Achieving a Strategic Mindset
Across the Force
(2020-2040)
The future portrayed within the Army Operating Concept (AOC) identifies a world in which complexity is a constant to all environments. The AOC identifies a world in which strategic thought will be not be optional but rather required to succeed and win. The vision is clear: to succeed and win in this type of environment, the entire force, rather than select individuals will be required to develop and execute thinking competencies to adapt to the complexity of the world and will be required to do so at the speed of information. Leaders at all levels will have to be adept at understanding context, perspective and interrelationships at the speed of the world and must be able to adapt to situations while learning to leverage all available information, knowledge and experience to succeed.

To win in this future environment, the entire force will be required to think strategically. While the Army may pride itself on this competency, it has not holistically instituted this competency within our Professional Military Education and Training systems. In fact, many of our most successful leaders have acknowledged that their own strategic thinking competencies were developed largely outside of PME, not because of it. Moreover, across the force there is wide-spread misunderstanding of the requirement and in many cases leaders are routinely questioning whether or not the entire force needs to think strategically at all? But the truth is, that while we have had notable exceptions, literature reviews, personal interviews, and Army initiated studies clearly demonstrate more failure than success in this critical skill. It is therefore the goal of this plan to build a comprehensive program to develop a force that can think strategically and are able to logically and intellectually defend their position or decisions; individuals who are deep in the Military Arts and the elements of National power”.

The Cold-Hard Truth

Strategic thinking competencies of an individual or the strategic mindset of the entire force is quite simply a life-long endeavor. It cannot be achieved through the current episodic exposure to today’s professional military education alone. It will require students to fully integrate institutional, operational and self-development opportunities and experiences and will require a consistent, disciplined approach to learning, exploring and
reflecting on topics relevant to the force. In the end, achieving a strategic mindset across the force is an endeavor in which Professional Military Education (PME) can only set the foundation for competency and success, but one in which the maturation will be an individual’s responsibility and will have to be supported by a self-development domain that allows individuals to explore ideas, expertise and perspectives at the speed of the world.

**What is Strategic Thinking?**

To fully understand strategic thinking, the term itself must be defined. For the purpose of this plan, Strategic Thinking is defined as “the use of a set of cognitive processes to synthesize an integrated perspective to envision and pursue a desired future state”. Of note, the definition is not limited to the strategic-level, nor it does not specify a requirement to have an end-state of a strategy, but rather this is an approach which leverages the use of a set of processes to process, synthesize and determine relevancy towards understanding and envisioning what the information means. In other words, strategic thinking applies to all cohorts (Officer, Warrant Officer, Enlisted and Civilians) and is not limited to either the tactical, operational or strategic levels but rather a skill required of all within the force.

The specific cognitive processes referenced in the definition are summarized in Fig 1 below:
The pillars of strategic thinking are those competencies most important to the development of strategic thinking and of an individual and or an organization and include:

- **Comprehensive Information Gathering**: A strategic thinker continually scans the environment, seeks information from disparate sources, suspends judgement and remains open-minded, considers others perspectives, and possesses listening and research skills.

- **Life-Long Learning**: A strategic thinker is a lifelong learner who iteratively tests, reflects upon, conceptualizes, and manages knowledge to gain insights on the environment and continually examines one’s own thinking.

- **Critical Thinking**: A strategic thinker identifies the essential aspects of a situation, questions assumptions, asks relevant questions, explains meaningful connections and distinctions, understands nuance, and considers limits of data.

- **Creative (Innovative) Thinking**: A strategic thinker generates creative and novel ideas, concepts and approaches, independent of conventional norms.

- **Thinking in Time**: A strategic thinker understands historical and contemporary contexts, recognizes patterns, forecasts possible futures, anticipates second and third order effects and has a long-term perspective.
• **Systems Thinking:** A strategic thinking uses a holistic perspective of the dynamic and complex environment to identify relationships and integrate disparate factors into a comprehensive whole.

**Strategic Thinking Competencies and KSAs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehensive Information Gathering</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Scanning the environment</td>
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<td>- Seeking information from disparate sources</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Open mindedness, suspension of judgment</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Considering other perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Research skills</td>
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<td>- Active listening</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Life-Long Learning</strong></td>
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<td>- Iterative testing, continuous learning</td>
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<td>- Reflection and metacognition</td>
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<td>- Conceptual ability</td>
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<td>- Agility</td>
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<td>- Adaptability</td>
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<td>- Information/knowledge management</td>
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<td><strong>Critical Thinking</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Identifying the central and peripheral elements of a situation</td>
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<td>- Questioning, challenging assumptions</td>
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<td>- Comfort with nuance</td>
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<td>- Generating creative and novel ideas and approaches</td>
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<td>- Reframing understanding when existing concepts falter</td>
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<td>- Re-evaluating and challenging conventional norms</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Thinking in Time</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Understanding historical and contemporary contexts</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Pattern recognition</td>
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<td>- Maintaining a long-term future perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Anticipating 2nd and 3rd order effects</td>
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<td><strong>Systems Thinking</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Identifying and comprehending complex and dynamic interdependencies between entities</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Holistic perspective, synthesizing interdependencies into a concept of a comprehensive whole</td>
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The enablers to strategic thinking are unique attributes of an individual or organization which facilitate strategic thinking competencies and include:

• **Broad Knowledge:** A strategic thinker has both broad general knowledge of many disciplines (e.g. geo-politics, world religions/cultures, economics, technology, sociology) and knowledge specific to a strategic environment
(e.g. local/regional customs, history, stakeholders) that provides a foundation for strategic thinking.

- **Collaboration**: A strategic thinker leverages the capabilities of others in a team or informal network (e.g. through cooperation, leadership, building trust, conflict management) to supplement one’s own strategic thinking, given inherent individual limitations and time constraints.

- **Communication**: A strategic thinker must communicate candidly and effectively in multiple media (oral, written, visual) for their individual understanding to move to the shared understanding required for strategy implementation by diverse audiences that require tailored persuasive messages.

- **Moral Courage**: A strategic thinker is principled, does what is best for the organization as a whole, and has the conviction and fortitude to speak truth to power regardless of any personal harm accrued from holding a given position.

- **Emotional Regulation**: A strategic thinker must be intellectually humble and account for his or her own natural limitations and biases related to emotion, perspective, and self-interest, while maintaining respect for the differing values and priorities.

- **Ethical Reasoning**: A Strategic thinker must comprehend moral challenges and apply ethical reasoning at the strategic level to empower virtuous service, wise decision making, and stewardship of the profession of arms according to its values and traditions. Additionally, they must examine and evaluate the importance of the character of the strategic leader, discretionary moral judgement within the profession, moral aspects of strategic choices, the just war tradition in the exercise of Landpower, moral complexities in leading organizations at the strategic levels, and other areas.

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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Broad general knowledge forming a foundation of awareness, e.g., of general history, global trends, geo-politics, socio-cultural forces, economics, military, technology, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Deep knowledge of the context of a strategic problem, e.g., relevant groups, stakeholders, cultures, relationships, regional history, capabilities, processes, public opinion, etc.</td>
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### Collaboration
- Team building (e.g., team composition, identifying and balancing strengths and weaknesses)
- Team leadership, managing conflict, interpersonal dynamics, climate, trust, consensus
- Networking and relationship building
- Organization, project management

### Communication
- Message tailoring, understanding the audience, creating narratives
- Effective oral, written, and visual communication skills
- Interpersonal tact and professionalism, especially during debate or disagreement
- Candor and self-confidence
- Concisely communicating complex issues
- Narrative ability, storytelling, engaging an audience
- Influence skills, persuasion, negotiation

### Emotional Regulation
- Self-awareness and self-control
- Respectful of others
- Intellectual humility, controlling the impact of personal biases, self-interest, and values
- Understanding limits of control and responsibility

### Ethical Reasoning
- Empower Virtuous Service
- Maintain Stewardship of the Profession
- Lead Just War Traditions

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**Where are we today?**

Professional Military Education and training within the operational force currently provides educational opportunities in many of the identified thinking competencies and enablers across all cohort groups. Likewise, a great deal of professional coordination is on-going to ensure coherency within a particular cohort group as well as between cohort groups. Unfortunately, due to a host of competing educational requirements many of our subject offerings are limited to common core classes which aim to achieve a knowledge level of understanding rather than breadth and depth required to achieve the needed advanced learning outcomes and corresponding growth of a strategic mindset. With limited time available and ever increasing demands on common core requirements this is not likely to change in the future.

In addition to limited time available to cultivate a strategic mindset within our institutional and operational domains there are many other environmental realities which will have to be accounted for in order for this plan to be successful.
To achieve a strategic mindset requires a lifetime commitment to education, thinking and reflection. The culture of the force currently exhibits a negative bias towards these very educational opportunities that are key to developing these competencies across the force. In fact, in many parts of the current culture, time spent away from the force to engage in educational opportunities is often compared to “taking a knee” while the force continues the fight.

In today’s Army, the force does not assess thinking competencies at the individual or enterprise level. With the exception of entry-level assessments, there are no force requirements designed to specifically assess the thinking competencies most key to enabling a strategic mindset.

The Army’s talent management system is immature and lacks the needed processes to ensure an individual’s thinking competencies are captured and managed to produce our best strategic leaders. The current system is heavily weighted to capture and position operational performers rather than those with demonstrated thinking competencies.

There has been remarkable growth in the capabilities and utility of technology into the classroom. There has been equally impressive growth in the ability to leverage search engine capabilities, web crawling technologies and knowledge management initiatives to allow individuals to receive relevant answers at the speed of thought. However, these capabilities have had only limited use in the delivery and pedagogy of education with PME.

The use of the web to allow individuals to explore vast amounts of information from anywhere in the world, at any time of the day using a host of enabling technologies is a generational game-changer. However, the ability to explore the vast amounts of knowledge, experience and expertise on topics relevant to our profession does not exist. Instead, this knowledge, experience and expertise remains behind the security of the portal firewalls making it difficult to find and access by those seeking self-development opportunities.

Environmental Realities Impacting the Strategic Mindset of the Force

- Limited Classroom and Unit Time
- Negative Cultural Bias Against Academic Achievement
- Lack of Assessment of Thinking Competencies
Where do we need to go?

To inculcate a strategic mindset across the force, Professional Military Education must be retooled to develop higher level thinking and learning competencies within our force. We must account for our current cultural mindsets and seek innovative solutions to develop the needed thinking and learning competencies across the force.

The Army’s current PME provides education and reflection opportunities within the realm of tactical and technical proficiency however limits the exposure to a skill-centric level of understanding. If our future leaders are to be prepared for an environment which is characterized by increased complexity, accelerated change and uncertainty, the force must mature its educational programs to achieve higher levels of thinking competencies to that of a self-actualizing level. This level is characterized by “the ability to recognize higher principles, complexity and interrelationships, individuals who are aware of the social construction of reality- not just rules and customs and are problem finding, not just doing creative problem solving. They are aware of paradox and contradiction in self and systems and learn to have a deep appreciation of others”. (Forbes Maureen Metcalf).

To begin pursuing the goal of strategic mindset across the force, it must be reiterated that a true strategic mindset cannot be developed solely through the current episodic exposure reflective of today’s existing PME programs. But rather, it can only be developed through an individual’s ability to synchronize and leverage the benefits of institutional, operational and self-development opportunities over the duration of a career. This will require individuals to invest more time in self-study and self-development than ever before (ADRP 6-22, Army Leadership). In the end, strategic thinking is quite simply a lifetime endeavor; an endeavor that will require an individual to gain and maintain intellectual curiosity on topics relevant to the profession throughout a life-time of learning; to explore, reflect and compare and contrast perspectives both in and out of the profession as one travels this journey. It is a cultural shift from the rank and grade episodic education opportunities to one in which the force must learn, evaluate, gain
perspective and determine relevance to the profession on a daily basis. In short it is the development of a culture that is passionate about learning, thinking and reflecting about all things relevant to the profession.

The development of a strategic mindset across the force must begin with a refinement to how Professional Military Education is delivered to its students. While the topics, skills and education must continue to reflect objectives of creating and maintaining technical and tactical proficiency across the force, it must be refined using innovative educational methods specifically designed to inculcate intellectual curiosity on topics relevant to the profession into its objectives. PME must be used to develop foundational understanding of the competencies and enablers and expose the force to the realized benefits of this type of thinking. PME institutions must also develop and integrate assessments specifically designed to evaluate thinking competencies at all levels and begin to use these assessments to inform student self-development plans and future curriculum enhancements. Finally, we have to break-away from our rigid teacher-led, one size fits all education methodologies towards concepts and initiatives which can be best characterized as learner-Centric. We must find ways to appreciate and fully leverage existing generational proficiencies enabled by technology advancements and embrace learner centric “flipped classroom” methodologies to aid in the maturation of the strategic mindset of the force.

As mentioned previously, the development of strategic thinking skills across the force mindset across the force cannot be achieved solely through episodic engagement with the institutional domain. Competencies, knowledge, and skills gained through PME must then be purposely matured and regularly exercised and accessed through operational assignments for it to take hold and flourish across the force. In the end, the operational force must mature and cultivate a cultural mindset to demand this type of thinking in all that it does.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Army must develop and institute a self-development repository of knowledge designed to allow individuals to explore, engage, learn, think and reflect on topics relevant to the profession and their own personal growth. We must find creative and innovative solutions which leverage web-crawling, search, and knowledge management technologies to create a self-development domain which is
available 24/7 and accessible using a host of enabling technologies. This repository should allow individuals to query at the speed of thought and requirement and enable access to the best information, knowledge, and expertise resident within the whole-of-government enterprise and relevant academic institutions.

Principles of Strategic Education

• Achieving a strategic mindset is a lifetime endeavor that is underpinned by the development and nurturing of intellectual curiosity
• The development of Strategic Thinking competencies are an individual responsibility and best taught in the institutional domain and developed and matured in the Operational and Self-Development Domains
• Strategic mindedness can best be measured by evaluating an individual’s ability to learn and ability to think
• Strategic thinking will be enhanced by fully leveraging technology and the information age.

How do we get there?

To accomplish the desired goal of cultivating a force who thinks strategically, a multi-phased plan which allows individual, cultural and enterprise-level competencies and understanding to learn and mature is presented in Figure 2 below:
Maturing the strategic mindset of the force will be a cultural endeavor. It must be understood at the onset that to achieve this mindset across the force we can only be successful through a force commitment to a life-time of learning which will rely on individuals to supplement PME foundational skills and understanding and operational experiences with self-development exploration and study. This will take time, perhaps as long as a generation (or more) to instill within the profession. There is no “easy button”.

To achieve the goal we will use a phased plan (Figure 3 below), that is not designed to be executed sequentially, but rather, a plan which allows the culture to change, emerging initiatives such as talent management and strategic assessments to mature and most importantly time for the enterprise to learn and leverage this competency across the force.
Achieving a Strategic Mindset Across the Force

Phase 1: Instill Intellectual Curiosity into the Profession

Research has shown that one common denominator to thinking strategically starts with instilled intellectual curiosity; The self-driven desire to develop understanding of foundational and inter-relational aspects of the profession. In all cases, our greatest strategic thinkers have self-developed these skills through a lifetime of learning, experiencing, and reflecting. They did not limit themselves to the introductions that they received in PME/JPME classroom settings, but rather continued to learn throughout their careers through constant study, interaction and reflection.

To inculcate this type of behavior we must refine PME to better light the fire of learning within the force, develop the needed repositories and assessment tools to enable and assess thinking competencies across the force. We must foster intellectual curiosity and enable individuals to become life-time students of the profession.

This phase begins immediately and is complete when the three objectives listed below are fully integrated into the force. (Estimated Duration 3-5 yrs).
OBJ 1.1) Develop and Implement Strategic Thinking/Learning Events within Institutional and Operational Domains

To aid in the development of Strategic Thinking competencies across the force strategic thinking/learning war-gaming events and exercises must be added to all PME courses and operational unit training. These types of events should be conducted regularly and fully leverage Learner-Centric methodologies. Faculties and unit trainers must be given the freedom to pick topics from existing lesson plans or once developed, the Strategic Thinking Self-Development Repository. The construct of the event should require students to research, evaluate and assess information, gain perspective thru interaction and debate, provide professional analysis of the information and present and defend views and solutions (both orally and written) on a given topic. As students mature in their career time-lines they should be increasingly driven outside of their comfort zones and forced to address issues and topics relevant to the profession with ever increasing levels of complexity. The purpose of these events is to mature intellectual curiosity on topics relevant to the profession and to develop the thinking competencies of individuals and the force.

OBJ 1.2) Develop Strategic Education Self-Development Repository

The development of a strategic mindset across the force is dependent on the self-development of its individuals. As such, we must develop a knowledge repository that can be used seamlessly across the institutional, operational and self-development domains. The initial construct of this domain must full leverage technology to produce a whole-of-government repository for learning and should initially focus on capturing information, knowledge, experience, and expertise which is most relevant to the profession. It must allow both structured (classes) and unstructured learning to occur. These topics should be captured using web-crawling technologies assisted by artificial intelligence software to consolidate and simplify information so that it can serve as a focal point for education. Topics should initially include: Land Warfare, Geo-Politics, Economics, History, Culture and Religion, Military Technologies, Communication Skills, Thinking Competencies, Data Analysis and Limitations, Policy, Strategy, Conflict Management, International Relations and Regional specific areas of interest to the profession. The repository should be developed to allow educational
opportunities in all three domains and should be used to facilitate classroom and unit instruction as well as self-development exploration. This should not be a follow-on build to existing distributed learning initiatives but rather the development of a system that quickly exposes the trending topics of the profession to allow individuals to explore at the speed of thought and debate equal to that of the real-world.

**OBJ 1.3) Develop Force-Level Assessment Tools To Measure Thinking Competencies**

To date, there are no force-level assessment tools to measure the thinking competencies of the force. In order to inform our way ahead, we must develop these tools to inform institutional growth and future self-development plans. Once established these tools will provide the needed baseline from which we will learn and mature and set the stage for future individual assessments. For this plan to succeed PME institutions must be part of the measurement tool for the force. When available, strategic thinking assessments should be added to the pre-arrival process of all PME. The measurements should be focused on evaluating an individual’s ability to learn, and to think and should be composed of metrics appropriate for the cohort and echelon of training. The Army War College will work with all relevant academic and professional organizations to determine appropriate measurement tools and will developed a process to inform Senior Level Leaders on an annual basis. In the future, as these tools mature, results should be linked to talent management initiatives to provide the force the ability to identify and manage strategic thinking competencies across the force.

**Phase 2: Mature Learner-Centric Professional Military Education System**

Today’s PME is a one-size-fits-all approach to learning, it is characterized by teacher-led delivery and tested to evaluate stated learning objectives. While this is exactly what is needed to evaluate knowledge and skills based learning, it falls short in developing the needed Analysis and Synthesis levels of learning required to enable a strategic mindset. To achieve a strategic
mindset is largely an individual endeavor. In the future students must be enabled to investigate relevant-to-the-profession topics of interest and passion at their own pace of learning, as it makes sense to the individual. For the force to think strategically, programs within PME must be refined to better foster individual intellectual growth across a career and enable constant and in-depth interaction with subject matter experts from our institutions and partner academic institutes to better address the intellectual curiosity of the individual student. We will have use lessons learned and knowledge gained from phase 1 to inform this phase of effort. Key to this phase is leveraging lessons learned from force level assessments to inform the development of individual level assessments which may be used to inform tailored educational opportunities. Finally, we will mature the Strategic Thinking Self-Development Repository to full-operating capability based on the user feedback and requests captured in phase 1.

This phase is complete when three objectives of this phase are fully integrated into the force. (Estimated Duration 3-5 yrs).

**OBJ 2.1) Develop Individual-Level Assessment Tools to Evaluate Thinking Competencies**

Using the knowledge gained in the Phase 1 development of force level strategic thinking assessment tools, we will develop individual level assessment tools to inform and enable self-development tracks which are unique to the skills and attributes of the individual. Once established and validated, the results of these tools will inform PME placement and educational paths, leader mentoring programs within the operational domain, and applicable talent management assignment processes. Completion of this objective will set the stage for Phase 3 objectives.

**OBJ 2.2) Develop Learner-Centric Programs within PME Curriculum**

Research and studies have shown that future learning environments will be characterized as “individualized”-allowing students to focus on areas of interest and passion, as well as areas of intellectual weakness. It promises to negate the “one-size-fits-all” educational methodologies and replace them with more tailored-to-the individual opportunities. While todays programs currently offer elective periods within PME, students are generally forced through a common core of JPME requirements regardless of proven
proficiency levels of understanding. To attain a strategic mindset across the force, PME curriculum must be refined to better address individual learning requirements and designed to allow students to be more involved in their own self-development.

**OBJ 2.3) Mature Strategic Learning Self-Development Repository**

The creation of the Strategic Learning Self-Development Repository in Phase 1 will be matured to Full Operating Capability (FOC) in this phase. Key to the maturation will be tailored improvements based on user experiences and feedback collected in Phase 1. Additionally, FOC will integrate new and evolving technologies and methodologies, expand topic coverage and include the development of individual user profiles to allow individual assessment based developmental recommendations and Community of Interest like collaborative opportunities.

**Phase 3: Develop Processes and Programs to Manage Success**

By the end of Phase 2 a learner centric system will be in place to allow individuals to self-develop their thinking competencies and strategic mindset. Maturation of the assessment tools will allow the identification of individual thinking competencies to be leveraged across the force and will inform talent management initiatives. Phase 3 will be designed to build a bench of strategic leaders and thinkers through the development of specially designed broadening and education opportunities and special programs designed to align the best talent that the force has to offer with the most productive for the force opportunities. This phase will also include an analysis of the growth of thinking competencies and strategic mindset of the force to determine accession implications for the future force. This phase begins with the completion of Phase 2 and ends when the objectives listed below have been completed. (Expected duration 3-5 years).

**OBJ 3.1) Align Broadening/Educational Opportunities with Talent**

Within today’s force, broadening and educational opportunities are rightfully implemented to build a broader, deeper base of knowledge and experience across the force. However, today’s opportunities are not aligned to the demonstrated thinking competencies of an individual in a disciplined manner. With the maturation of force and individual level thinking
competencies enabled by this plan, the force will be better positioned to manage these broadening opportunities by aligning talent to opportunity to enhance overall force readiness and effectiveness.

**OBJ 3.2) Develop Special Programs and Opportunities to Grow Strategic Leaders and Educators**

As understanding of individual-level thinking competencies mature through this plan, the Army must develop special programs to invest in those individuals with the highest demonstrated levels of potential. Specially designed, rigorous programs of study and reflection should be created to produce the best leaders and educators that the force can produce.

**OBJ 3.3) Integrate Lessons Learned into Accession Procedures**

With the cultural shift to assess and build strategic thinkers for the Army laid out in this plan- lessons will be learned. Lessons will be learned on how to produce the very talent required to succeed and win within the Army Operating Concept. Likewise lessons will be learned on the level of intellect and the needed abilities required to achieve the levels of thinking competencies that will be required to fight and win our future battles. These lessons learned must be used to evaluate the accession requirements needed for this type of future force.

**Conclusion**

The future portrayed within the Army Operating Concept (AOC) identifies a world in which complexity is a constant to all environments. To win in this environment the strategic mindset of the force must be raised from a knowledge and comprehension level to a level of analysis and synthesis. To accomplish this goal, the force must address the limitations of the current PME system, instill professional intellectual curiosity into the profession at an early level and demand this higher level of thinking in all that we do. Individuals must be life-long learners of the profession enabled to develop and mature this intellectual curiosity through a self-development domain which allows individuals to seek out knowledge and information at the speed of their own thoughts, reflection and experience. To enhance the strategic mindedness of the force is truly a generational undertaking and a cultural shift from today’s Army; there is no easy button to press, it will be hard work.
However, for the force to succeed and win in the complex future envisioned within the Army Operating Concept this plan serves as the framework for future understanding and success.