Executive Director’s Commentary on Navy’s Education for Seapower Study in Advance of 20 June Center Event on the Future Education of Navy Leaders

Earlier this year, the Department of the Navy completed what it billed as the first “clean sheet” review of the education of its leaders in over a Century. The authors make a sweeping series of recommendations, from creating a dedicated Chief Learning Officer (CLO) to establishing a community college system for training enlisted Sailors and Marines. So what’s the verdict on this ambitious effort? As a veteran of numerous large Department of Defense (DoD) studies, both inside and outside of government, I found this effort to be extremely thorough, methodologically sound, and full of meaningful recommendations. The key, however, is to ensure that the implementation effort does not get bogged down in the DoD bureaucratic process and wither on the vine, a fate that has befallen many a previous study. The path to success, in my view, is for the Navy leadership to get the governance structure of the Naval education enterprise right and to have a laser focus on drawing on corporate best practices in the field of learning and education. This concentration will enable the Navy to achieve its desired end state: an education system that enables the Navy to succeed against the spectrum of security challenges facing the Nation in the coming years.

The Education for Seapower study, led by Under Secretary Thomas Modly and a board of retired admirals and education experts, is quite comprehensive. During the course of their work, the study team—utilizing quantitative and qualitative methods—consulted a wide range of government and private sector experts, surveyed leaders and organizations across the Navy and Marine Corps, and conducted a detailed analysis of past studies of naval education as well as efforts undertaken in foreign maritime services. This analysis led to a series of conclusions and recommendations. Overall, the study recommended the fostering of a top-down driven culture of lifelong learning for Navy leaders through organizational and policy changes to adapt the way that the Navy trains its leaders. On the organizational front, the Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer directed the creation of a Naval University System to align educational activities across the Navy and the appointment of both a new three-star admiral position on the Chief of Naval Operations (OPNAV) staff as well as a new staff assistant for naval education, the Navy CLO. On the policy side, the Secretary directed the establishment of a Naval Community College and created a requirement for future Flag-level officers to obtain an in-residence master’s degree in a strategic studies-related field.

The study’s conclusions and recommendations are very solid in the main and could definitely move the needle for future naval leaders. I do, however, have a few quibbles and one major concern that I would encourage the Navy to consider as it implements the study recommendations.
First, while I agree with the study’s focus on building a culture of continuous learning and mandating higher education before promotion to general officer levels, I would encourage the Navy to more closely examine educational trends in both academia and the private sector. The delivery of higher education today, for example, is shifting pretty dramatically away from in-residence full-time programs to more on-line or hybrid approaches that mix digital learning, online instruction, and in-person classes. The study recommendations, though, feel more heavily focused on adapting existing Navy schoolhouses when a more transformative approach may be what is appropriate. Second, I would like to see a greater business focus in Naval education. As a strategist, I understand the importance of that discipline for Naval leaders, but we also need leaders that can develop and deliver effective acquisition programs as well as manage the business of the overall enterprise that is the Department of the Navy.

My biggest concern, however, is the creation of both civilian and military flag-level officials to help direct naval education. While both of these officials ultimately report up to the Secretary, they do so through separate reporting chains, which creates potential for bureaucratic infighting, a perennial Pentagon challenge. Crucial to heading off these kinds of headwinds is choosing the right kind of officials for these new roles and getting the overall governance structure right. Drawing from my conversations with successful corporate CLOs, the Navy CLO and OPNAV admiral need to be both well versed in Navy operations and experienced educators. Leaders that lean too far in either direction would have greater chances of running aground on bureaucratic shoals. As for the governance structure, the key will be an effective and empowered Naval Education Board that meets regularly and has the ear of the Secretary. Adopting these kinds of approaches will help to ensure that the Navy’s admirable effort to transform the education of its current and future leaders stays on open water.

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