

Navy Undersecretary Modly Touts E4S Education Initiative During Forum

The Navy Department is aggressively pushing its new “Education for Seapower” initiative because it will need Sailors and Marines who will have the mental flexibility and critical thinking skills to compete and win in an era of “great power competition” and rapidly changing technology, naval leaders of the effort said Nov. 14.

Educating its leaders is more important now because of “the new strategic environment we’re in” and the rapid changes in technology, said Undersecretary Thomas Modly, who has been tasked to drive the initiative. Looking at the future, “it’s going to be unpredictable” and the naval services “will need intellectual flexibility, Sailors and Marines able to respond to the changing conditions,” he said.

America’s strategic competitors, who Modly prefers to call “adversaries,” are overtaking U.S. technological advantages, so success will be determined by how America can use the technology, Modly said at a forum sponsored by the U.S. Naval Institute and hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

When a skeptical member of the audience asked what problem the program is trying to

solve, Modly said it was trying to answer the question “is the naval education system really able to provide the officers we will need to solve” the strategic problems the new era will bring.

John Kroger, a former enlisted Marine and experienced educator, said he took the newly created job as the Navy Department’s Chief Learning Officer because “better education in the Navy and Marine Corps is fundamentally important to competing.” Because the great technological and economic advantages America had in the 1980s and 1990s have been eroded by the great power competitors, “we’re not going to be a credible force unless we educate,” Kroger said.

Navy Secretary Richard Spencer launched Education for Seapower, referred to as E4S, on Feb. 12 saying: “I am convinced, now more than ever before, that the intellectual development of our naval leaders is the most critical warfighting capability for our national security.”

E4S was advocated by a panel of former senior Navy, Marine and diplomatic leaders who looked critically at the Department’s top educational institutions, including the Naval Academy, Naval Postgraduate School, Naval War College and Marine Corps University, and key civilian academic institutions. It envisioned establishing a Naval Community College, with residential and online course and universal transcripts so

“enlisted Sailors and Marines could earn accredited associate’s degrees in technology-rich fields, and a new Naval University System that retains the strengths of current educational institutions, while aligning strategic intent in order to provide increased agility,” according to the Navy’s announcement.

Modly and Kroger said formation of those institutions is still in process.

Kroger said he hoped to be able to name the community college officials soon.

His top immediate priority, he said, was “developing the first-ever comprehensive Navy educational strategy” that would guide the program going forward.

Those two officials and a later panel of the leaders of the Naval Academy, Postgraduate School and Marine Corps University, wrestled with unresolved issues of how the educational progress of officers and enlisted leaders would be considered in the annual fitness reports and evaluations, how civilian educational institutions would collaborate with the new naval educational structures and how the increased emphasis on education would mesh with the current intensive focus on military training, given the pressure on naval personnel’s time.

Kroger said he did not see military training and education being separate efforts but as a needed blend. With the increased technical levels of warfighting, “training is going to become even more complex going forward. The fundamental thing you get from education is how to learn,” he said. The officials said the education programs they were creating would include cultural aspects as well as technical fields to better prepare naval personnel to engage with foreign allies and partners and confront the adversaries.