

The Future of Marine PME

Supporting future Force Design and talent management
by LtCol Erin Berard

With the accelerating pace of change in the 21st century, Marine lethality requires lifelong learning and the ability to acquire new skills quickly. *Force Design 2030* calls for change in response to the shift in the Marine Corps' mission focus to great power/peer-level competition, with special emphasis on the Indo-Pacific. The shift necessitates a comprehensive review of not only our Service's size, configuration, and technological capacity but also has prompted us to take a hard look at our individual warfighter's core cognitive characteristics. The physical and mental toughness, tenacity, initiative, and aggressiveness required to win in close combat have long been a prerequisite to earning the title of Marine. In recent decades, the technological boom forced us to build on technical skill sets and add occupational specialties that can concentrate power to innovate, adapt, and succeed. Today, the focus is increasingly on prioritizing our intellectual strategic edge against competitors and adversaries.

Force Design 2030 set the tone for how the force would transform to adapt, remain relevant, and outmaneuver our adversaries. In November 2021, the Commandant published his *Talent Management* report, charting a new course for personnel management. *Talent Management 2030* describes a system of institutional processes and policies designed to attract, develop, retain, and incentivize the most talented and best performing Marines. Similarly, *Force Design 2030* requires a meaningful change in how the Corps educates Marines. In response, we will reinforce and modernize the Marine

>LtCol Berard is currently serving as the Operations Officer for Academic Affairs, Marine Corps University.

Corps' education enterprise to maintain our effectiveness as the Nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness while simultaneously transforming the force for the future operating environment. Professional military education (PME) is an investment in our people and provides the service with the architecture necessary to build Marines who are cognitively agile, intuitive problem solvers equipped with the knowledge and broad range of skills required to thrive in a complex multi-domain battlespace. To this end, Marine Corps University (MCU) is honing its officer and enlisted PME continuum to promote rigorous standards for achievement, value superior instructional capacity, build professional military leaders, and ensure Marine cognitive and intellectual talents are maximized, documented, and leveraged to the greatest extent possible throughout the force.

The Marine Corps relies on MCU to guide the long-term direction of PME. Guided by the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* and vision, as well as *Force Design 2030* and *Talent Management 2030*, MCU's Strategic Plan places the university on a common trajectory to deliver PME and training through resident and distance learning programs while also preserving and presenting the history of the Marine Corps. The responsibility of the university is to guide the professional growth and development of Marines by providing educational

opportunities that are grounded in the development of higher-order habits of mind associated with the analytic and creative skills foundational to decision-making.

The Marine Corps must be in the business of creating highly flexible and adaptive areas of study that promote the needs of the individual warfighter, ensure non-traditional career paths exist for the military strategist, and enable the discovery and utilization of cognitive talents to meet the demands of future warfare. MCU must maintain and enhance a learning environment for Marines that promotes four key elements of Marine Corps education: transformation, application, relevance, and feedback. These key elements of Marine Corps education are part of a robust process of continuous improvement to make already excellent educational programs even better.

Transformation

Educational transformation looks toward a future of information age learning, rigorous and responsive teaching methodologies, global access to e-learning platforms, and the talent management needs of our corps.

Information-Age learning requires a deep understanding of how people learn and empowers critical and creative thinking through learner control and autonomy. Outcomes-based education depends on rigorous assessment practices, strong feedback loops from the FMF to the education enterprise and connects to the Commandant's emphasis on academic rigor and accountability in his planning guidance. MCU's resident and distance educational programs have led this transformation effort with the



The Marine Corps sends top-performing officers to teach in resident PME programs. (Photo by LCpl Yasmin Perez.)

support of its institutional effectiveness program. In Fiscal Year 2022, MCU launched an automated tool known as TK20 for collecting and analyzing institutional effectiveness data. This new technology is strengthening the university's capability to access data more efficiently and improve decision making both inside the classroom and out in the FMF. To better evaluate academic performance and improve the data repository of student portfolios, TK20 will also enhance the university's ability to adapt the best practices of major civilian universities by making accreditation, micro-credentialing, collaboration, and talent management data needs better defined and readily available.

MCU's faculty is made up of carefully selected military personnel and civilians who are directly involved in the development, delivery, assessment, revision, and adaptation of the curricula to ensure its standards, quality, and relevance. MCU is proud of its faculty. A common misperception (perhaps true fifteen years ago) is that our teaching faculty is made up of second-tier Marine officers. The reality is that our military faculty at Expeditionary Warfare School and Command and Staff College promote at a rate higher than their peers. The Marine Corps sends its top performers to teach in our programs.

Our civilian faculty have PhDs from Harvard, Georgetown, the University of Chicago, and other premier universities. As leaders in their academic disciplines and the profession of arms, civilian and military faculty are involved in the research, service, and professional development in their areas of competence in support of MCU's educational programs. Additionally, MCU's Faculty Development Program provides robust training and development opportunities with an emphasis on learning as well as the currency of subject-matter expertise in their fields of study. Opportunities to collaborate with sister Service universities, Naval Postgraduate School, civilian institutions, industry, and other federal agencies is an intentional process that continues to improve the quality of education delivered to our students.

The e-Learning Ecosystem (eLE) is a system of systems containing multiple application platforms and Learning Management Systems providing a digital learning environment that supports the creation, distribution, tracking of digital content, as well as monitoring and reporting of student performance. Digital content such as interactive media, video, audio, virtual classrooms, file storage and sharing, and social communities are provided through a single point of access for all Marine learners.

Today's highly dispersed global environment coupled with the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic further showcased eLE as a significant enabler within Training and Education. The ability of eLEs to simplify the end user's experience as a one-stop shop for distribution and tracking of digital content has a direct connection to talent management. Enabling student performance data to become more accessible and better synchronized with training and personnel databases can improve the realtime visibility of academic performance metrics both inside and outside the boardroom.

As the Marine Corps looks to improve talent management systems and applications, MCU is postured as a key enabler for identifying high intellectual performers and future strategic leaders. PME is an iterative touchpoint throughout the entirety of a Marines' career. As a result, MCU has the advantage of capturing academic profiles over time and assessing not only academic performance but feedback from the commanders and supervisors of our graduates.

In Fiscal Year 2021, MCU implemented two major initiatives to better align academic performance with talent management. The first is the change to the master's degree policy at resident Command and Staff College (*MARADMIN 434/20*), which requires all U.S. students to enroll in the degree program. Graduates of the resident program now earn a master's degree recognized easily in today's promotion boardroom. The second initiative is the implementation of observed Academic Fitness Reports (*MARADMIN 412/20*). In close coordination with M&RA, MCU continues to support efforts to develop long-term initiatives that will increase the effectiveness of the academic reporting and tracking system over time. Expanding this initiative to non-resident students and the development of a comprehensive tool to track and compare a Marine's PME and professional development accomplishments—both in grade and over the course of their career—is also being explored at this time to widen the visibility of all program graduates.

Talent Management 2030 also describes the expansion of other educational opportunities as a valuable contribution to the Marine Corps' talent management goals. These opportunities exist as military and civilian graduate and doctoral degree-granting programs, fellowships, educational enhancements such as the Gray Scholars Program, and course certifications granted via MCU's College of Distance Education and Training. In Fiscal Year 2021, MCU transitioned the Marine Corps' PhD track from its pilot phase to a program of record. This program allows Marines to compete for a small number of opportunities to enter PhD programs at prestigious civilian universities and earn doctorates. The intent of this program is to provide the Marine Corps with a cohort of advanced strategic and technical thinkers to support senior leader decision making and assist in developing defense and Service strategies. As these highly specialized military leaders begin to graduate and return to the fleet, MCU is developing the means to assess and evaluate the program's return on investment. The Marine Corps' need for these critical thinkers who can advise from a position grounded in both operational experience and deep academic expertise is critical.

Application

Education without application is a non-starter. Without meaningful opportunities to put problem-solving skills to work, student learning suffers. MCU provides a valuable intellectual architecture for analyzing battlefield success. Education by its nature "raises all boats" by maximizing brainpower within our Corps. MCU provides the application of cognitive might by leveraging the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Future Warfare, professional outreach, and the newly created Wargaming Directorate.

MCU's Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Future Warfare enables an interdisciplinary approach to complex problem solving, fosters an environment that enhances our collective warfighting capability, and facilitates and encourages novel solutions to current and future warfighting challenges to



The Corps broke ground on the Marine Corps Wargaming and Analysis Center at Quantico in May 2021. The facility will support dozens of wargames annually, including those conducted in MCU's colleges and schools. (Photo by LCpl Ann Bowcut.)

expand the Corps' competitive edge and improve our warfighting effectiveness. The center provides general support to all academic programs and maintains several academic chairs that serve as outside subject-matter experts from other Marine Corps organizations, sister Services, other governmental agencies, and

of other audiences through podcasts, annual roadshows, scholarly research, and industry forums. The community of interest includes over 8,000 social media followers on 5 platforms, 600 email subscribers, and allied militaries on 4 continents. Furthermore, MCU provides a central repository for regional

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through volunteer service from private individuals. Such support allows MCU to enhance its educational programs beyond the minimal requirements of Service and joint professional military educational outcomes and broaden the range of expertise to which MCU's students have access.

MCU's outreach program provides opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to collaborate with external groups and build linkages within the innovation and future warfare ecosystem. MCU connects its ideas to the efforts

and cultural subject-matter expertise through contracted staff, and the resident resources of our Middle East Studies and the Center for Regional Security Studies.

In response to the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, MCU moved out quickly to develop educational wargaming expertise and build opportunities for both resident and non-resident students. In 2021, a Wargaming Directorate was created to synergize the efforts across the university and ensure a wide range of wargaming platforms—from tabletop

to Cloud-based gaming—are available to students around the globe to gain decision-making “reps and sets” in an unclassified environment. Additionally, in Academic Year 2020 (AY20) and AY21, MCU students supported *Force Design 2030* through participation in analytical wargames with Marine Corps Warfighting Lab to test and evaluate force design concepts related to the infantry battalion and Marine Littoral Regiment. These parallel initiatives have been mutually beneficial and will remain a part of educational wargaming in the future.

Relevance

To prepare for the future fight, Marines must deepen our understanding of our Nation’s security environment, improve our connections to allies and partners, and advance our interoperability with our navy brethren. MCU’s focus on great power competition (GPC) and naval warfighting along with bolstering the International PME program are major highlights our warfighters will need to be relevant going forward.

The DOD expects that GPC and the potential for conflict will be defining characteristics of the international security environment for 2030 and beyond. In response to this rising challenge, the Secretary of Defense directed all Service and joint PME institutions to expand their International-PME programs as well as develop learning outcomes at the intermediate and senior PME level with a focus on GPC. From AY19–AY21, MCU hosted multiple curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular events focused on GPC. In AY22, MCU will complete the second biennial officer CRB in a row that focuses on great power competition.

MCU maintains an International Program responsible for all eligible allied and partner students and plans to increase IMS participation by 50 percent during the Future Year Defense Program 22–26. MCU’s IMS program is designed to build long-term enduring relationships between Marine Corps officers and international officers. On average, MCU receives approximately 72 international students per year who attend the resident PME programs, with

30 students enrolled in distance learning. The Marine Corps’ plan to increase IMS participation not only ensures additional quotas within resident PME programs are available but also increased the IMS participation in the Blended and Distance PME programs, providing our allies and partners with a significant increase in capacity and more affordable and flexible options.

Training and education that expand Blue/Green staff relationships foster our ability to plan and manage naval operations. As a part of the Enlisted and Officer PME 2020–2022 Curriculum Review Boards, MCU’s focus on the integration of naval concepts such as sea control, amphibious assaults, expeditionary strikes and raids, and expeditionary advanced base operations has been at the forefront of curriculum design. Integrating naval perspectives into wargaming creates better unity of effort, increases the speed of action, and improves our ability to plan to achieve combatant commander goals. To foster Naval/Marine understanding, MCU has a standing seat at the table in several cross-Service Naval Education Working Groups, is structured for naval officer teaching faculty on our staffs, and maintains a senior Naval Chair within our ranks.

Assessments and Feedback

Assessments and feedback are an essential part of effective learning. MCU has taken enormous strides in building data repositories and building out analytical surveys that have greatly helped students understand course materials and have shown to improve their learning.

MCU’s Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning department supports the collection and analysis of information supporting systematic assessment and evaluation of both resident and non-resident programs. Included in their mission are research services that promote relevant, timely, and accessible data to gain a deeper understanding of issues and conclusions that support decision making, resource allocation, and institutional effectiveness. MCU’s institutional effectiveness program obtains the assessment industry’s best practices

and the tools needed to codify, record, and evaluate the effectiveness of learners, faculty, and teaching environments. These efforts greatly enhance MCU’s ability to make data-driven decisions about its curricula and programs.

MCU conducts surveys of all OPME graduates and their supervisors approximately eighteen months after graduation and is expanding this effort to include interviews. The Qualitative Program Evaluation initiative to gain feedback on MCU programs directly from senior leaders in the FMF and joint force. These tailored sessions should provide more meaningful feedback on the university’s success in preparing its graduates to meet the Marine Corps’ needs. By obtaining quantitative and qualitative data on the quality and perceived value of our programs, the student’s preparedness for follow-on assignments, and supervisor feedback, the university gains an honest assessment of the utility and impact of our programs. Analysis of these data supports making informed decisions about the future of professional military education to strengthen the connection between what we teach and how we fight.

In the challenging world of near-peer competition, the pace on the battlefield will not be determined by the pace of our muzzles but by the pace of our minds. Bottom line, we can have the best concept, equipment, and tactics, but the discriminator will always be our people. Unfortunately, we are not alone nor unique in our efforts to transform the force. Near-peer competitors like China are also ramping up their focus on building an advanced and highly technical military force-in-readiness. As predicted, the gap between the United States and China is shrinking on all fronts and China’s economic steam is not expected to significantly slow any time soon. More than ever before, the urgency to transform and improve the applicability, relevance, and feedback of Marine Corps PME is paramount.

