

Innovation in Education

The Innovation in Education column highlights new or updated praxes, pedagogies, and activities associated with learning and teaching in Professional Military Education. The column is meant to share high impact practices and novel methods of teaching according to the latest research from the field of educational science. We hope the column sparks new ways of engaging students in active learning practices that facilitate deep learning and transfer from the classroom to the command post and everything in between.

Joint Combined Warfighting School: Curriculum Revisions

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This year, the Joint Forces Staff College (JFSC) celebrates its 75th Anniversary, and that makes it a great opportunity to reflect on the rapid evolution in the curriculum of the Joint and Combined Warfighting School (JCWS). As 2021 unfolds, the JCWS curriculum reflects rigor in Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) Phase II. The evolved curriculum better prepares student officers from every service to prevail in meeting the complex security challenges the Joint Force will face in the future.

Over the last two years, the JCWS reformed its curriculum to address the security challenges ahead. Its ten-week span of the curriculum is now sharpened to a fine point to better transform world-class students into master practitioners of the joint planning and execution of joint, interagency, and combined operations. Under the careful direction of the JFSC Commandant and the JCWS Director, the faculty and staff pooled their wisdom, experience, and energy to calibrate the curriculum to the new paradigm of globally integrated operations that will secure a lasting advantage in the context of Great Power Competition (GPC). Remarkably, the JCWS team accomplished this feat while sustaining uninterrupted operations and under the restrictive conditions of a global pandemic, without missing a class!

Guided by an emphasis on the student learning experience, joint acculturation, and teamwork, the JCWS team oriented the curriculum toward greater student-led learning, used American history as the foundation for America's future, and added several rigorous student performance assessments. What makes this astounding is that they succeeded in performing this reformation entirely in the online environment—while outsmarting a global pandemic—and teaching every single class on-line.

¹ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

In the ice-breaker exercise titled “PURPLE GUARDIAN,” students are thrust into a complex joint planning scenario involving a widespread terror attack on the U.S. mainland. From the first week of JCWS, students build their capacity to work well under pressure and with responders from international, federal, state, tribal, and local levels. Following the exercise, the first course of JCWS, titled “Joint Force Fundamentals” (JFF), commences. In JFF students examine the doctrinal joint functions in the context of the global GPC at play at the time of the United States’ inception. Faculty and students review the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the culminating victory in the War for Independence, the Battle of Yorktown.

They also study the U.S. Constitution, which the U.S. officers have sworn to support and defend. As students observe the global competition now ongoing between the U.S., the People’s Republic of China, and the Russian Federation, they reexamine GPCs that have occurred over the last 300 years. Faculty and students also review the Civil War, WWI, WWII, the Cold War, Vietnam, the Balkan campaigns, the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Global War on Terror, and ongoing operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and around the world. As the JFF course concludes, students become familiar with the current National Security, National Defense, and National Military Strategies.

After mastering the content of JFF and the importance of unified action amongst the military services, stakeholder agencies of the U.S. government, allies, and international- and non-governmental organizations, students begin to design a five-year operational approach to the Combatant Commander Campaign Plan by applying elements of operational design described in the newly revised Joint Publication 5-0. Students master the elements of operational design and hone their skills as joint practitioners during the second course of the JCWS curriculum, titled Strategic Campaign Design (SCD). During SCD, students learn collaboratively as members of a joint planning group. However, students must also create their visualization of the operational environment and operational approach. Doing so challenges and strengthens student imagination, creativity, industry, and confidence. Through rigorous application exercises, they learn to become highly effective leaders and contributors within joint, interagency, and combined planning teams. In the process they learn to think more critically, more operationally, and more strategically. Faculty further cultivate student’s capacity to work cooperatively in the third course of JCWS, “Integrated Contingency Planning” (ICP). In the course, students learn the seven steps of the Joint Planning Process (JPP), while creating a contingency plan to defend an allied nation from attack in the context of GPC.

In the last course of JCWS, Planning in Crisis (PIC), students execute the seven steps of the JPP under the severe time constraints of an emerging crisis. The crisis scenario takes place three years into the future and incorporates a substantial number of adversary actions below the level of conflict to create the basis for a complex attack on an ally. Under intense pressure, students must rapidly create a plan to defeat the attack. Their planning, informed by their meticulous efforts during ICP, thoughtfully considers the adversary, its great power supporter, other U.S. government stakeholders, allies, and international and non-governmental organizations. The challenging capstone exercise solidifies student confidence in their ability to lead at the operational level of war and their ability to plan successful joint operations within the context of GPC.

Over the ten-week experience that is JCWS, each student must successfully navigate a decathlon of ten rigorous performance assessments. The assessments include three examinations at the conclusion of each course, JFF, SCD, and ICP, a team research paper, two discussion board assessments, a written assessment consisting of a two-page written memorandum to the Secretary of Defense and the President, and three exercise participation assessments. Student success in the assessments hinges directly on their participation in seminar efforts, their one-on-one relationship with their assigned faculty advisor, and their individual efforts.

The demanding ten-week experience serves to ensure that every student fulfills the JCWS Mission: “JCWS educates national security professionals to plan and execute Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational (JIIM) operations. Graduates are critically thinking, operationally minded, skilled joint warfighters who can operationalize national, military, and theater security strategies into design-informed operational plans. Graduates have a primary commitment to JIIM teamwork, attitudes, and perspectives.” The attributes described in the mission statement are central to the success of JCWS graduates as joint leaders in the future security environment. The evolutionary improvements embodied within the JCWS curriculum over the last two years were made possible only through the dedicated teamwork of JFSC and JCWS leadership, faculty, and staff.