME establishment to meaningfully integrate all three elements described herein as essential for developing truly skilled joint warfighters. One notable exception is the Joint and Combined Warfighting School (JCWS), which also maintains a compositionally balanced faculty and student bodies, and whose faculty are, with few exceptions, current or former joint qualified officers. It is, in fact, the largest producer of JPME II graduates headed for initial joint duty.\textsuperscript{22} While its shorter duration precludes the depth of study present in JAWS, JCWS provides extraordinary intensity and rigor and meets the essential requirements for joint warfighter development, demonstrating that the essential requirements are not onerous when systematically integrated.

The 2022 National Defense Strategy clearly indicates the world is a more dangerous place, increasing the need for joint warfighters capable of competently planning and executing complex, multidomain joint operations.\textsuperscript{23} DOD is demonstrating an eagerness to produce more—and more capable—joint warfighters who can lead the joint force to prevail in the conflicts the Nation may face in the future. In the process of developing more such warfighters, it is imperative to understand what truly constitutes a joint warfighter and how to develop one. A ruthless focus on the three elements critical to joint warfighter development will ensure that DOD can dedicate its efforts and precious resources to what the Nation truly needs—getting the best out of the joint warfighter development process. JFQ

Notes

2. Ibid., GL-6; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum (CJCSM) 1810.01, Outcomes-Based Military Education Procedures for Officer Professional Military Education (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, April 1, 2022), E-A 2, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Manuals/CJCSM%20201810.01.pdf.
4. CJCSI 1810.01.
6. CJCSI 1800.01F.
9. CJCSI 1800.01F, A-8; CJCSI 1810.01, E-A.2.