GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-20-323, a report to congressional addressees

February 2020

PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

Programs Are Accredited, but Additional Information is Needed to Assess Effectiveness

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD relies on PME and JPME to prepare its military personnel throughout their careers for the intellectual demands of complex contingences and major conflicts that typically involve more than a single military service. However, according to DOD's summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, PME "has stagnated, focused more on the accomplishment of mandatory credit at the expense of lethality and ingenuity."

The Conference Report accompanying the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 included a provision for GAO to evaluate DOD PME and JPME institutions. This report examines the extent to which (1) the military services' PME programs have met civilian and JPME accreditation requirements, (2) OSD has assessed the effectiveness of the military services' PME programs, and (3) USD (Comptroller) has monitored the military services' PME program budget data. GAO analyzed applicable laws and policy, analyzed accreditation and budget information, and interviewed officials from the military services' intermediate- and senior-level resident PME programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that DOD take steps to determine its ability to assign Navy officers to PME programs of other services, implement performance measures–including tracking of costs, and issue guidance for service reporting of PME budget request data. DOD concurred with all of GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-20-323. For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell, 202-512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

All of the military services' intermediate- and senior-level officer Professional Military Education (PME) programs have met civilian and met or partially met Joint PME (JPME) accreditation requirements. However, not all of the military services' PME programs met the JPME seminar student mix requirement of at least one student from the nonhost military department. For example, the Army's intermediate-level PME program did not meet its Sea Service (i.e., Navy, Marine Corps, and, in certain instances, Coast Guard) requirement (see table). GAO's analysis found that the Navy could have assigned officers to Air Force and Army programs while not harming participation in its own seminars. Without taking steps to improve Sea Service participation, students lose opportunities to interact with students from other military departments, which officials have identified as critical to joint acculturation.

Air Force and Army Professional Military Education (PME) Intermediate-level Seminars without Required Sea Service Representation, Academic Years 2016-2018

PME program	Total number of seminars	Seminars without required Sea Service representation		Total number of military students in seminars	Military students in seminars without required Sea Service representation	
		Number	Percent		Number	Percent
Air Command and Staff College	**120**	29	24%	**1,191**	288	24%
Army's Command and General Staff College	**216**	48	22%	**3,021**	664	22%
Total	**336**	**77**	**--**	**4,212**	**952**	**--**

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-20-323

Note: For the purposes of Joint Professional Military Education, Navy, Marine Corps, and, in certain instances, Coast Guard officers can count towards meeting the Sea Service seminar student mix requirement.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) has taken steps to improve its oversight of the military services' PME programs, but is limited in its ability to assess their effectiveness. Department of Defense (DOD) guidance states that performance measurement is a means of evaluating efficiency, effectiveness, and results and that a balanced performance measurement scorecard includes nonfinancial and financial measures focusing on quality, cycle time, and costs. While OSD is in the process of developing some performance measures, it is not planning to require the military services to track program costs. Implementing its planned measures and establishing costs as a performance measure will better position OSD to assess the effectiveness of PME programs.

The Under Secretary of Defense (USD) (Comptroller's) ability to monitor the military services' PME programs is limited by incomplete and inconsistent reporting of service budget request data. DOD guidance does not require the Marine Corps to submit an annual budget request data exhibit for its senior-level PME program and existing guidance for programs that are reported does not specify how to uniformly account for costs. Without complete and uniform budget request data, USD(Comptroller) is challenged in monitoring these programs.