

Intellectual Capital: A Cautionary Note

Anna Simons

ABSTRACT: *Parameter's* Editorial Board Member Anna Simons responds to the preceding article in this issue, "Intellectual Capital: A Case for Cultural Change."

I am all for Spain, Banks, and Mohundro's idea of Army Smart. I like to think any academic teaching in a professional military education (PME) institution would agree: brains should trump brawn. However, it is not clear to me that GPAs or, worse, standardized test scores accurately capture who is capable of daring thinking or sage leadership. Nor do I think having more PhDs or Masters-level officers in the force is altogether wise, or even necessary. As it is, too many officers and soldiers are earning diplomas from what are, for all intents and purposes, degree mills. They are doing so because education now counts for promotion. No question, being able to tally up pieces of parchment enables units to brag about how smart their soldiers are. But – if we sample just some of the written work turned in to earn those degrees, we would (or rather, should) be appalled.

More troubling than the money and time being wasted, however, is the assumption that academic credentials signify talent. Yes, attending a 10-month Masters program or earning a PhD in 3 years (the military standard) exposes individuals to subjects they might not study on their own, which can be very valuable. But as anyone who has been around PhDs should recognize, just because someone possesses an advanced degree does not guarantee he or she is a particularly quick, deep, or profound thinker. Nor does it guarantee he or she can communicate effectively.

To be sure, in our 18-month-long in-residence degree-granting program at the Naval Postgraduate School, we too have problems with students who can not express themselves particularly well in writing. We also graduate officers who would not be able to organize a Masters-level argument without considerable assistance. However, that does not mean our students are not smart – or curious, or able to absorb information by means other than reading and writing.

I invoke our students because there are multiple kinds of intelligence, and while I am counting on the authors' argument to provoke a long overdue debate, my biggest quibble is with their criteria – which are stacked in favor of only one particular type of intelligence. In the not so hoary past, when reading books and not just emails was an avocation, people used to distinguish between "book" smarts and "street or people" smarts. It was often thought that anyone with the former tended

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to lack the latter. Such a binary view seems of a piece with thinking women can not be both smart *and* beautiful, but it also lines up with the authors' contentions about motivation and intellect.

Let's consider their motivation-intellect juxtaposition for a moment. I can not tell from the article whether the authors think this opposition informs people's choices consciously or subconsciously, is a by-product of Army conditioning, or what else. But if I have read them correctly, they believe the Army right now privileges the wrong thing (motivation) over the right thing: intellectual human capital. Even if we accept that Army leaders weight these two competencies against each other in favor of motivation, the authors' preferred means for assessing cognitive agility are puzzling. Especially when we consider neither standardized tests nor GPAs probe an individual's ability to assess novel or unfamiliar situations accurately. Nor is either designed to reveal who might be unconventional in their approach to learning, never mind problem solving.

Consider GPAs. At most institutions, grades reflect little more than who has the mental acuity to absorb, regurgitate, or (at best) *maybe* synthesize information passed down in transmissible form via a teacher, books, or from some other authoritative source. Grades rarely reveal an individual's capacity for discovering information independently, let alone for generating new or different ideas.

In fact, standardized tests and GPAs end up measuring the very thing the authors take issue with: namely, motivation, specifically, who has the motivation to excel in the classroom, and who has been motivated to acquire good test-taking skills.

Meanwhile, what does good officership require? Based on what I have seen commanders wrestle with over the years, a good portion of every day is spent managing other humans, which requires an intelligence that can not be gleaned from books. Officers have to be able to read other people and the dynamics among them. This need is compounded in places like Afghanistan and Iraq where they also need to be able to "read" non-Westerners, especially non-Westerners for whom history matters. Here, actually, book smarts can help since, if nothing else, being familiar with what has been written can help commanders accurately vet what subject matter experts (SMEs), cultural advisers, interpreters, and others are telling them.

In other words (and to state the obvious), any one officer needs to be the master of multiple intelligences. As for the Army overall, it needs a variety of types – everything from big picture, conceptual thinkers to detail-oriented perfectionists. Though, ultimately, what the Army most needs is a "smart" mix, while to ensure it has that mix requires it to develop a healthy respect for variation, not just at junior levels but up through the highest levels.

I would be surprised if anyone were to argue against developing officers' critical thinking. But if we are talking about fostering (and identifying) true agility, then there should be no set metrics for what constitutes "intellectual human capital," while *real* talent management should eschew set path(s). Career-long-learning would instead be tailored and re-tailored *for* individuals based on *their* interests and affinities,

their experiences, and their recognized strengths and weaknesses (along with a host of other considerations – to include family needs).

Advanced civilian schooling might be suitable for some. But surely the Army can be more original than this. For instance, why create a military-educational complex that encourages everyone (officer and enlisted alike) to scramble to get into whatever degree-granting program they can? Instead, why not offer everyone who is, say, in a regionally aligned brigade, a set of “for credit” classes *specifically* designed to make them smarter about their area of operations (AO) (*and* about politics, economics, history, and anthropology, at the same time)? There are innumerable ways the Army could put together relevant and useful short courses taught by world-class faculty to benefit the force, and not just individuals. I know degrees serve as an important retention tool these days. But even so, earning credit should be the bonus from education, not the point in seeking it.

Of course, in an ideal world, the Army would also operate an eHarmony-like program to synch individuals’ capabilities with the service’s needs, adjustable over time since individuals grow and mature at different rates. However, realistically speaking, and just given the Army’s size, it is unlikely the Army can treat individuals this individually – which is why it is also imperative to proceed with some amount of caution when coming up with new ways to identify and manage the talent within. I say this because the US military loves to metricize. It will turn anything it thinks is important into a benchmark, and then make that a gate for everyone to try to pass through. Yet, doing so flies directly in the face of fostering what will make the Army *Army Smart*.

Every smart officer I know is desperate to see the Army promote and place those who can think deeply and creatively into strategic positions. They want to work for leaders who are smarter, wiser, and better informed than they are. Spain, Banks, and Mohundro offer many suggestions for how the Army might better assess, identify, grow, and treat such individuals. In principle I am with them. But when it comes to credentialing, I would ask them to reconsider fetishizing academic credentialing which unduly privileges only one type of talent.

Yes, absolutely: officers (everyone, actually) need to be granted more time to stretch their thinking – and to be able to indulge in thinking. This is why stints at corporations, at non-profits, in Washington, in Silicon Valley, and abroad on exchanges also have to be on the table. Knowledge no longer resides exclusively in top-tier schools.

Ultimately, who then should end up where—whether in command because they can lead and listen, or on staffs because they are smart planners and implementers—is, I would say, the challenge beneath the challenge that “Intellectual Capital: A Case for Cultural Change” highlights. As for what the Army might look like if it could get this right: at a minimum, the silly pride that certain officers currently exhibit in being “knuckledraggers” would disappear, while big thinkers would not.

