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Are U.S. Military Academies Preparing Graduates for Today's Wars?

By [Andrew Exum](#)
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For the past five years, U.S. Army and Marine Corps officers have been operating in highly complex combat environments in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Uniformed decisionmakers realized early on that these wars required a wide array of skill sets and areas of expertise beyond those traditionally taught to junior officers. Army chief of staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker has stressed the need for a new kind of Army leader “skilled in governance, statesmanship, and diplomacy” and able to understand and work within different cultural contexts. The question, then, is to what extent the education given to future ground component officers at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis is working to produce such leaders. Specifically, to what extent are the traditional engineering-based curricula at the nation's service academies producing leaders with the requisite language and cultural skills necessary to be effective officers on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan?

The Core Curriculum

The curricula at both Annapolis and West Point are under almost constant review by both the academies themselves and external auditors. The purpose of the curricula, however, remains constant: to prepare graduates for service as officers in the nation's military. At West Point, the dean of students says that the academy's goal—“to educate and develop twenty-first-century Army officers”—requires creating “officers who anticipate and respond effectively to the uncertainties of a changing technological, social, political, and economic world.” In the same way, an internal faculty review of the academy's curriculum recommends that graduates be able to demonstrate proficiency in the following six “domains” of knowledge: engineering and technology, math and science, information technology, history, culture, and human behavior.

The core curriculum, however, is heavily weighted toward the hard sciences and mathematics. Unlike students in most civilian universities, each cadet—regardless of major—is required to take at least two semesters of both chemistry and calculus, and a three-semester engineering sequence. A midshipman at the Naval Academy takes two semesters of both chemistry and calculus in his or her first year. In the same way, all cadets and midshipmen are required by law to receive a bachelor of science degree—even those majoring in literature or political science. The obvious question here is whether or not this science-intensive education still prepares academy graduates for the contemporary battlefield.

The Curriculum and the Battlefield

The debate over whether U.S. taxpayers should be funding an engineering education for future officers has been long and often heated. West Point's symbolic position as the nation's first engineering school adds fuel to that fire. But the challenge facing both academies today is not so much whether or not to remain engineering schools, but how to balance the practical skills that officers need on the modern battlefield—languages and cultural intelligence in addition to more traditional martial skills—with the

academies' loftier goal of giving their cadets and midshipmen a broad "intellectual foundation" for service. As West Point's faculty review notes, "We cannot simply train cadets for the situations they will encounter as officers. Rather, we must educate them broadly so that they will have the foundation for continued learning and development as professionals throughout a lifetime of service to the nation."

That said, the primary mission of the service academies is to support the needs of the military. Today, both the Army and Marine Corps demand officers with more language skills, experience living abroad in foreign cultures, and knowledge of not just modern technology but also the regions where they might be called to serve. The service academies' strong emphasis on math and science supports a vision of war still fashionable in some circles of the defense establishment, in which technology plays a leading role. But the wars that the United States finds itself fighting today are low-tech affairs. For an Army or Marine Corps infantry officer, knowledge of Pashtu or Arabic is more important than the ability to operate complex computer networks.

All of the service academies—not just the Military and Naval academies—have felt increasing pressure from the Defense Department to produce junior officers proficient in strategic languages such as Arabic and Mandarin Chinese, with greater knowledge of the world outside America's borders. After all, academy graduates are usually given just a few more months of specialized training before being sent to combat units. As such, since the September 11 attacks, both West Point and the Naval Academy have rapidly increased the numbers of foreign languages taught and the opportunities for cadets and midshipmen to study abroad. In any given academic semester, more cadets and midshipmen than ever before are in exchange programs with military academies in other countries or are spending an academic term in a foreign country in some other capacity. At West Point, around 15 percent of all cadets study abroad at some point. That is better than some civilian institutions, but not when compared to universities with strong international relations programs. At Georgetown University and Tufts University, for example, 58 and 48 percent of all undergraduates study abroad, respectively. Surely the military academies can reach at least half these levels.

Remaining Obstacles

Despite the earnest efforts of their faculties, both academies fall short of providing the kind of language and cultural skills that ground commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan say they want in their junior leaders. Each cadet at West Point is required to take only two semesters of a foreign language—hardly enough to develop significant true proficiency. At the Naval Academy, meanwhile, there is no language requirement. Thus, some midshipmen can graduate without any language instruction whatsoever.

In addition, it remains difficult for some cadets and midshipmen—such as Division I athletes and those in advanced leadership positions—to take a semester to pursue some of the exchange programs made available to their classmates. For this reason, the academies must work to increase the number of summer programs available. Also, the academies should continue to seek out engineering programs abroad where cadets and midshipmen might fulfill some of their engineering requirements while engaging with different cultures.

Another real problem is the lack of resources for exchange programs and language instruction. In essence, both academies have been given "seed money" that they have used to establish and grow these kinds of programs, but a lack of consistent funding hobbles such efforts. Unable to determine whether next year's budget will match the current one, academy educators are left unsure of how aggressive they can be in expanding or improving these programs. The academies need clearer guidance about goals, such as the percentages of students engaged in study abroad programs or the level of foreign language proficiency required of graduates. Also, they must be provided with the resources needed for what have thus far proven to be promising programs.

Debate over what kind of education the nation's cadets and midshipmen should receive is inevitable. As part of that process, Congress, the Defense Department, and the service academies should continue working together to make the nation's officer corps better suited to complex wars through intensified attention to language and cultural education.

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