

Resident Officers PME

Its time has passed

by Capt Kevin N. Byington

Talent Management 2030 correctly identifies quality of life issues as a contributing factor to Marines electing to leave the Service. Specifically, it references “PCS [permanent change of station] frequency” and asks the rhetorical question, “Does the annual PCS reassignment of approximately 25,000 Marines improve our lethality as a force?” Any reasonable observer will conclude that the answer is no. While the assignments process is under review and will undoubtedly go through changes, a detail missing from this section of *Talent Management 2030* is the interplay between resident professional military education (PME) programs for officers and PCS frequency. To take this important concept to its logical conclusion, we should examine the necessity of resident PME for career-level schools and intermediate-level schools hosted by the Marine Corps. Specifically, I recommend eliminating the resident Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS) and Command and Staff College (CSC) programs in Quantico.

To appropriately frame this argument, we must first identify a key assumption about the current PME model: We are told that resident and non-resident PME are equivalent. If they are equivalent, then why are they separate programs? Putting aside arguments about how boards like the Commandant’s Career Level Education Board and the Commandant’s Professional Intermediate-Level Education Board came into existence and the fact that we have done them for a long time, the question remains unanswered: If resident and non-resident PME are the same, then why are they different?

Whether we officially acknowledge it or not, selection to resident PME programs serves as an indicator to some

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board members, commanding officers and their staffs, and peers within occupational field communities that those who were selected are better or more competitive than their peers. This not only comes with a whole range of assumptions about those officers who were selected, but more importantly, those who were not. While not every single officer shares this sentiment, I guarantee that most, if not all, officers have encountered someone in a position of power who does. In *Talent Management 2030*, we identify reducing bias in its various forms about Marines as an institutional imperative, yet we

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maintain this program. This can contribute to selection bias in both promotion boards and competitive assignment boards. Why would it not? The convening message for resident education boards states that those selected are the best and most fully qualified—implying that non-selects are *not* the best and *not* the most fully qualified.

Graduates of both resident and non-resident PME have expressed that the quality of education is better at resident

courses. However, we cannot simultaneously hold that the two programs are equal but one is also better. Some of those officers had also done some portion of or completed non-resident PME before attending resident PME, lending credibility to their claims (having seen both programs). While I cannot attest to the validity of that claim, let us take it at face value. If the quality of education at a resident PME course is better than distance education or the Blended Seminar Program (BSP), is that an argument in favor of resident PME or an argument for increasing the quality of instruction at distance programs and BSP? I argue the latter.

Selection to resident PME, for some officers, results in a massive waste of time and energy for both the officer and the institution. Officers can complete non-resident PME or be close to completion and still get selected for the resident program for that exact same course (the only exception being the BSP). The immense frustration felt by an officer who spent two years of nights and weekends completing their PME only to be told they have to PCS to do the same course all over again is justifiable. Once again, if the courses are the same, then why are they different? If the courses are the same, what is the added benefit? In addition to the frustration imposed on the officer, the Marine Corps pays money for that PCS and loses that officer from the operating forces for an entire year. It seems odd that we would simultaneously waste an officer’s investment in their education

and take a gap in the operating forces when so many are already present. The alternative presents a win-win for both the officer, who retains their investment and does not have to PCS, and the institution, who has fewer gaps in key positions in the operating forces.

In the section discussing reduced PCS frequency in *Talent Management 2030*, the “enormous strain on our families” is referenced as one rationale for the change. This rings true for any Marine with a family as well as both enlisted Marines and officers and is a driving factor for Marines who elect to leave the Service. It seems self-evident that a PCS followed by another PCS just 12 months later puts significantly more strain on a family than a standard 36-month tour. In some cases, a Marine may desire to stay in the National Capital Region and subsequently get what they ask for, but for the majority of students, they turn around 12 months later and PCS once again.

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For a typical officer career path, resident PME serves as an intermediate assignment between grades (for those select-grade to the next rank) or within grades (for those who get selected in between tours of the same rank). It is impossible to fulfill the intent of *Talent Management 2030* that “monitors will seek to keep Marines and their families in the same geographic duty station as long as opportunities for career growth exist” for a large percentage of officers without the elimination of resident EWS/CSC programs. If eliminating the resident programs in Quantico is the answer, what do we replace it with? The good news is we already have programs in place. Not only do we currently have the online/seminar Distance Education Program for both EWS and CSC but we also have the BSP. The BSP is a hidden gem that few officers get to access near their home stations, and we



Non-resident OPME like the Expeditionary Warfare School Blended Seminar Program may be a better option for officer career paths. (Photo by LCpl Alison Dostie.)

should explore the possibility of increasing their capacity to absorb the influx of officers who would necessarily utilize them. Having BSP utilization become the norm, instead of the exception, will enable monitors to fulfill the above intent for all officers.

advanced degrees as a part of their career to get promoted, but they do have to complete EWS and CSC. Those who choose to pursue other advanced programs understand the costs they will incur by doing so. For those officers, the positives may outweigh the negatives. For the rest of us, more stability will be a welcome change.

While this idea may seem radical, especially to those who were selected for and enjoyed their experience at resident PME, I argue it aligns with *Talent Management 2030* and presents numerous benefits for all officers across the Marine Corps. Given the opportunity to stay at their current station, execute DEP or BSP with the certainty that they will not be given PCS orders for the same program, and have a follow-on permanent change of assignment to reduce PCS frequency, I argue most younger officers would choose that over a one-year PCS to Quantico. Furthermore, it presents benefits to the institution by having more available officers ready to fill gapped billets in the operating forces and further reduces PCS costs—another *Talent Management 2030* imperative. The only thing we need is a willingness to shake the way we have always done things and be willing to try something new.

