

Leveling the Playing Field

A case for re-baselining education billets and compensation

by LtCol Scott Humr

Important aspects of the Marine Corps' efforts to manage talent for the 21st-century force are doomed to fail without accompanying organizational reforms. Specifically, key policies governing billets and compensation of structure for technical education, coupled with the non-existent requirements for attendance at resident professional military education (PME), result in a competition for a finite resource of talented Marines. These outdated and unquestioned policies are not only constraining the cultivation of technical talent, but they also directly affect the overall availability of assignable Marines to fill billets across the FMF. To address these issues, the Marine Corps needs to update its force structure policies with a holistic reevaluation of assignments to educational institutions and a re-baselining of technical billets across the force to address placing the right Marine, in the right billet, at the right time.

Policy Is Out of Step

Current Marine Corps policy is out of step with what is required to implement 21st-century talent management. Specifically, *MCO 5311.1E, Total Force Structure Process*, provides the policy on how compensation for graduate education programs (previously referred to as "special education programs") is calculated. By this order, compensation for graduate education is a three-for-one value proposition. In other words, a command must identify three billets it would relinquish to gain a single new billet, which is a net loss of two billets. This compensation is a non-starter for most commands that already lack sufficient personnel. On the other hand, residential institutions such as Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS), Command and Staff College (CSC), and the

>LtCol Humr is a Marine Corps Technical Analyst as part of the Marine Corps PhD-Technical Program. He currently serves as the Deputy for the Intelligent Robotics and Autonomous Systems (IRAS) under the Combat Development Directorate in Quantico, VA.

Current Marine Corps policy is out of step with ... 21st-century talent management.

Army Captain's Career Courses do not have billets tied to their graduates. This is a problem because this construct does not entail any compensation, though it contributes disproportionately to the number of trainees for Marine Corps manpower's patients, prisoners, training, and transients (P2T2) calculations at approximately three resident PME for every single technical opportunity.¹

However, if the Marine Corps is to cultivate the technical talent it needs and at the rate it needs it, current policies need to change to address this.

Unquestioned Requirements

Currently, the number of Marines who attend resident PME does not fluctuate in a way that is commensurate with the available officer populations (i.e., 202K total force, force drawdown). As shown in Figure 1, both EWS and CSC class sizes have remained relatively stable over the last twenty years. For instance, in 2021 the available population to assignment to EWS increased by 1 percent, but the EWS class size increased by 7 percent. Moreover, the delivery of resident PME content at this same time has expanded to include non-

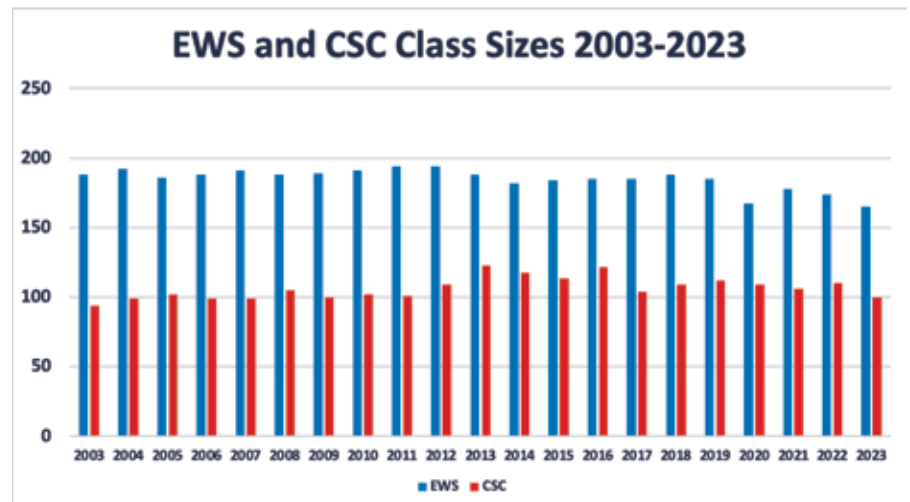


Figure 1. EWS and CSC class size 2001–2023. (Figure provided by author.)

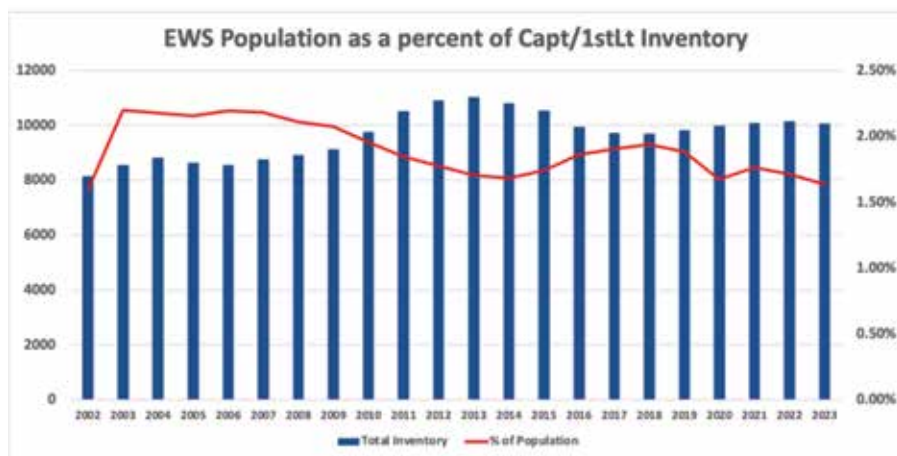


Figure 2. EWS population as a percent of captain and 1stLt inventory. (Figure provided by author.)

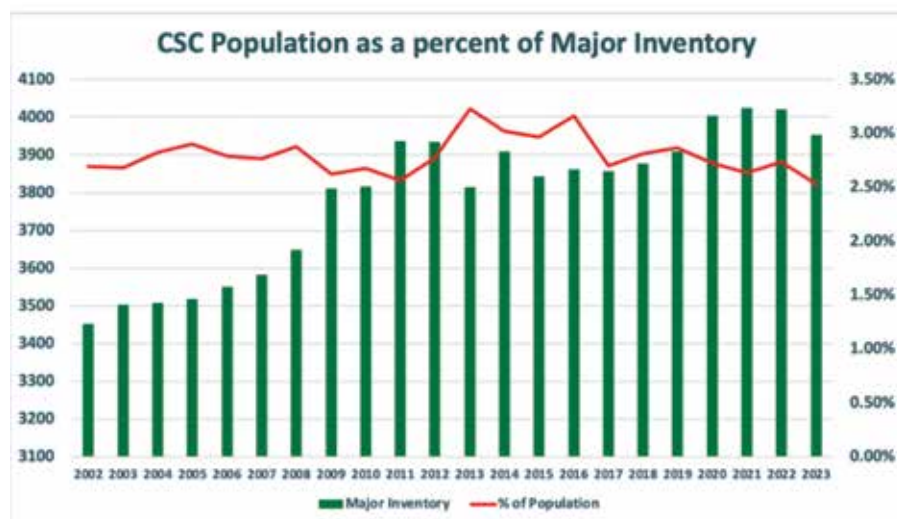


Figure 3. CSC population as a percent of the major inventory. (Figure provided by author.)

resident, blended seminars, and other Service opportunities.² Despite this, the population slated to attend resident PME institutions has largely not changed to reflect these new modalities. However, the populations in officer inventory have also fluctuated over this time as well. Figure 2 and Figure 3 demonstrate how the EWS and CSC class sizes pressurize the force differently as officer inventory fluctuates. This is a problem because unquestioned requirements that do not consider fluctuations in officer inventory result in suboptimal assignments toward filling validated staffing goals or offering other educational opportunities. Such an approach to resident PME assignments communicates that the only driver of in-residence requirements is the number

of seats available and a complementary number of instructors to employ. This is the tail wagging the dog.³

While it is recognized that Joint PME institutions have certain requirements for their mix of students from all Services to ensure they maintain their accreditation based on the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act and additional legislation, the total number is not sacrosanct.⁴ Moreover, the value of resident education is not being called into question. Resident education will likely always be looked at as superior to other forms of delivering the same content—and for good reasons. First, Marines are hand-selected to attend resident education based on their overall performance and future potential. Second, this sets the bar even higher for the performance

at resident institutions and their educational outcomes, while also fostering closer relationships and networks built by in-residence institutions. However, the number we allocate to these institutions every year must still be assessed to ensure the Marine Corps is taking a more deliberate approach to allocating its finite population of personnel to the education and training it needs most. For these reasons, the Marine Corps needs to take a more holistic approach to making such assignments while also cultivating the required talent it needs to add to its ranks to compete in the 21st century.

A Holistic Approach

To address this, the Marine Corps can take the following steps:

Re-baseline

First, the Marine Corps technical billets must be re-baselined with the intent to rebalance the need across the force. Most of the Marine Corps technical billets that require a master's level education were codified in tables of organization and are unlikely to change without significant trade-offs in other capabilities and capacities. Additionally, 86 percent of these billets reside in the supporting establishment.⁵ Combined with the rapid advancement in technology over the past twenty years across the entire MAGTF, it is unlikely the distribution of those billets will remain relevant to the needs of the Marine Corps now and in the future. For instance, the latest *MCO 5231.4, Marine Corps Data and Artificial Intelligence (AI)*, will require the development of associate data officers, data stewards, data custodians, and command data and analytics officers to oversee and implement such efforts. This of course does not include the technical training needed to implement autonomy in support of human-machine teaming. Beginning with a zero-baseline construct, every command across the Marine Corps should be able to advocate for the technical talent it needs without having to identify offsetting compensation or at a minimum, a one-for-one.

A zero-baselining approach would also allow commands to identify billets

that may only require particular skills short of an entire master's degree. This could allow Marines to potentially stay in place while enrolling in a local university or online institution. Or both. This would not only provide greater stability for families but also reduce the cost and disruption of a permanent change of station. Furthermore, a zero-baseline approach could help identify

Scholarships Review Board to ensure P2T2 (the in-residence education portion that contributes to the *training* in P2T2) is properly baselined to accommodate growth in technical education and accounts for fluctuations in available and projected officer inventory. The MCU should develop an objective requirement for resident PME by identifying billets that could benefit

larger effort to completely re-baseline all 88XX billets and recompute those requirements so the Marine Corps can shift technical talent to where it needs it the most or even allow enlisted Marines and civilians to fill some of those positions if it makes sense. 88XX OccFld Managers should develop their an operational advisory group that can meet yearly to hear from the billet holders and to provide feedback for regular curriculum reviews or ways to reshape education requirements that can best meet the needs of the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps cohort of PhD-technical analysts can also provide additional insight, oversight, and assistance to these operational advisory groups to help facilitate these reviews, which will help feed information to the fellowships, special education, and Scholarships Review Board.

... to allow a Marine to gain the deep expertise required to address the many difficult challenges they will find themselves in, there is little substitute for resident graduate education ...

opportunities that enlisted Marines could fulfill or which billets may make sense to change over to a government civilian position. Non-resident PME would also become a standard requirement, just as it is mandatory for those currently attending resident graduate education at the Naval Postgraduate School. In short, the Marine Corps can no longer let the status quo drive education requirements. Rather, the Marine Corps needs to take a hard look across the entire landscape of technical billets to find where they are needed the most and what the best path might be. In short, re-baseline the number of Marines entering resident PME (i.e., EWS, CSC, Army Captain's Career Courses, Marine Corps War College, fellowships) to compensate for the numbers going into in-residence graduate education programs.

Reevaluate

Next, the Marine Corps needs to reevaluate how to establish objective PME requirements. Rather than take away from a unit's structure to compensate for the education and a new billet, a commensurate reduction in the number that attends resident PME would have the same effect on keeping P2T2 at acceptable levels. To this end, the Marine Corps, through Marine Corps University, needs to reinvigorate the fellowships, special education, and

from in-residence education (i.e., joint staff billets, company commander). This would be a positive first step in developing an actual requirement for resident PME over filling classrooms to employ instructors. Resident PME should not get a free pass to eat first at the expense of creating greater depth in our technical personnel or other areas of personnel assignments. Lastly, resident PME should reassess its archetype of resident education by challenging how it delivers it exclusively aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico. Developing a distributed campus model across all the Marine Corps' major bases and stations may provide a more sustainable model (reduce permanent change of station costs and improve family stability) in the long run while still offering resident and resident-like experiences.

Reengage

The 88XX Occupational Field (OccFld) Managers need to have additional authority to help address stagnation in current billets that have billet education evaluation certificates. Occupational field managers can engage with individual commands to update and accurately reflect the needed skillsets for those billets. Without such oversight, commands are unlikely to relinquish the billets they currently have, even if the requirement may have changed. This step is also fundamental for the

Conclusion

The Marine Corps needs to wade into the deep waters of challenging its outdated PME practices that compete with the requirement to train the next generations of technical leaders and experts. This will require the Marine Corps to have a larger discussion on resident PME and in-residence graduate education assignments. While both contribute to the number of those in training for P2T2, only the Marine Corps' technical billets are tied to an actual education requirement. The Marine Corps must also recognize not all technical talent will come from graduate education. Marines are getting educated on their own. However, to allow a Marine to gain the deep expertise required to address the many difficult challenges they will find themselves in, there is little substitute for resident graduate education with a technical focus.

The Marine Corps can change course on its policies. Current policies are out-of-date because they fail to consider a whole-of-institution approach to solving these problems. Yet, this needs to change if the Marine Corps is going to address its stated need for technical talent. Moreover, officer assignments would also benefit by filling a better number in their staffing goals if the

resident PME contribution to P2T2 follows current manning levels and is tied to established requirements upon graduation.

A holistic approach to addressing talent management is required to address the increasing nature of the technological battlefield. To move forward, the Marine Corps must question its assignment's structure, assignments policy, compensation, and quotas by periodically re-baselining its requirements. A more thorough approach will help ensure the Marine Corps maximizes its educational investments, prevents billet stagnation, and most importantly, places its Marines in the right place, with the right skill sets, at the right time.

Notes

1. Based on data obtained from the Marine Corps University registrar, EWS and CSC classes total approximately 291 Marines per year compared to approximately 100 Marines sent to the Naval Postgraduate School every year. Analysis of resident PME for the Army Captain's Career Course was not included in this analysis but would further demonstrate the disproportional nature of resident PME compared to technical opportunities. Data is available upon request.

2. EWS and CSC class size was provided by the Marine Corps University registrar. Marine Corps officer inventory data was taken from the Defense Manpower Data Center: <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

3. Scott A. Humr and Emily Hastings, "New Wine in Old Wine Skins: Marine Corps Technical Talent Requires a New Approach," *Marine Corps Gazette* 107, No. 6 (2023).

4. Kristy N. Kamarck, *Goldwater-Nichols and the Evolution of Officer Joint Professional Military Education (JPME)* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016).

5. Naval Postgraduate School, Marines at Naval Postgraduate School, PowerPoint, (2021), https://nps.edu/documents/106613168/0/NPS+Marine+Students+placemat+chart_Jan+2021.pdf/eba24556-8110-5d2a-213e-6a90ef7a2dbe?t=1611958814768.

