Educating to Compete

Development opportunities for Marines and the Corps

by LtCol Nathan Fleischaker

"It is not enough for Marines to educate themselves on war and warfighting alone. Such a narrow focus limits the benefit they can give to the Nation … social, economic, technological, and other matters beyond military history and leadership are essential if Marines are to excel in competition … [education] should improve knowledge of and openness to the interests of potential and existing allies and partners."[1]

—MCDP 1-4, Competing

How does the Marine Corps prepare itself and its Marines for great power competition? Among proposed solutions to this question, one common action point is bettering education. Gen Berger, both in his planning guidance and his notes on force design planning, highlights education, and the recently published *MCDP 1-4, Competing,* similarly emphasizes its role.[2] Yet, *Competing* presents a strikingly expansive vision of the breadth of required education: Marines must be prepared to excel in a new form of combined arms that exists outside combat zones, demands holistic understanding of the strategic environment, and requires a depth of familiarity with interagency and international partners whom we will work alongside.[3] Unfortunately, *Competing* provides no guidance on how to cultivate these strengths and skills. Instead, it vaguely suggests, with references to "self-education" and "educate themselves,"[4] that responsibility for doing so lies on the individual Marine.

While personal PME and self-education is important and imperative, it cannot be the only cog in this complex machine. Nor should we assume that other approaches we typically turn to for PME (residential schools/programs or unit-level programs) offer a complete solution. While institutional channels that "develop strategically minded warfighters"[5] are an essential part of this education, as we seek to prepare ourselves effectively for competition, we can and should also look outside the military. In particular, within the robust ecosystem of national security think tanks and professional organizations, there are numerous outstanding educational opportunities that have been—inexplicably so—overlooked by our Corps. These sources offer tremendous opportunities and "quick wins" that, at virtually no cost to the Corps, can supplement other elements of PME and better prepare Marines to perform successfully across the competition continuum.

This article should not be understood as another opinion added to the already saturated debate about PME. Nor does it attempt to offer a comprehensive solution. Instead, it identifies specific existing opportunities and proposes ways the Marine Corps can leverage them. It does this by briefly reviewing both the educational requirements of the current security environment and the circulating commentary on how to improve PME. Then, in proposing a framework for categorizing these proposals, it highlights how the existing debate overlooks the potential of think tanks and policy institutes. Practically, it provides an initial annotated list of several existing programs and highlights one program (the Council of Foreign Relations Term Membership) for special attention. It concludes by offering additional recommendations and areas for further consideration.

An Educated Force and Existing Efforts to Achieve It

Competing has good company in drawing attention to the significance of education. It is well understood that education develops Marines who understand how military operations both fit into a broader national strategy and coordinate with efforts of joint, interagency, and international partners. The

>LtCol Fleischaker is an Infantry Officer and Operational Planner currently participating in the Commandant of the Marine Corps Strategist Program as a PhD Student at Stanford University. He has greatly benefited from CFR Term Membership and other programs mentioned in this article.

demand for such a quality military education is longstanding,[6] and the Joint Chiefs of Staff recently wrote that they sought the

> development of strategically minded joint warfighters, who think critically and can creatively apply military power to inform national strategy, conduct globally integrated operations, and fight under conditions of disruptive change.[7]

Still, reviewing the past and present debate about improving PME suggests that its focus has overlooked key opportunities.

Most PME analyses focus on internal changes: adjusting programs, organizations, and units tasked (and funded) by the military. This is the implicit focus of official documents such as the Joint Staff's Vision for PME and the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. Within avenues for critiquing national security issues, the residential schoolhouses (especially war colleges) are frequent targets for criticism; every few years, another round of commentary will reemerge along familiar themes: the rigor and pedagogy of the curriculum, the role of academic theory versus practical performance, and the composition and disciplinary background of academic faculty.[8] Another frequent theme, especially within the Marine Corps (where several prominent generals' voracious reading habits have been especially influential), has been the role of individual reading. Articles regularly suggest improvements to the Commandant's Professional Reading List or advise on how to develop one's own.[9] As previously noted, the emphasis on self-education also makes an appearance in *MCDP 1-4* as the assumed correct approach for educating Marines. Finally, a less common theme centers on developing command PME programs; authors note their importance and make recommendations for how they can be better implemented and institutionalized.[10]

Quite rare (especially within the Marine Corps, as compared to other Services) is an emphasis on exploiting opportunities that exist in external institutions. While the merits of civilian graduate school are occasionally discussed, both for individual officer development and long-term operational advantage, these are limited almost exclusively to the context of longstanding Army programs.[11] (There is certainly much room to consider how the Marine Corps might expand its approach.) After this, one remaining set of external opportunities has received even less attention: the vast array of professional organizations and think tanks focused on national security policy.

Overlooked Opportunities: National Security Policy Institutes and Think Tanks

Figure 1 presents a framework for categorizing the PME landscape with columns indicating whether the program is run by the military or an external organization, and rows depicting the responsible entity. Colored text indicates the level of attention given to this type of PME, with red emphasizing missed opportunities.[12] A cursory glance demonstrates the previous section's point: most of the existing programs and commentary focus on the left column, with a smattering of low-density programs in the top right column that have attracted little attention. The lower right portion (part-time individual and unit-level PME that uses external organizations) is a gaping hole. This represents an ignored major opportunity for the Marine Corps.

Framework for Categorizing PME Opportunities

Legend

Blue - Institutional Recognition, and existing commentary on how to improve

Grey - Institutional recognition, but no/little commentary on how to improve it

Red - Opportunities exists, but little/no institutional support, recognition or attempts to leverage it

	Internal	External
Service	**Residential PME, Colleges and Schools** • Assignment/selection controlled by Marine Corps • Full-time, opportunities interspersed throughout a career • All Ranks	CMC Senior Fellows / TLS and CPIB Fellowships • *Post Command O5/O6 (few CPIB opportunities)* Civilian Graduate School for PME • CMCSP, ACSP, ADP • Capt, Maj, LtCol MIT Seminar XXI • Service manages selection/funding; part time for an academic year • Maj-LtCol (½ LtCol, ¼ Maj, ¼ Col) • **White House Fellowship** • **CFR International Affairs Fellow**
Unit	**Company/Battalion level PME programs** • Part time / as schedule permits • All Ranks MTT Courses/Events (MSTP or MCTOG)	?? [Not well explored]
Individual	**Professional Reading Lists** • Part/personal time • All Ranks Non-resident PME / CDET • Part time • All Ranks	Part Time • **CFR Term (and Lifetime) Membership** • **CNAS Shawn Brimley Next Generation Leaders** • **FDD National Security Fellows Program** • **Atlantic Council Millennium Leaders** • **Part-time / online civilian graduate programs** Short Conferences / Trips • **Merrill Center (SAIS) – National Security Scholars and Practitioners Program** • **Clements Center (UT Austin) - Seminar on History and Statecraft**

Figure 1. *(Figure provided by author.)*

The network of U.S. national security policy-oriented think tanks and institutes is a national asset because of its main *output*, which is diverse sets of policy recommendations for national leaders. Equally important, however, is the *process*: opportunities to observe, learn from, and participate in developing national security policy recommendations and opportunities to enter networks of other individuals involved with and interested in these same issues. As these institutions are independent of the Marine Corps and DOD, their recommendations may at times diverge from official policy. However, even when their priorities may sometimes differ, this network of institutes is rife with diverse and unique venues that would strengthen the Marine Corps and Marines as we prepare for competition.

In competition, military force is wielded alongside and in support of other national and allies' capabilities to achieve strategic goals—appreciating this fact is a critical feature of competition and strategic thinking. Therefore, Marines must have a holistic perspective, factoring in a particular operation's overall environment, the Nation's strategic goals, and how other (non-military) elements from interagency and international partners operate. Where better to develop such a perspective than in partnership and participation with organizations that intentionally draw together a diverse set of experts, focused on understanding and proposing solutions to such problems?

From a purely individual PME perspective, it is easy to follow these organizations and receive both updates on their publications and podcasts as well as invitations to attend their events and conferences. Additionally, unlike many of the books that populate our professional reading lists, think tanks encourage and provide opportunities for interaction and collaboration with their authors and experts. Marine Corps efforts to guide individual professional development (such as professional reading lists) should be updated to recommend that Marines follow and engage with policy-oriented institutions in order to learn about issues and even develop relationships with various experts.

Even more promising for developing Marines are part-time fellowships offered by several think tanks and explicitly intended to identify and develop promising mid-career national security professionals. Participation in such programs does not necessitate orders, requires minimal time away from a duty day, and is either free or involves nominal costs to participants.[13] Yet, these fellowships offer tremendous opportunities to develop Marines. While the specific format varies from short conferences to evening meetings and seminars, participants are always given expanded access to the sponsoring organization's network of experts. Most of these occur in the context of discussions with key national policymaking leaders (past and present) about major international policy issues. Equally important, fellowships can foster relationships among the rising national security leaders selected for these programs. Thus, for Marines given opportunity to participate, the result is an expansion in both *what* as well as *whom* you know: a broader understanding of various non-military perspectives on national security problems, and an initial network of relationships—including both senior individuals and peers who have several decades of career ahead of them—that can be accessed to navigate the interagency and national security ecosystem in the future. In terms of the *Competing* vision for preparing Marines for competition, fellowships like these achieve it precisely.

While historically Marines have been involved in these programs, this is truly an individual effort: they typically hear of them through word of mouth, and there is no institutional attempt to record participation or to encourage and facilitate Marines' ability to compete for acceptance. Instead, the Marine Corps' approach to think tanks and outside institutions appears focused exclusively on a small CMC Fellows program that sends a few officers a year to various external organizations. This is valuable, but its capacity is sparse; any means for broadening access for more Marines to gain similar exposure should be welcomed. Further, Marine Corps fellowships focus exclusively on senior officers, almost all post-command O5 and O6s (in their mid-40s). By contrast, externally sponsored mid-career programs typically aim for individuals in the 30- to 35-year-old age range. Ignoring opportunities to invest sooner in Marines' careers causes the Marine Corps to miss chances for earlier exposure to the broader national security community, for the value of networks formed and developed over a career, and for the long-term return on investment that can accrue from ten to fifteen-plus years of leveraging such knowledge and relationships.

Existing Programs

Following is an initial, annotated list of some existing programs, and a discussion highlighting how the Marine Corps might facilitate participation in one: The Council on Foreign Relations' Term Membership Program. Marines who are eligible to apply should be encouraged to do so, and Service-level leaders should consider these in making policy adjustments that help meet our Corps' competition goals.[14]

Part-Time Fellowships

- *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Term and Life Membership.* Celebrating its centennial in 2021, the CFR is the most prestigious "foreign policy club" in the United States. Membership is highly selective and includes the "who's who" of past, present, and future government and business leaders. CFR hosts multiple events each week around the country (most are close to New York and Washington, DC) as well as annual conferences on major U.S. foreign policy and global issues. Members are invited to all events; they also have access to one another and resident experts. Life membership is ideal for senior field-grade and general officers and as well as for senior civilian Marines. Term membership—ideal for junior field-grade officers, as applicants must be 36 or younger—is a program designed to develop promising, relatively junior individuals; it offers them access to all membership opportunities for a five-year term and provides additional opportunities to develop relationships with other term members.[15]

• *Center for New American Security, Shawn Brimley Next Generation Security Leaders Fellowship*. This prestigious program is focused on leadership within the U.S. national security community, and it affords many opportunities to interact with former and current Executive Branch members. Fellows represent a broad range of national security perspectives, including government, nonprofit, media, health, and business sectors. (Military fellows are always a distinct minority.) This fellowship runs for a full calendar year and requires proximity to DC. Applicants must be 35 or younger.[16]

• *Foundation for Defense of Democracies, National Security Fellows Program*. Similar in format to the Center for New American Security program, this fellowship is more focused on exposure to specific issues for U.S. national security. Fellows bring experience and perspectives from within government, nonprofit, and journalism sectors, and military officers are often a plurality. This program runs for a full academic year, requires proximity to DC, and is not strict about its advertised age caps.[17]

• *Atlantic Council, Millennium Leadership Program.* Focused on leadership development as well as exposure to major global/international challenges, this international program's fellows come from around the world. Programming over two years involves regular events around DC, several week-long, in-person events, and international travel. Applicants must be 35 or younger.[18]

• *MIT, Seminar XXI.* A part-time education program providing graduate-level introduction to security studies and contemporary challenges, this fellowship involves approximately eight evening dinner talks and three weekend-long conferences in DC and Northern Virginia, with exposure to broad topics from international security and conflict. Most participants are from the DOD, with a small number from other Executive Branch agencies and nonprofit organizations. The Marine Corps selects (and funds) about fourteen Marines yearly to attend. The strategy and plans division at Headquarters Marine Corps (PL) manages the Marine Corps' participation. However, Seminar XXI is not well advertised and has historically selected mostly post-TLS officers working in the Pentagon. This kind of program presents an opportunity to expand selection to consider slightly more junior officers who may offer a longer-term return on investment.[19]

The Council on Foreign Relations term membership is an ideal opportunity for development of junior field-grade officers. *(Photo by SSgt Gabriela Garcia.)*

Short Conferences/Trips

• *National Security Scholars and Practitioners Program, Merrill Center (Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies).* A weeklong conference focused on national security threats and strategy, this event invites prominent academics and past/present policymakers.[20]

• *Seminar on History and Statecraft, Clements Center (University of Texas-Austin).* A weeklong conference focused on national security threats and strategy, as well as practical advice for writing and publishing on national security issues, the Seminar invites prominent academics and past/present policymakers.[21]

• *Young Strategists Forum, German Marshall Fund*. A trip to Japan, focused on Asia security issues. Program selects personnel from both the U.S. and international partners and includes individuals with a wide range of background, including academia, journalism, government, business, as well as military.[22]

• *Military Trip to Israel, Foundation for Defense of Democracies*. A trip to Israel focused on battlefield visits of modern Israel's past wars, contemporary strategy, and force design issues, as well as Israeli domestic politics and their connection to broader Middle East security issues.[23]

Full-Time Fellowships

• *White House Fellowship.* A prestigious, full-time year-long fellowship, it places fellows in key Executive Branch positions to work on major policy issues, participate in additional leadership development, and familiarize with the Executive Branch.[24]

• *Council on Foreign Relations, International Affairs Fellow.* Another prestigious, full-time year-long program, CFR fellows are placed in a government or nonprofit sector that is related to but different from their own background. This is often a think tank for those from the government, and for those in academia, it is often government service. The goal of this cross-pollination is to expand awareness of issues and facilitate diverse solutions to international security issues.[25]

CFR Term Membership

Each of these programs offers distinct opportunities to expand how the Marine Corps develops Marines into strategically minded warfighters; however, CFR Term Membership merits special attention because of its flexibility, scope, and ability to scale. While other programs involve a conference, a trip, and/or opportunities to hear from and interact with experts and past/present policymakers, these are often on a structured and inflexible schedule that requires proximity to Washington, DC. In contrast, CFR Term Membership hosts the same types of events but at venues across the Nation and over a five-year period with flexible participation requirements. (For more senior individuals, selection to Life Membership extends access to these opportunities indefinitely.)

Expanding Marine participation in CFR Term Membership is limited by one significant challenge, though: applicants must be nominated by at least one current CFR member, and strong applications typically include multiple recommendations from different life members.[26] Many junior field-grade officers could certainly benefit from Term Membership and would be competitive for selection, but barring an unusual set of experiences, it is unlikely they have a relationship with one or more active CFR members. Yet, this is a challenge that the Service could help overcome by simply identifying and matching potential applicants with Marines (active, civilian, and retired) who are active CFR members. These connections could lead not only to strong recommendations and successful applications but also to mentoring relationships and more members: a virtuous cycle that expands both the network within and the benefits to the Marine Corps.

One straightforward, if non-comprehensive, way to begin implementing this would center on Marine Corps University because of its proximity to DC, and its role as a unit Marines return to multiple times throughout a career. Cultivating Life Members from among Marine Corps University's permanent faculty and endowed chairs would be an obvious way to extend networking abilities for the Marine Corps. Further, resident PME programs (especially EWS, CSC, and SAW) are natural venues for identifying potential applicants to be linked with Life Members. If potential applicants were identified early enough in a resident PME program, a relationship could form over much of the academic year and could be incorporated into existing curriculum requirements (such as elective seminars or a faculty advisor for a thesis) to minimize additional time commitments. This relatively simple and partial implementation option could be expanded by looking for CFR Life Members among other units at Quantico and in the Pentagon, as well as senior active duty officers. Likewise, a process for identifying potential applicants might be expanded to include an open application or nomination process.

The Marine Corps could further incentivize Term and Life Membership by providing funding for membership dues and incorporating participation into broader talent management efforts. Especially for active duty Marines, talent management would include highlighting the value of CFR membership (as well as other programs including those identified in this article) for manpower processes such as FITREPs, selection and promotion boards, and assignment. These changes could also be incorporated into ongoing Headquarters Marine Corps efforts to manage the Marine Corps' Strategy Professionals. While addressing talent management processes is beyond the scope of this article, a necessary and easy first step is to ensure those processes have appropriate information by tracking Marines' selection into these programs and fellowships. The Life Members who would be mentoring potential applicants would mostly be civilian Marines; for them, CFR membership could be treated as a bonus on their annual reviews. Another possible incentive would be reimbursing annual membership dues (these range from $350 to $870, depending on the type of membership and location).[27] While possible to expect Marines to self-fund, it would be relatively low cost for the Service to provide funding to cover some membership dues. Further, spending money on programs to educate and develop Marines is consistent with investments the Marine Corps currently makes. For example, the Marine Corps currently spends about $10,000 for each Marine who participates in the MIT Seminar XXI program.[28] With CFR membership, a similar investment could provide upwards of twenty Marines a comparable opportunity for professional development: fifteen to twenty Term Members as well as three to four Life Members (these Life Members could also facilitate the new membership applications of six to twelve Marines each year).[29]

Recommendations

External organizations offer the Marine Corps tremendous opportunities to better develop Marines and prepare the Service for competing. To exploit these opportunities, the single most important step is to designate a unit—Marine Corps University seems a good option—with the responsibility to explore and develop the Service's efforts. Many changes would be easy to implement. Several actions, such as adding information about think tanks to professional reading lists or producing annual MARADMINs to better inform Marines about program and application opportunities, are trivial to implement. Others, such as keeping records of Marines' selection and participation in such programs, connecting past participants with potential applicants, and budgeting funds to reimburse membership dues, will require staff action. Yet, even these changes appear achievable and likely to result in high impact "quick wins."

In addition to these practical recommendations, this article has also suggested several areas for further investigation. First, there is ample room for the Marine Corps to reconsider expanding how it utilizes civilian graduate school, as well as associated issues related to career timing, utilization tours, and selection procedures. Second, all these topics touch on the challenging issue of talent management and should be incorporated into ongoing efforts. Pressing issues include considering how to account for multi-faceted and unique features of Marines' experiences, such as selection to one of these mid-career

development programs and expanding the concept of a payback tour from a single assignment to a series of appropriately timed assignments throughout a Marine's career. The programs identified in this article should at least serve to inform many Marines of opportunities that may otherwise have been unknown, and they could also spur Service leaders to make appropriate, institutional-level changes. Together this will help develop Marines and posture the Corps for expertise, clear advantage, and success in competition.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-4*, *Competing*, (Washington, DC: 2020).

2. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019); and Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030: Report Phase I and II*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).

3. *MCDP 1-4, Competing.*

4. Ibid.

5. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War*, (Washington, DC: May 2020).

6. Leonard D. Holder and Williamson Murray, "Prospects for Military Education," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, Spring 1998).

7. *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War.*

8. For several examples see these articles from the last few years: James Lacey, "Finally Getting Serious About Professional Military Education," *War on the Rocks*, (May 2020), available at https://warontherocks.com; Jim Golby, "Want Better Strategists? Teach Social Science," *War on the Rocks*, (June 2020), available at https://warontherocks.com; Adam Lowther and Brooke Mitchell, "Professional Military Education Needs More Creativity, Not More History," *War on the Rocks*, (May 2020), available at https://warontherocks.com; and Celestino Perez, Jr., "What Military Education Forgets: Strategy Is Performance," *War on the Rocks*, (September 2018), available at https://warontherocks.com.

9. Capt Olivia Garard, "Commandant's Professional Reading List: A Call," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (July 2020), available at https://mca-marines.org; and William F. Mullen III, "A Warrior's Mind: How to Better Understand The 'Art' Of War–MCA," *Marine Corps Gazette,* (Quantico, VA: April 2019).

10. Nathan Fleischaker, "Improving Our PME System," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: March 2013): Brett Perry, "Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare Through PME," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: March 2018); and Kenneth Sullivan and Jeff Phaneuf, "Give Them the Tools," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (July 2020), available at https://mca-marines.org.

11. For an explicit argument for civilian grad schools, see: David H. Petraeus, "Beyond the Cloister," *The American Interest*, (July 2007), available at https://www.the-american-interest.com; and Gordon B. Davis, Thomas C. Graves, and Christopher N. Prigge, "The Strategic Planning 'Problem,'" *Military Review*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, December 2013). For an example of civilian graduate education's role in operational success, see: Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, Reprint edition, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

12. This model is intentionally simplistic and at least one obvious difficulty is that responsibility may be split between different entities. For example, I categorize non-resident PME as individual because Marines individually select into participation and the Service has no role in directly assigning individuals. However, the Service is responsible for creating, funding and managing CDET and non-resident PME opportunities. Other programs, such as the White House Fellowship, require individual initiative to apply, and selection is subject to the external organization, but participation ultimately depends on the Service's involvement for PCS orders.

13. This implies that a legal ethics review and letter may be required, but because the programs do not change year to year, this would likely be a one-time review for the program, rather than for each Marine. In addition to part-time programs, there are a few prestigious, sufficiently valuable full-time fellowships for which the Marine Corps should consider modifying personnel policies in order to allow individual participation.

14. This list is surely incomplete and simply maintaining a current and comprehensive list of programs to help inform Marines would be of utility. An older version of a similar list can be found here: Lena Andrews et al., "Getting Involved in Policy: An Overworked Grad Student's Guide," *War on the Rocks*, (May 2015), available at https://warontherocks.com.

15. Information available at https://www.cfr.org.

16. Information available at https://www.cnas.org.

17. Information available at https://www.fdd.org.

18. Information available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org.

19. Information available at https://semxxi.mit.edu.

20. Information available at https://www.merrillcenter.sais-jhu.edu.

21. Information available at https://www.clementscenter.org.

22. Information available at https://www.gmfus.org.

23. Information available at https://militarytriptoisrael.org.

24. Information available at https://www.whitehouse.gov.

25. Information available at https://www.cfr.org.

26. CFR members are limited to making three recommendations a year.

27. Information available at https://www.cfr.org.

28. Information available at https://smxxi.mit.edu. For further comparison, this also buys about twenty minutes of F-35 flight time: See Colin Clark, "Marines Put F-35B Flight Costs 17 Percent Lower Than OSD," *Breaking Defense*, (August 2013), available at https://breakingdefense.com.

29. Variation is because annual dues differ based on a member's geographic location.