

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

A CHANGE OF COURSE: REDESIGNING THE PROGRAM OF
MILITARY INSTRUCTION AT WEST POINT

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR LD 720
TOEP 1996

BY

CAPTAIN JAMES P. SHAVER

WEST POINT, NEW YORK

DECEMBER 1995



In 1989 LTG Dave R. Palmer, the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, made a decision to transform the structure of military instruction. He removed the military science courses from the academic year and established a two-week military intersession devoted entirely to the intensive instruction of military science. The Superintendent chose this structure to balance the quality among the academic, military, and physical programs. Other factors, however, impacted significantly on the decision. The primary reason for the creation of Intersession was to remove military science instruction from the academic year and make academic endeavors the top priority. This paper will explain the reasons for the change of policy, the arguments for and against the new policy, and the consequences of the change in terms of organizational efficiency.

For many years the superintendents of West Point realized that demands upon cadets exceeded the cadets' ability to accomplish all the tasks required of them at the level of excellence that the cadets were capable of achieving. The Board of Visitors first noted the excessive demands on cadet time in 1830. In 1865, Sylvanus Thayer stated in a letter to George Cullum that the cadets had to digest more academic study than they could handle.¹

Excessive demands on cadet time continued through the years and became a major issue in 1977. The West Point Study Group identified exorbitant demands as a major problem. The revisions made based on the Study Group's recommendations, however, did not solve the problem. The Academy again conducted a comprehensive study of the problem beginning in September, 1987 and ending in April, 1989 as it prepared for its fifth decennial accreditation evaluation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. In the Institutional Self-Study 1988-89, the central theme that drove most of the recommendations of the study group

was that a decrease in the total program demands must occur to achieve an increase in cadet academic performance. The study group recommended an increase in the weight of emphasis given to academics as a way of increasing academic performance.²

LTG Dave R. Palmer, the Superintendent of USMA, agreed with the findings and recommendations of the study group. He decided to take action to make the necessary changes in the structure of the cadet program by initiating Project Enrichment. The purpose of the project was to develop a new design of the cadet experience, one that focused equally on the academic, military, and physical programs. Palmer formed a committee composed of key members of the Dean's and Commandant's staffs and chaired by Colonel William Wilson, Director of the Office of Leader Development Integration.

On March 1, 1989, Palmer gave his initial guidance to the Project Enrichment committee and shared with the committee his reasoning for beginning this project. First, he agreed with the findings of the self-study indicating that the cadets were overloaded with requirements. Second, the military and physical development programs were at the proper level of output. Third, the academic program required improvement. Finally, Palmer believed that to improve the quality of the academic program we must reduce the cadet requirements during the academic year.³

As the committee attempted to define the optimal cadet experience, the first step was to identify the portions of each program that were mandatory requirements for graduation. The activities of each program found as nonessential would either be eliminated completely or moved to the summer. Eliminating the nonessential tasks would give cadets a more manageable schedule during the academic semesters. Cadets could excel in all the activities in which they were engaged.⁴

From the beginning of the study, Palmer had some questions concerning the structure of the military science (MS) program. He approached COL Robert "Tex" Turner, Director of Military Instruction, and asked about the possibility of teaching and training all the MQS-1 precommissioning requirements during a two or three week period in January as a way to improve the quality of the Academy's MQS system. Turner immediately developed courses of action and requested input. He started by addressing the question to all the department heads who were presently teaching MQS subjects such as military leadership, principles of war, and U. S. military history in their departments during the academic year.

The response was not favorable. Department Heads from both History and the Behavioral Sciences and Leadership thought placing MQS-1 precommissioning requirements into a two-week intensive period of instruction was acceptable, but they did not want to pull their departments' subjects from the present format and place them into a compressed instructional period. Retaining MQS subjects in their core courses allowed academic departments to portray the courses as key and essential for commissioning purposes. Holding on to MQS subjects would discourage anyone on the Project Enrichment committee from recommending the elimination of one of these courses or the reduction of the departments' requirements on cadet time in the academic semesters. The departments were not supportive of changing or modifying their own programs to improve the MQS program.⁵

Palmer felt that to achieve the objectives of Project Enrichment, every program at the Academy would have to sacrifice something. He held another meeting on April 7, 1989 with the Project Enrichment committee and other key leaders of the Academy to make this crucial point. He started the meeting by giving general guidance to the members of the committee. He

instructed the committee to maintain an appropriate balance between quality and quantity, placing more emphasis on quality. He continued by stating that no program was sacred. He was referring to his previous comment when he said that the military and physical programs were where they needed to be in terms of quality. Tex Turner fully understood the General's comment. Turner knew that Palmer approved of the quality of the military program as it stood, but he also understood that the committee had the option to rearrange it to provide a better, more enriched military program.⁶

Palmer provided more specific guidance to narrow the scope of the project. He stated that he wanted to maintain a 4-year experience with two academic semesters and one summer session per year. Each developmental area would have a baseline set of requirements for all cadets to complete and an enrichment experience that would vary to meet the abilities and desires of the individual cadet. The Superintendent then instructed the Department of Military Instruction (DMI) to consider decreasing MS academic courses from four to one or two. Additionally, he wanted DMI to consider electives in MS courses during the academic year and the summer. He made no mention at that meeting of looking into a two-week intensive training period for MQS training or military science instruction.⁷

The subject of pulling military science courses from the academic semesters dominated the discussions of a more discrete audience composed of Palmer, Wilson, and COL Larry Donnithorne, the Special Assistant for Strategic Planning. Donnithorne did not agree with DMI's reasoning for retaining a place for military science in the academic curriculum. In the Project Enrichment committee meetings, DMI used the importance of MQS instruction as their reason for keeping military science courses a part of the academic semesters. Donnithorne

believed that the same goals could be met by conducting immersion training in a two-week intensive training period outside of the academic semesters. According to Wilson, DMI did a poor job of selling the importance of its program in comparison to the arguments presented by academic departments. DMI limited its arguments for the program's importance to the fulfillment of MQS precommissioning requirements. With no other major arguments to respond to, Donnithorne had an easy task of selling the idea of Intersession to Palmer.⁸

The committee held an in-progress review (IPR) for the Superintendent on April 28, 1989 to present three proposals for the new program. The common thread among all three proposals was the continued focus on all three aspects of cadet development (academic, military, physical) throughout both academic semesters and a concentration on the military program in the summer. At the end of the IPR, the Superintendent concurred with most of the recommendations, but he took a different stance on the military program. He directed that all military science courses be pulled from the academic semester and placed in a two-week military Intersession.

Turner was completely surprised by the decision. He had personally visited and talked with the Superintendent on several occasions about the desired structure of the military science program. In all those meetings, the Superintendent never mentioned the concept of Intersession. Turner could not believe that the Superintendent would consider such a drastic change. He was so upset by the decision that he went to see the Superintendent at home on the following Sunday to talk about the situation. The Superintendent was convinced that Intersession was an excellent course of action and there was no changing his mind. Because of his sense of duty to his superiors, Turner finally gave up the fight and supported the decision.⁹

The next task at hand was to decide when to execute this two-week session. As the

committee examined the options of when to conduct Intersession, they developed three courses of action. The first course of action was to conduct Intersession in January. The major advantages were that it gave the cadets a mental break, all four classes could participate equally, and it allowed maximum participation from the Office of the Commandant. The disadvantages were that it required preparation during either fall semester or Christmas break, the weather would limit outdoor activities, and it required a quick "gear change" for academic officers. The second course of action was to conduct Intersession in May. The advantages were that it allowed more time to prepare and train the teachers, the academic instructors were less objectionable to it, and the better weather would permit outside activities. The disadvantages were the questionable mental involvement of first class cadets since all graduation requirements would have been met, the conflict it would present to DMI's preparation for summer training, and the dilemmas created if a cadet failed Intersession. The third option was to conduct split sessions. This option's disadvantages were similar to option two and it had few advantages. With all options presented, the Superintendent chose to conduct Intersession in January.¹⁰

Many factors motivated Palmer to change the way the Academy taught military science. His top priority was to increase the quality of the academic program without weakening either the military or physical programs. His intentions were not to destroy the uniqueness of the Military Academy in an effort to make it more like a high-quality civilian university. He believed that cadets neglected their military science courses in terms of study time and class preparation so that they could focus on requirements for other academic courses. By pulling the military science courses from the academic semesters and putting them into a block of time all their own, the cadets would focus on the MS courses completely and spend more time preparing for

classes.

DMI would be the center of focus and have full control. Concentrated MS classes also freed up time during the academic semester for other academic pursuits. Another benefit of Intersession and Project Enrichment was that the Academy could create an elective branch of MS so that cadets could major in military science. DMI would teach these elective courses during the academic year and have ownership of the program. Furthermore, Intersession would give the cadets an opportunity to see their academic professors as soldiers teaching military-type subjects. Finally, Intersession would be a pure military operation during which cadets would wear BDUs and focus on military topics without any distractions. Palmer did not concern himself with the possibility that cadets would not retain the knowledge due to the compressed nature of the instruction. He assumed the learning quality would be just as good as if the Academy had left the courses in the academic year.¹¹

Tex Turner did not agree with the Superintendent. He thought the military science program was very effective in its present form and he saw no need to change a time-proven program. He had worked hard to improve the program and thought that Intersession would degrade the effectiveness of military instruction greatly. Turner's primary concern was the perceived loss of instructor expertise that Intersession created. He had hand-picked the cadre in DMI and they were experts in the subjects they taught. With Intersession, he saw no way that he could control the quality of instruction when he had no influence over the instructors (the instructors borrowed from the academic departments). He felt it made little sense to give him a mission without granting him control over the resources needed to accomplish the mission. Turner's opinion also differed from the Superintendent's in that he felt it would be too difficult for the cadets to

assimilate the information in such a short amount of time. With the reduction of instructional hours from 156 to 80, he envisioned a significant decline in the quality and retention of military instruction. In reference to the long-term effects, Turner felt Intersession would impact negatively on the department and its staffing. As the budget cuts and forced reduction of Academy personnel loomed on the horizon, the reduced employment of DMI during the academic year made the department a prime target for manpower cuts. According to LTC Piazza, the Chief of Military Science, Turner saw Intersession as a threat to the program built during his tenure as department head.¹²

The implementation of Intersession had to be fast and efficient to meet the Superintendent's guidance of conducting the first Intersession in only seven months. The first thing that had to be done was to adjust the calendar to fit in the two-week period. Spring leave shifted as did the graduation date of the Class of 1990. DMI began quickly to design and resource Intersession so that it would be a quality training experience. They began tasking academic departments for instructors and post agencies for logistical support. The task was tough, but DMI pulled it all together in the time allocated.¹³

As Intersession loomed on the horizon, the Corps of Cadets experienced a change in leadership as BG David Bramlett assumed duties as Commandant of Cadets on December 18, 1989. As a recent arrival, Bramlett asked Wilson, the head of Project Enrichment and director of the Office of Leader Development Integration, to summarize the purpose of Intersession. Bramlett received a reply from Wilson on January 5, 1990, just as Intersession was underway. Wilson said that the decision stemmed from an attempt to move academic program "distractors" out of the academic semesters. The result was the removal of the MS courses, the fall APFT,

and other PE course work from the academic semesters. Wilson viewed Intersession as a time of high quality military instruction and training conducted in a highly structured and military environment.¹⁴

The Academy conducted the first Intersession over the period of 3-16 January 1990. The mission statement of Intersession 1990 was two fold: (1) teach, train, and practice the Corps of Cadets in combat leader skills and selected professional knowledge and physical education subjects, (2) accomplish administrative tasks, as required. At the completion of Intersession, the Superintendent asked the Commandant to assess the success of Intersession with the intent of improving Intersession 1991. The Commandant went to work immediately and directed that all agencies and departments that supported or participated in Intersession submit an after action review (AAR). DMI was the action agency for the compiling and assimilation of all AARs. As they synthesized the information, they found many positive and negative comments concerning Intersession. With all input compiled, the consensus was that Intersession accomplished its purpose, but with much cost.¹⁵

The primary concern of Turner was validated; most of the course directors agreed that the quality of military science instruction suffered greatly. All course directors agreed that the condensed time period for the instruction was the key factor in the decreased quality.¹⁶ Many instructors and cadets viewed Intersession as a "fire hose" approach that fostered a "spec and dump" mentality among cadets.¹⁷ Another major deficiency was the quality of instruction. Because no selection criteria existed for the instructors coming from the academic departments, officers taught courses for which they were not most qualified. To add to the lack of expertise displayed by some instructors in the subjects they were teaching, cadets reported that some

instructors vocally opposed teaching military science classes.¹⁸

The planners of Intersession failed to use the short, two-week time frame to its maximum potential. One of the great weaknesses of Intersession was that the cadets found it less than challenging--most instructors agreed. However, the instructors found themselves fully committed and, at times, over-committed. Some thought that teaching MS courses during a separate time from academic courses would give the cadets a chance to devote the proper amount of time to studying military skills. This view was not validated due to the low level of class preparation and in-class performance by the cadets. The minimal effort of cadets disappointed but did not surprise most instructors. With no other competing requirements, the cadets failed to treat the MS courses as important.¹⁹

Although many problems existed with Intersession 1990, the leaders of the Academy concluded that overall it was very successful. The Commandant of Cadets assessed Intersession as accomplishing the mission of providing the cadets quality military science instruction in an environment free of competing academic requirements. He also believed that Intersession supported the pursuit of academic excellence during the academic semesters. With Intersession 1990 completed and assessments still coming in, Bramlett was not blind to the fact that there existed great potential for future Intersessions.²⁰

Palmer believed that Intersession accomplished what he had hoped it would; it removed a "distractor" from the academic semesters and freed time for academic program improvement. He echoed the comment of many academic instructors in saying that it was a great opportunity for the cadets to see instructors as soldiers, thus giving the instructors more credibility with the cadets. Finally, he felt that the creation of the military science elective was an excellent

opportunity for DMI. Overall, he was pleased with Intersession and saw no need to go back to the old system.²¹

Armed with numerous lessons learned and experience, DMI went to work to make Intersession 1991 better than its predecessor. During the preparation, DMI experienced personnel changes as COL Thomas W. Karr assumed duties as Director of Military Instruction and LTC Thomas E. Piazza became the Chief of Military Science. With the help of all the veteran members of DMI, Karr sought out ways to fix the major problems experienced during Intersession 1990. DMI revamped the schedule to make better use of time, to include adding lab periods for "hands-on" training to reinforce classroom instruction. Instructor identification and preparation improved in that DMI made an effort to ensure all instructors were the best qualified to teach assigned topics. Based on after action reports, Intersession 1991 was much better than the year before.

Does the record since the implementation of Intersession justify the decision that the leadership made? The answer is not readily apparent. Yes, the academic program is much stronger today than it was fifteen years ago. Palmer's goal of improving the academic program at West Point was accomplished. The collegiate community, as well as the general public, hold a West Point education in high regard compared to other colleges and universities. But if one only looks at the impact the decision had on academics, one will not get an appreciation of the whole picture and the impact Intersession had on the Academy as a whole.

Intersession evolved from Project Enrichment. Project Enrichment's primary focus was to address the issue that the cadets had too many demands on their time and they were not able to excel at anything. By pulling MS courses out of the academic year, the Academy decreased

requirements on cadets and allowed them to focus more time on a smaller number of requirements. Over time, however, the Academy has managed to fill the cadet's day with more academic requirements. The concept known as "curriculum creep" occurred over time and now the cadet "plate" is just as full as before with academic labs and other academic course requirements.²² In essence, the increase in academic requirements made up for the decrease in military science requirements and the cadet still has to make a choice of what requirement he or she will meet.

Intersession created an environment in which cadets could focus on military science courses and give it their maximum effort, but cadets did not put the expected amount of effort into the MS classes even when there were no competing requirements. The assumption that if the cadets had fewer, more clearly prioritized tasks, they would perform better seemed to be invalid in the light of Intersession. The Academy gave MS courses a specific block of time, but it did not plan sufficient cadet incentives to excel in military science.²³ The importance of MS courses to cadets did not increase with the creation of an exclusive time period.

There was wide disagreement on how Intersession affected the quality of military instruction. Some argued that the quality declined while others said it increased. The amount of hours of military instruction decreased significantly with the first Intersession. But as Intersession evolved, the Academy increased the number of military science instruction hours during Intersession and added MS- related topics to the Commandant's Hour that boosted the amount of instruction above what it was before Intersession began. Although there was an increase in hours, there is no way of determining unambiguously whether the quality of learning increased or decreased. Without comparing the level of learning and retention of two graduating classes,

one exposed to Intersession and one not, no one could prove whether Intersession improved or detracted from the quality of military instruction.

In summary, the implementation of Intersession impacted significantly on the structure of the cadet experience. In an attempt to improve the quality of the academic program, the Academy completely restructured the military program to minimize interference with academic pursuits. Palmer based his choice to move military science instruction out of the academic semesters on factors other than improving or maintaining the quality of military instruction. Intersession was an attempt to give time back to the military program that was taken away during the academic semesters.

ENDNOTES

1. Larry R. Donnithorne. Preparing for West Point's Third Century: A Summary of the Years of Affirmation and Change, 1986-1991. (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1991).
2. United States Academy Institutional Self Study 1988-89: Report to the Commission on Higher Education Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1989), 103-104.
3. Steve Grove. 1989 Superintendent's Annual Historic Review. (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1991), 107.
4. Larry R. Donnithorne. Preparing for West Point's Third Century: A Summary of the Years of Affirmation and Change, 1986-1991. (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1991), 69.
5. Robert A. Turner. "Project Enhancement." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., March 14, 1989; Paul L. Miles, Jr. "Project Enhancement, MQS-1 Program of Instruction." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., March 23, 1989; Howard T. Prince II. "Project Enhancement, MQS-1 Leadership Program." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., March 20, 1989.
6. Robert A. Turner. "Superintendent's Meeting on Enrichment." (Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., April 7, 1989), 1.
7. Ibid.
8. William Wilson, Committee Chief of Project Enrichment. Interview by author, 22 November, 1995, Highland Falls.
9. Robert Turner, Director of Military Instruction. Interview by author, 2 December, 1995, West Point.
10. Steve Grove. 1989 Superintendent's Annual Historical Review. (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1991), 108.
11. LTG Dave R. Palmer. Interview by Dr. Steve Grove, 13 June 1991. (Historic Collection, United States Military Academy Archives, West Point), 38-39.
12. Thomas E. Piazza, former Chief of Military Science. Interview by author, 29 September 1995, West Point.

13. Steve Grove. 1989 Superintendent's Annual Historic Review. (West Point, United States Military Academy, 1991), 110.
14. William L. Wilson. "Purpose of Intersession." (Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., January 5, 1990).
15. Steve Grove. "1990 Superintendent's Annual Historic Review." (West Point, United States Military Academy, 1995. Photocopied).
16. Gary Halstead and Robert Brown. "Intersession 1990 Military Science After Action Report." (Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., February 15, 1990), 1.
17. William J. Pokorny. "Trends Noted in the Intersession After Action Reviews." (West Point, N.Y., March 21, 1990), 1.
18. Gary Halstead and Robert Brown. "Intersession 1990 Military Science After Action Report." (Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., February 15, 1990), 3.
19. Jeffrey Long. "Critically Assessing Military Intersession." (Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., January 17, 1990), 3.
20. David A. Bramlett, "The COM Reports," Assembly, May 1990, 19.
21. LTG Dave R. Palmer. Interview by Dr. Steve Grove, 13 June, 1991. (Historic Collection, United States Military Academy Archives, West Point), 38-39.
22. Thomas E. Piazza, former Chief of Military Science. Interview by author, 29 September 1995, West Point.
23. Jeffrey Long. "Critically Assessing Military Intersession." (Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., January 17, 1990), 3.

SOURCES CITED AND REFERENCED

Primary Sources

- Bramlett, David A. "The COM Reports," Assembly, May 1990.
- Donnithorne, Larry R. Preparing for West Point's Third Century: A Summary of the Years of Affirmation and Change, 1986-1991. West Point: United States Military Academy, 1991.
- Grove, Steve. 1989 Superintendent's Annual Historic Review. West Point: United States Military Academy, 1990.
- Grove, Steve. "1990 Superintendent's Annual Historic Review." West Point: United States Military Academy, 1995. Photocopied.
- Halstead, Gary , and Robert Brown. "Intersession 1990 Military Science After Action Report." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., February 15, 1990.
- Long, Jeffrey. "Critically Assessing Military Intersession." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., January 17, 1990.
- Miles, Paul L. "Project Enhancement, MQS-1 Program of Instruction." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., March 23, 1989.
- Palmer, Dave R., LTG. Interview by Dr. Steve Grove, 13 June 1991. Historic Collection, United States Military Academy Archives, West Point.
- Piazzе, Thomas E., former Chief of Military Science. Interview by author, 29 September 1995, West Point.
- Pokorny, William J. "Trends Noted in the Intersession After Action Reviews." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., March 21, 1990.
- Prince, Howard T. "Project Enhancement, MQS-1 Leadership Program." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., March 20, 1989.
- Turner, Robert A. " Superintendent's Meeting on Enrichment." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., April 7, 1989.
- Turner, Robert A. "Project Enhancement." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., March 14, 1989.
- Turner, Robert A., former Director of Military Instruction. Telephonic interview by author, 2 December, 1995, West Point.

United States Military Academy Institutional Self Study 1988-1989: Report to the Commission on Higher Education Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. West Point: United States Military Academy, 1989.

Wilson, William L. "Purpose of Intersession." Memorandum, West Point, N.Y., January 5, 1990.

Wilson, William L. Interview by author, 22 November 1995, Highland Falls.