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Ten Takeaways: The Education for Seapower Report

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TEN TAKEAWAYS

The Education for Seapower Report

*October 2019 reflection by John Kroger on the Department of the Navy's
February 2019 Education for Seapower report*

In February 2019, the Department of the Navy issued its landmark Education for Seapower (E4S) Report, calling for major reform and improvement of our system of naval education for commissioned and enlisted Sailors and Marines. The Department of the Navy is beginning to implement the report's recommendations at the direction of Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer, through his memorandum to all naval forces. When fully implemented, these changes to our education and promotion systems will have a profound impact on our naval services. Because of this, it is essential that policy makers, and indeed our entire force, understand the report and its conclusions. I recommend that everyone read the full E4S report; it is filled with important insights into the nature of seapower in the 21st century and the essential contribution of education and intellectual development to maintaining naval dominance. Since, however, the main section of the report is 71 pages long, I thought it would be useful to summarize its main conclusions and recommendations. Accordingly, here is my take on the 10 most important takeaways you need to know about the future of Navy and Marine Corps education from the E4S report.

1. Education of Our Force Is Vital to National Security

After exhaustive study of the strategic challenges we face as a nation, the E4S board concluded: "The education of our naval leaders is the single most important way to prepare the Naval Services, and the Nation, for a dangerous and uncertain future." As retired Admiral James Stavridis observed in the report, "In the end, 21st century warfare is brain-on-brain conflict, and we must build our human capital and intellectual capacity as surely as we produce the best pure war fighting technology if we are going to win the nation's wars and advance its security."

2. Our Current Educational Efforts Are Inadequate

Because our intellectual capital is so vital to our nation's security, developing that capital through education becomes a top priority, at least as important as building

platforms and weapons systems. The E4S report concluded that our current system of educating Sailors and Marines is “insufficient to create the operational and strategic leaders needed for the modern Navy and Marine Corps.” Indeed, the report noted that, in some respects, we have gone backwards. “While 98% of flag officers had attended the Naval War College on the eve of World War II, today only roughly 20% have.”

3. Immediate Action Is Necessary

Unlike a weapons system, we can’t just buy a strategically minded senior noncommissioned officer or field-grade staff officer—it takes years of education and the right motivation to develop the creativity and critical thinking required to lead through an uncertain future. The E4S board concluded that inadequate intellectual development of our force “is THE fundamental problem that must be corrected now.” We need to strengthen our capabilities in leadership and ethics, strategic education, technology and science, organizational management, logistics, and acquisition. Failure to change and improve, the report noted, would be a “strategic blunder.” This will require a major cultural shift, so that every naval warfare community and discipline recognizes the full value of education to our national security.

4. We Must Invest in and Support Our Educational Institutions

After studying the Naval War College, U.S. Naval Academy, Naval Postgraduate School, and Marine Corps University, the E4S board concluded that though these schools have proud histories and talented faculty, they are “underfunded, underprioritized, underutilized, and disconnected from one another, without any unifying strategic vision or purpose.” The report noted in particular that “[f]aculty are not receiving enough funding to teach effectively, develop professionally, and conduct research.” To fix these problems, the report calls for the creation of a unified Naval University System, changes to intellectual property rules for faculty, major budget process reforms within the Pentagon, and an increase in high-priority funding.

5. We Must Create a Naval Community College for Enlisted Personnel

Our enlisted Marines and Sailors represent a national treasure, both in terms of intellect and selfless dedication to service. Yet we do not provide adequate educational opportunities that will help them develop their vast capacity to help solve the strategic challenges of the future. The report notes that despite many programs to support enlisted education, “valuable talent from the largest part of the services is not being utilized.” To tap into and develop this talent, the report calls for the creation of a Naval Community College offering “rigorous associate of science degree programs for naval sciences, with concentration areas such as data analytics, organizational behavior, and information systems.”

6. We Need 21st Century Education

The E4S report recognizes that residential education delivered over an extended period in a traditional campus setting is a very valuable educational tool, but that deployments and operational and training needs often make residential education difficult to obtain. To address this problem, the report calls for adoption of more-flexible education-delivery models, including short executive courses, stackable certificates that lead to degrees over time, and better use of available technology to deliver education outside the brick-and-mortar classroom. The report also calls for two important changes in emphasis in our school curricula: coursework leading to “greater understanding of emerging technologies,” and “more theoretical education in order to develop true critical thinkers and leaders.”

7. The Navy Must Adopt School-Selection Standards

Achieving high-quality educational outcomes means much more than retaining the best professors or creating challenging curricula. The E4S report noted deep concerns about how Navy officers are selected for and perform at graduate professional military education schools. “Leaders candidly observed that the Navy often sends poorly qualified officers to fill quotas. This practice includes sending non-due course officers, junior officers to senior programs, and restricted line officers, such as dental officers and chaplains, to fill quotas meant for unrestricted line officers.” As a result, Navy officers “consistently underperform the officers of other services.” To remedy this problem, the report calls for “competitive in-residence graduate education selection boards” similar to those already adopted by the Marine Corps—a process that has already begun in the Navy and is still being refined by both services.

8. The Navy Must Change Its Evaluation and Promotion System to Value Education

For education to truly matter to the naval services, excellence in learning must be recognized and rewarded. The E4S report concluded that while Marine officers and enlisted personnel are required to pursue and complete education coursework to qualify for promotion, many Navy officers do not, because education is not seen as necessary or valuable to career advancement. “Education is currently viewed as an obstruction in naval career paths by the majority, an obstruction exacerbated by the needs of the personnel assignment system,” and “there are not enough incentives for the personnel to continue higher education.” The report thus recommends significant changes to how we evaluate and promote officers, to insure that career incentives promote, not discourage, educational and intellectual development.

9. Leaders Must Take Responsibility for Education in Their Command

If we want our forces to reach their full strategic and operational potential, our officer and enlisted leaders must model a commitment to excellence in lifelong

learning. The E4S report notes that although it is critical for leaders in our force to pursue their own intellectual development, this alone is not sufficient. In addition, our leaders need to “assume responsibility for the education of their charges.” This means that leaders at all levels, both commissioned and noncommissioned, must help the Marines and Sailors they command identify, obtain, and complete the academic coursework we need for our national security.

10. Improving Education Is a Team Effort

Finally, the E4S report makes clear that all of us, individually and collectively, are responsible for strengthening the intellectual capabilities of our naval forces. Individual Sailors and Marines must pursue more education and take their academic performance just as seriously as they do the performance of their operational duties. Our leaders must obtain world-class education while taking responsibility for the educational advancement of the men and women they lead. Our educational institutions need to reinvent their curricula and delivery systems so that greater educational impact can be achieved for sea services that are by definition continually deployed. And the Department of the Navy as a whole must invest in our schools and make badly needed reforms to our personnel systems so that education becomes a top priority. These reforms are not optional. This is a fight we must win if we are to do our duty to protect national security.

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Since 1 October 2019, John Kroger has served as the Department of the Navy’s first Chief Learning Officer.

