

Clearer Guidance Could Improve Joint Professional Military Education Nuclear Deterrence Curriculum

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What GAO Found

All 23 Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) programs GAO surveyed reported that they include varying degrees of nuclear deterrence content in their intermediate- and senior-level curricula, including incorporating mandatory topics identified in JPME guidance. However, the Department of Defense (DOD) has not explicitly defined nuclear deterrence in the guidance to help JPME programs develop nuclear deterrence content. Including an explicit definition of nuclear deterrence in the guidance could help JPME program officials facilitate a shared understanding of the concept, which would better prepare JPME students for joint assignments related to nuclear deterrence missions.

Selected Defense Schools' Core Courses at the Intermediate- and Senior-Levels with Nuclear Deterrence Content

College or university	Number of core courses	Number of core courses with nuclear deterrence content
National Defense University	37	12
National Defense University - Joint Forces Staff College	10	7
National Intelligence University	5	1
Army Command and General Staff College	17	5
Army War College	29	6
Naval War College	10	4
Air University	30	19
Marine Corps University	28	9
Space Force - Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies	13	8

GAO analysis of DOD information provided in response to GAO survey. | GAO-25-107416

In response to DOD requirements, JPME programs have begun developing learning outcomes and objectives for their JPME curricula that include a focus on nuclear topics, such as nuclear deterrence. However, GAO found the time frame for the JPME programs to implement DOD's outcomes-based military education system is unclear, and the military services had varying understandings of the required time frame for implementation ranging from 2027 to 2029. Setting a specific time frame for full implementation of its outcomes-based military education system could help DOD implement the effort and meet the educational needs of the joint force for contemporary nuclear deterrence.

Why GAO Did This Study

The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review emphasizes the importance of supporting the professional development of service members working in and supporting the nuclear field. Additionally, DOD has recently shifted from a topics-based approach to an outcomes-based approach to monitor and assess student learning for key topics covered in JPME curricula, including nuclear deterrence.

A Senate Armed Services Committee report accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 included a provision for GAO to assess DOD's JPME system, including the curriculum involving nuclear deterrence. GAO evaluated, among other things, the extent that JPME programs have 1) included nuclear deterrence content in JPME, and 2) developed learning outcomes that include nuclear deterrence.

For this report, GAO reviewed JPME programs' curricula and conducted a web-based survey of the education institutions that manage the 23 intermediate- and senior-level JPME programs. GAO also reviewed policy, guidance, and other documents, and interviewed cognizant officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to DOD, including update guidance to explicitly define nuclear deterrence and thereby enhance JPME curricula, and set a specific time frame for full implementation of outcomes-based military education. DOD partially concurred with the three recommendations. GAO continues to believe that these recommendations are warranted, as stated in the report.