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ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS IN PME

Cultivating Curiosity, Creativity, and Connection

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Abstract: This article argues that voluntary, interest-driven enrichment programs operating alongside the formal curriculum are an underutilized yet powerful means of fostering intellectual curiosity and creativity, deepening peer connections among professional military education (PME) students, and enhancing resilience. Drawing on educational theory, creativity research, well-being literature, and a decade-long institutional example from a U.S. PME institution, it examines how enrichment programs cultivate creative problem-solving, personal balance, and meaningful professional relationships. It shows how activities ranging from military history seminars and wargaming to athletics, creative arts, and practical life skills contribute to leader development by broadening ways of seeing the world, supporting psychological well-being, and strengthening social cohesion, including among international military students. The article outlines a low-cost, scalable model emphasizing student initiative, institutional trust, and organic growth, positioning enrichment as a deliberate educational investment rather than an extracurricular distraction.

Keywords: enrichment programs, creativity, resilience, professional military education, PME, extracurricular activities

Professional military education (PME) institutions develop leaders

who are tactically and strategically proficient. These same curricula strive to produce men and women who are creative, lifelong learners, broadly adaptable, and resilient. One effective yet often overlooked tool for achieving adaptable and resilient capacities is enrichment programs—voluntary courses and activities that extend learning beyond the prescribed curriculum. These programs can range from academically rigorous seminars in history and military science to athletic pursuits such as land navigation or marathon preparation, as well as more personal and creative offerings like woodworking, cooking, or even courses on love languages and retirement planning. While these might be a much-needed diversion from academic pursuits, they are far from being a distraction. These opportunities create a culture of curiosity and exploration where students can deepen their expertise, discover new talents, and strengthen connections with peers and faculty. By doing so, enrichment initiatives contribute directly to the holistic development of military leaders by fostering intellectual agility, personal well-being, and professional versatility. Enrichment programs can be an essential component of modern PME, and they can be implemented across institutions to better prepare officers for the complex demands of leadership.

As Major General Jason Bohm explained, “The Enrichment Program was created to provide our students with a more holistic experience at the Expeditionary Warfare School. Its purpose was to build cohesion among the EWS community to include faculty, staff, students, and family.”¹ Participant experiences suggest the program achieved those aims. As one student put it, “I went to [the school] to expand my horizons and challenge myself. I didn’t expect to encounter such a robust enrichment program on top of what I already knew was waiting for me.”²

For the purposes of this article, *enrichment programs* refer to both extracurricular activities that occur outside the formal curriculum and cocurricular activities that are institutionally supported and aligned with broader educational goals but remain voluntary and low stakes. This article first defines enrichment programs within PME and distinguishes them from formal curricular offerings.

¹ MajGen Jason Bohm (Ret), email message to the author, 3 March 2026, hereafter Bohm email.

² Mark Hull, (Army veteran), email message to the author, 31 March 2026, hereafter Hull email.

It then examines how such programs foster creativity, intellectual curiosity, well-being, and professional relationships. Next, it outlines a practical model for developing enrichment programs based on experience at the Expeditionary Warfare School, Marine Corps University. Finally, it addresses common criticisms and argues that enrichment programs should be viewed as a deliberate component of leader development rather than an extracurricular luxury.

Enrichment Programs

An enrichment program in PME is a structured but voluntary collection of student- and faculty-led courses, activities, and communities of practice that operate outside the formal curriculum while remaining part of the institutional environment. These cocurricular or extracurricular offerings are not designed to meet prescribed learning objectives or assessment requirements. Enrichment programs are defined not by subject matter or whether they carry academic credit, but by their voluntary, nonassessed nature and their position outside required coursework. In some cases, the same activity may be taken either for graduate credit or as a purely voluntary enrichment experience, depending on how the student elects to participate. This flexibility allows enrichment activities to complement the formal curriculum without being constrained by it. Instead, they provide low-stakes, interest-driven opportunities for participants to explore topics, skills, and experiences that broaden both professional and personal development. Most meet during evenings or weekends and are open to all members of the institution. The range of offerings is wide—military history seminars, wargaming, physical training, creative arts, and practical life skills. While participation is optional, the programs are supported through light administrative structures that allow them to develop organically. In many cases, they also fill a gap where formal electives are limited or unavailable.

This approach is consistent with longstanding military educational philosophy. For example, “Intellectual training at West Point is underpinned by the belief that the best officers are created from a broad-based education.”³ The U.S. Naval War College similarly offers electives outside its core curriculum that allow students to

³ *West Point Academic Enrichment* (West Point, NY: West Point Association of Graduates, U.S. Military Academy, 2025), 2.

explore areas of personal interest.⁴ Enrichment programs provide a flexible and scalable way for PME institutions to advance those same aims by promoting lifelong learning, intellectual curiosity, and creative thinking.

A 2024 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction highlights that PME should “demonstrate critical and creative thinking skills, emotional intelligence, and effective written, verbal, and visual communications skills.”⁵ Curricula at graduate-level PME institutions are well suited to developing critical thinking through the study of doctrine, strategy, and tactics. They are less effective at teaching, demonstrating, and assessing creative thinking and emotional intelligence. Professor Milan Vego reminds us that “war is largely an art, not a science. Hence, it is inherent that military commanders and their staffs must be highly creative in planning, preparing, and employing their forces for combat.”⁶ As Vivian M. Y. Cheng points out, “Creativity-related attitudes, conceptions, habits and thinking strategies were commonly transferred from the initial study over to daily life, new learning and teaching.”⁷ Such transfer suggests that creative habits developed in one context can influence performance in many others. Creativity can be taught, but it is often developed more effectively through varied and experiential outlets than through formal instruction alone. Enrichment programs provide those outlets. By creating space for exploration beyond the core curriculum, they complement formal education and help develop more adaptable, well-rounded, and resilient leaders.

Benefits of Enrichment Programs

Obviously, offering cocurricular courses in military history, strategy, or wargaming will help students develop an understanding of the profession of arms. Equally beneficial, and often more en-

⁴ “Electives & Areas of Study,” *U.S. Naval War College*, U.S. Naval War College, accessed 17 September 2025.

⁵ *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01G, Officer Professional Military Education Policy* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 15 April 2024), Encl. A, A-3.

⁶ Milan Vego, “On Military Creativity,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 70 (3d Quarter 2013): 83.

⁷ Vivian M. Y. Cheng, “Understanding and Enhancing Personal Transfer of Creative Learning,” *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 22 (2016): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2016.09.001>.

gaging, are extracurricular enrichment courses in chess or tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). One study specifically found that “TRPG players perform better than non-TRPG players in all aspects” of the verbal subtest of the Wallach–Kogan Creativity Tests.⁸ These activities cultivate transferable skill sets, and it is the routine act of applying skills from one context to another that fosters creative and strategic thinking.

An extracurricular enrichment group might incorporate board games and tabletop role-playing games, both of which have been linked in the research literature to the development of creativity and divergent thinking. One empirical research article noted, “These findings provide a first step in the study of creativity and board games and suggest they could help temporarily improve one’s divergent thinking capacity.”⁹ A subsequent study by the same authors showed “that the frequency of playing board games was positively correlated with several components of creative potential: divergent thinking, openness to experiences, creative self-efficacy and creative personal identity.”¹⁰ In a cocurricular setting, selections could also include strategy-focused games aligned with military themes. For example, the board game *Memoir ‘44* introduces fog of war through command-card constraints, terrain effects, and combined-arms coordination, while *Pandemic* requires cooperative crisis response, resource triage, and management of global interdependence under escalating pressure.¹¹

When deliberately facilitated, such games serve not as entertainment but as structured environments for decision-making under uncertainty and reflection on strategic consequences. Whether integrated as a cocurricular activity or extracurricular activity, a board game enrichment group can augment a traditional PME experience:

These games often required critical and strategic

⁸ Tsui-shan Chung, “Table-top Role Playing Game and Creativity,” *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 8 (April 2013): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2012.06.002>.

⁹ Maxence Mercier and Todd Lubart, “The Effects of Board Games on Creative Potential,” *Journal of Creative Behavior* 55, no. 3 (2021): 875, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.494>.

¹⁰ Maxence Mercier and Todd Lubart, “Board Games Enhance Creativity: Evidence from Two Studies,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 19, no. 3 (2024): 481, <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000547>.

¹¹ Richard Borg, *Memoir ‘44* (Los Altos, CA: Days of Wonder, 2004); and Matt Leacock, *Pandemic* (Roseville, MN: Z-Man Games, 2008).

thinking, which supported the school's broader educational outcomes. However, those outcomes were realized in games about a fantasy feudal Japan, winemaking in France, or futuristic conflicts between members of the Greek pantheon, etc. Ultimately, the students came to realize that while they were reinforcing skills and habits of military judgment and decision-making, they were doing so in a way that was cathartically distinct from their day-to-day PME studies.¹²

Whether it is a collaborative wargame, an inventive chess maneuver, or a novel boardgame strategy, learners carry over creative attitudes, habits, and thinking strategies from one area into others.¹³ Enrichment courses broaden a person's exposure to new ideas, which will in turn give them a new pool of experiences and ideas to pull from when confronting challenges. While the content they learn during a woodworking, real estate investment, or cooking class will make them better woodworkers, investors, and cooks, it also makes them a more well-rounded leader with new perspectives because of these experiences and the insights they bring.

The military has made a concerted effort to promote creative thinking.¹⁴ While some argue that creativity cannot be taught, "it is now widely accepted in the literature that creativity can, in fact, be taught, nurtured and developed."¹⁵ The real questions have become: What is creativity, and how should PME foster more of it? As Teresa M. Amabile explains, "A product or response is creative if it is a novel and appropriate solution to an open-ended task."¹⁶ For instance, lessons in endurance, pacing, and resource management gained during a marathon preparation enrichment course could

¹² LtCol Chris Nelson (Ret), email message to the author, 10 March 2026.

¹³ Cheng, "Understanding and Enhancing Personal Transfer of Creative Learning," 58.

¹⁴ Todd T. Holm, "Teaching Creative Problem-Solving: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures," *Journal of Military Learning* 8, no. 1 (April 2024): 3–4.

¹⁵ G. Gow, "Can Creativity Really Be Taught?," *Tech Directions* 73, no. 6 (2014): 12; and Tamara J. Patston and David H. Cropley, "Teacher Implicit Beliefs of Creativity: Is There an Arts Bias?," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 75 (2018): 366–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.06.020>.

¹⁶ Teresa M. Amabile, "The Motivation to Be Creative," in *Frontiers of Creativity Research: Beyond the Basics*, ed. Scott G. Isaksen (Buffalo, NY: Bearly Limited, 1987), 227.

transfer in novel ways to challenges in supply and logistics. For officers and enlisted servicemembers to develop more novel and appropriate solutions to tasks, they need to be exposed to a wider spectrum of ideas. Enrichment programs expand the spectrum of experiences and perspectives available to servicemembers, thereby increasing the likelihood of generating novel and appropriate solutions to military tasks.

Alongside creativity, another essential leadership trait fostered through enrichment is intellectual curiosity. “Curiosity has been described as the noblest of human drives,” and as Anne-Laure Le Cunff explains in her review of psychological well-being research, curiosity is a cornerstone of flourishing—psychological well-being, happiness, personal growth, creativity, adaptability, and supporting lifelong learning.¹⁷ Promoting intellectual curiosity in adults is about creating the right conditions, habits, and mindset that make learning both rewarding and natural. Most humans have natural curiosity and just need the opportunity to explore new domains of knowledge that spark passion and encourage lifelong learning. By offering avenues for deeper exploration of military history, strategy, and related fields, enrichment courses encourage intellectual curiosity and critical thinking beyond what is possible in the formal curriculum.

Establishing and maintaining a work-life balance is important. Recent surveys of Marine aviators “described insufficient work-life balance . . . [as] an inability to achieve work-life balance [and it] contributes significantly to attrition rates.”¹⁸ Working in a fluid and dynamic environment, which is common even in garrison, makes it difficult for many uniformed personnel to be a part of community or church activities like bowling leagues, softball teams, or even book clubs. But when enrichment program activities are part of an institution’s calendar, carving out time for the activities becomes much easier. One of the benefits of the enrichment program is that

¹⁷ Celeste Kidd and Benjamin Y. Hayden, “The Psychology and Neuroscience of Curiosity,” *Neuron* 88, no. 3 (November 2015): 450, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2015.09.010>; and Anne-Laure Le Cunff, “Systematic Curiosity as an Integrative Tool for Human Flourishing: A Conceptual Review and Framework,” *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 58, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-024-09856-6>.

¹⁸ Maj Jim Bernthal (Ret), “Fixed-Wing Pilot Retention: Barriers, Recommendations, and Broader Implications,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 106, no. 6 (June 2022): WE11.

many of the skills taught are portable. The students can continue to engage in origami, pottery, woodworking, board games, history, investing, or a myriad of other activities they explored long after they finish the enrichment program. What they learn in these programs can help them find balance for years to come and hopefully make them lifelong learners.

Mission readiness increasingly hinges on preventing burnout, bolstering morale, and retaining experienced personnel. For example, a recent mixed-methods study of U.S. military health providers found that “addressing burnout is of military significance due to its impact on the quality of health service provision as well as resilience and retention within the military.”¹⁹ Similarly, in PME settings, research on base services in the Philippine Air Force (15th Strike Wing) revealed how the quality of housing, recreation, family support, and transport significantly influences morale, job satisfaction, and ultimately retention—areas directly tied to mission readiness since dissatisfied personnel can quickly degrade unit cohesion, delay training, or leave gaps in operational capability.²⁰ By embedding enrichment programs into PME curricula and base life, whether through improved facilities, better support for family life, or structured downtime, military institutions can help reduce attrition, maintain continuity, and preserve readiness during peacetime and combat conditions. In this sense, enrichment programs offer a practical way to reinforce the kinds of engagement, recovery, and positive experiences that are associated with reduced burnout.

The impact of engaging in a creative outlet should not be underestimated. Too often, we dismiss creative endeavors as frivolous or unproductive; the author once heard a father remark, “If people do it as a hobby, it shouldn’t be your college major.” In other words, if it is enjoyable, it cannot be practical. Yet, research demonstrates the opposite. Creative activities hold intrinsic value, improving both health and adaptability. Helene L. Stuckey and Jeremy Nobel reviewed arts and health research and found that visual art, music, writing, and other creative practices promote

¹⁹ Bolanle Olapeju et al., “Socioecological Drivers of Burnout: A Mixed Methods Study of Military health Providers,” *Frontiers in Public Health* (2024): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1410825>.

²⁰ Deardito Iayan et al., *Fostering Military Personnel Satisfaction, Morale, and Well-Being: A Qualitative Analysis of Base Service Quality Toward Enhancement Strategies in the 15th Strike Wing*, SSRN working paper (Quezon City: World Citi Colleges, 2023), <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4625472>.

healing, reduce stress, and build resilience.²¹ Girija Kaimal, Kendra Ray, and Juan Muniz showed that even 45 minutes of artmaking can significantly lower stress hormones, regardless of artistic experience.²² Mark A. Runco argues that creativity is a universal human capacity that helps individuals adapt to changing environments, while Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn in a World Health Organization review of more than 900 studies, concluded that creative engagement supports health across the lifespan.²³ Creative outlets are therefore essential to human flourishing. Unfortunately, PME curricula remain largely devoid of them; an enrichment program, however, can provide precisely the creative opportunities that are missing.

Enrichment programs cultivate relationships by creating shared experiences that extend beyond the formal curriculum. The shared experience of learning in an enrichment program helps build relationships based on what communication scholar Kenneth Burke referred to as the *sharing of substances*.²⁴ Burke argued that persuasion and cooperation depend less on logical proof and more on “identification”—the sense that people are “substantially” connected. For Burke, *substance* is not a physical object but rather a collection of beliefs, values, roles, and experiences that define who we are, in essence our identity. When people discover overlap between their “substance” and someone else’s “substance,” they become *consubstantial*. That means while they are different people, they are linked by shared symbolic grounds. That is why two doctors from different nations may feel an immediate bond as healers, or why football fans from very different walks of life unite around loyalty to the same team. The more *substances* people share, the stronger their sense of identification becomes because each over-

²¹ Helene L. Stuckey and Jeremy Nobel, “The Connection between Art, Healing, and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature,” *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 2 (2010): 254–63, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497>.

²² Girija Kaimal, Kendra Ray, and Juan Muniz, “Reduction of Cortisol Levels and Participants’ Responses Following Art Making,” *Art Therapy* 33, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2016.1166832>.

²³ Mark A. Runco, “Creativity,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 55 (2004): 74–80, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141502>; and Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn, *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being?: A Scoping Review* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2019).

²⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950).

lapping layer deepens their *consubstantiality*. While PME students might feel connected to others in the program because they are all in the military, they experience stronger connections to others in the same branch of the military and an even stronger bond with those in the same military occupation skill. They can develop even deeper bonds with those who also share their passion for music or affinity for reading or an interest in 3D printing. The more of their identity they share, the more they identify with others because of *consubstantiality*. Such identification lays the groundwork for leaders who can build trust, foster cooperation, and sustain community across diverse groups.

This dynamic of shared substance provides a powerful basis for trust, cooperation, and community. Within PME, those relational bonds matter not only among peers but also across partner nations. One of the expressed goals of Marine Corps University is “deepening bonds of trust and understanding between allies and partners and the Marine Corps.”²⁵ The Marine Corps is not alone in that goal. Enrichment classes allow international military students (IMS) to interact, develop relationships, and “share substances” with U.S. students and faculty in informal settings. Those opportunities move relationships from professional to personal and deepen those bonds.

Enrichment programs are particularly well suited to fostering durable relationships between U.S. students, faculty, and IMS, whose presence is central to the strategic purpose of many PME institutions. Formal classroom settings often reinforce national, professional, and hierarchical identities, whereas enrichment activities create informal, low-stakes environments in which participants engage first as learners, teammates, or collaborators rather than as representatives of states or Services. These shared experiences accelerate the process of identification by allowing IMS and U.S. students to discover overlapping interests, values, and practices that transcend national boundaries. Over time, such interactions generate relational capital that can persist long after graduation, shaping how officers perceive, communicate with, and trust one another in future multinational contexts. As Joseph S. Nye argues, enduring influence and cooperation among partners depend not

²⁵ *Education Command Academic Year 2026–2029 Campaign Plan* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2025), 7.

only on formal agreements or institutional alignment but also on attraction, shared understanding, and interpersonal relationships developed through sustained engagement.²⁶ Enrichment programs thus complement formal diplomatic and educational objectives by creating the interpersonal foundations necessary for effective coalition leadership and long-term security cooperation.

The U.S. population is work obsessed. Alexis Ohanian, a co-founder of Reddit and Initialized Capital, has labeled that obsession “hustle porn.”²⁷ It refers to the fetishization and glorification of extremely long work hours and relentless work ethic. It promotes the idea that true dedication and success require excessive sacrifice, *constant* grinding, and the public display of work as a “badge of honor” to the point of ignoring health or personal well-being. Hustle porn is harmful because it encourages people to overwork and normalizes suffering for productivity, often leading to burn-out and a toxic work culture. In professions like law, where billable hours are the coin of the realm, working more hours is demanded and rewarded. But the law of diminishing returns comes into play at some point. Taking breaks, taking vacations, and engaging in hobbies makes people more productive when they are at work. The private sector has found that “when employees find fulfillment outside of work they tend to become better at their jobs.”²⁸ The mind needs rest, diversion, and pleasure to function optimally. Enrichment programs can ensure people have an opportunity to find a fulfilling hobby or activity outside of work. That, in turn, helps them find balance.

Developing Enrichment Programs

Developing an enrichment program is simple but not necessarily easy. The primary challenges are practical, particularly logistical constraints and cultural resistance. Most institutions operate with limited resources, whether in terms of budget, facilities, or time on an already crowded calendar. When a curriculum is carefully constructed and protected, even accommodating a last-minute guest

²⁶ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 108–9.

²⁷ Leah Fessler, “Reddit Co-Founder Alexis Ohanian Is Taking a Stand against ‘Hustle Porn,’” *Quartz*, 7 November 2018.

²⁸ Louis Tay, “When Workers’ Lives Outside Work Are More Fulfilling, It Benefits Employers Too,” *Conversation*, 15 August 2025, para. 20.

speaker can be difficult, let alone creating space for a wide range of enrichment offerings. Fortunately, because enrichment activities are voluntary and typically occur after hours or on weekends, they do not compete directly with the formal curriculum in the same way.

Most institutional leaders recognize the value of enrichment programs, even if that value is framed modestly as providing constructive alternatives for students' time. The more significant issue is not whether enrichment is worthwhile, but what it is prioritized against. When leadership signals that enrichment matters, participation follows. Because these programs are voluntary, they attract individuals who are genuinely interested, while placing no burden on those who are not. This self-selection ensures that engagement is driven by intrinsic motivation rather than obligation.

Enrichment programs are probably best if they are member-driven. The Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS) at Marine Corps University has been successfully offering an enrichment program for more than a decade. Early in the academic year, the dean (Dr. Kirklin Bateman) briefs students on what the enrichment program is and how they can submit enrichment program opportunities. During this briefing, he draws on Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, explaining to students that they are in a unique and wonderful position. They are being paid to go to school and expand their minds and develop professionally, but it is also an opportunity for them to "sharpen their saws." That is what Covey calls regularly renewing yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to maintain balance and effectiveness.²⁹ This is a time for them to reengage with activities they used to enjoy and/or to learn new ones. If they are interested in starting an enrichment course of their own, they can fill out a simple form and submit it. The form asks for the name of the proposed group, their contact information, the goal of the activity, a brief description of what the group will do, how often the group will meet, an operation risk assessment, and any support they will need from the school or costs students might incur while participating. Reviewing the proposals may identify overlapping activities. In such cases, the reviewer will recommend that the proposers explore opportunities

²⁹ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 287–319.

for collaboration to develop a single course or, where collaboration is not feasible, revise their proposals to ensure the offerings are clearly differentiated.

The resulting program is dynamic. Some courses are stable and faculty-led, others transition between instructors, and many are newly created each year based on student interest. At any given time, approximately 20–40 programs may be active. An enrichment fair, organized in a county fair format, provides a venue for sponsors to present their activities and recruit participants. After this initial stage, responsibility shifts to the group leaders and participants. While some offerings diminish over time, most persist throughout the academic year, and many continue informally beyond it. Table 1 demonstrates the breadth of courses offered by students and faculty. Everything from quatrefoil to foodies, from John R. Boyd scholars to jujitsu junkies, and woodworking wannabes to Winston Churchill scholars found a time and place for similar curious minds to gather and explore issues of mutual interest. Participants found a place to *embrace their inner nerd* and spend time getting to know each other outside the workplace.

There are two ways these enrichment programs can be implemented. They are not mutually exclusive. They could be offered as electives/extracurriculars completely agnostic of the curriculum or they could be offered as cocurriculars for credit. In either case, they are designed to be something students opt into rather than an expectation. If the programs are being offered for credit they will need to have objectives, lesson cards, and an accounting of the time participants will spend in direct contact with faculty and an estimate of how much time they will spend on assignments and assessments. Those pieces of data will be used to determine the credit hours for the enrichment program. Individual institutions may have additional requirements.

Extracurricular

There is considerable flexibility in the extracurricular model. Activities may be student-led, require no formal assessment, and exist purely for the sake of learning. For the purposes of this article, *extracurricular enrichment* refers to institutionally supported but nonassessed opportunities for voluntary intellectual, creative, or personal exploration that occur outside the formal curriculum. Ac-

Table 1. Representative categories and examples of enrichment offerings at EWS

Credit-eligible electives	Sports related	Professional development	Social and hobbies
Ellis Fellows for Military Transformation	EWS basketball team	Cyber security enrichment	Chess club
Beyond Boyd Seminar	John F. Kennedy 50-miler	How the Navy fights	Wargaming enrichment
Captain’s Combat Leadership Seminar	Mountain biking	Captain’s Combat Leadership Seminar	MCU chaplain’s EWS bible study
CIV-MIL relations	Jujitsu maneuver warfare	Battle study and decision-making	Woodworking
Irregular warfare in the age of great power competition	Marine Corps Marathon	Seminar on Greek military history	Student-led Tun Tavern bible study
Winston Churchill as war leader: WWII	EWS golf club	Quatrefoil Society	CHOWder Society (foodies)
China Scholars Program	Orienteering	Seminar on War	

Source: compiled by author.

tivities may range widely, from religion and investing to woodworking, yoga, or strategy games, but they share a common structure: elective participation, absence of evaluation, and engagement driven by personal interest. By cultivating hobbies and emerging passions, participants develop habits of self-directed growth that extend beyond formal education.

Cocurricular

Cocurricular enrichment occupies a middle ground. Like extracurricular offerings, participation is typically voluntary and topics may extend beyond traditional coursework. However, these activities are intentionally integrated into the institution’s educational framework. They may include structured reflection, facilitated discussion,

or alignment with broader learning outcomes. While not assessed in the same manner as core coursework, they are also not entirely detached from institutional expectations. In this model, enrichment is not only exploratory but deliberately developmental, reinforcing intellectual habits and professional identity in structured but low-stakes environments.

Regardless of format, enrichment programs offer benefits for students and faculty. For faculty, they provide an opportunity to teach outside established curricula and to explore topics of genuine interest, which can renew intellectual engagement. For students, they create space for curiosity, creativity, and connection. Together, these outcomes contribute to a stronger intellectual culture within the institution.

At EWS, a small number of enrichment courses are offered for graduate credit, typically in areas such as military history or leadership. Participation in these courses may be for credit or simply for interest. The administrative requirements are limited. Courses must be taught by appropriately credentialed faculty and include graded work, but they otherwise resemble other enrichment offerings in structure and intent.

Major General Jason Bohm explained how he started an enrichment program: "Its concept was simple. We began by asking two simple questions: First, what are the top three things you always wanted to do in your personal or professional lives that you never had the time, expertise, skills, or resources to pursue? Second, what knowledge, skills, and expertise do you have that you are willing to share with others? By asking those questions we received over 150 responses that we binned into six different categories. Administrators brought together people with like interests, identified the volunteers willing to lead these groups/clubs/teams, and then facilitated their activities as needed."³⁰ The first year will always be the most difficult as people seek to define what they want the program to be and what they want it to become.

This approach highlights both the simplicity and the challenge of implementation. The first year is often the most difficult, as participants collectively define the program's identity. In practice, es-

³⁰ Bohm email.

establishing an enrichment program follows a clear sequence. First, communicate the concept as voluntary, interest-driven learning outside the formal schedule and provide examples to guide understanding. Second, solicit proposals. Third, host an open forum where participants can explore offerings and enroll. After that point, the program largely sustains itself through the initiative of its members.

The early stages may feel uncertain and even chaotic. That is not a flaw but a feature of a system designed to foster ownership and creativity. Leaders should resist the urge to overdirect and instead allow the program to evolve organically. For individuals to develop curiosity, creativity, and meaningful connections, they must have the freedom to engage on their own terms, even when that process is somewhat uncomfortable. Growth, after all, tends to occur just beyond the edges of comfort.

Participants Found the Opportunities Worth the Efforts

Time is quite possibly the most precious commodity in our lives. Time on an academic calendar indicates what leadership thinks is important. Where and how we spend our time is an indication of what we value. We spend our time where we need to spend it and where we want to spend it. We might need to go to work because we need to draw a paycheck. We go to our children's soccer game because they are important to us and being there is a sign of us caring. Sometimes our *needs* overpower our *wants*, and we go to work instead of going to our children's soccer games. But when students see that time has been made on an academic calendar for enrichment programs it sends a message: "These are worth our time." One of the enrichment program students wrote "[The woodworking] class was a non-linear, non-military experience that perfectly fit EWS and my goal for being there: to grow. I learned the art of pen turning under [the instructor's] gracious teaching 10 years ago. Since then I've transformed the principles and confidence [he] gave me into building benches, beds, toy swords, and a Captain America shield."³¹ Another student noted, "Although some enrichments required a continuous commitment, the ones

³¹ Hull email.

that appealed to me the most were those where you could participate as the student's schedule permits, making them more flexible for students trying to prepare for the fleet, complete the EWS curriculum, and balance family time."³²

The enrichment programs also helped form a greater connection between the participants and the faculty. Another woodworking student explained,

I started woodworking during COVID but through the enrichment program, my love continued to grow for the hobby. Seeing the set up and tools [the instructor] has in his shop allowed me to be exposed to the art of the possible. I purchased my own CNC [router] which led me to then purchase a laser and continue to grow my LLC [private business]. Without this program, I'm not sure how much this hobby would have grown. I'm so thankful for the opportunity and exposure to broaden my scope and learn from him and those around me. I've made lifelong friendships and still keep in touch.³³

A Counterargument Worth Addressing

Some might contend that if students have enough time to participate in enrichment programs, the core curriculum should be more rigorous. There is validity to this argument. The only constant in PME is change. The future operating environment is constantly evolving and that means faculty are always looking to add more to the curriculum. But for every hour of instruction that goes in to keep warfighters up to date on drone, AI, or threats, an hour must come out somewhere else. It is easy to say if students have six hours to learn to make an end-grain cutting board they should have time to read an additional article. That perspective assumes enrichment programs are a distraction from "serious" study rather than a complement to it.

In practice, most PME institutions deliberately build "white space" into the academic schedule for reflection, physical training, or research. Enrichment programs do not replace academic rigor;

³² Maj Alex Ponce, email message to the author, 1 March 2026, hereafter Ponce email.

³³ Caroline Locksmith, (USMC veteran), email message to the author, 9 March 2026.

they provide a constructive way to use that white space by providing opportunities to participate in activities that engage curiosity, foster creativity, and encourage intellectual risk-taking. Far from being frivolous, pursuits such as outdoor recreation, meditation, yoga, music, art, or woodworking are supported by research showing their therapeutic benefits in reducing stress and anxiety.³⁴ In this sense, enrichment opportunities extend beyond skill-building or hobbies. They give participants tools to manage the pressures of being a student, a parent, and a warrior—tools that strengthen resilience and allow them to perform at their best in every role they hold. To dismiss enrichment as unnecessary overlooks one of the most practical tools PME institutions have for cultivating resilient, adaptable leaders.

Major General Bohm explains,

We train and educate in the Marine Corps. We train for certainty and educate for uncertainty. The Enrichment Program augmented this training and education process by affording faculty, staff, and students the opportunity to grow in new and unique ways outside the classroom. It not only strengthened cohesion, but it also positively impacted resiliency, abilities, self-confidence, and fostered community that one could argue assisted with retention as well.³⁵

Starting an enrichment program can require a cultural shift, calendar space, supportive leadership, physical space, and maybe even very small amounts of administrative and financial resources. But the cultural shift is toward a broader mindset about learning, education, and what we see as valuable. If we are locked into a mindset that says the only education worth pursuing is making war-

³⁴ See Kirk Fernitz, "Woodcraft Helps Veterans with Anxiety and PTSD," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 29 April 2023; Sara Grassini, "A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Nature Walk as an Intervention for Anxiety and Depression," *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 11, no. 6 (2022): 1731, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm11061731>; Lisa King et al., "The mySELF Group: Recreation- and Art-Based Group Therapy as Adjunct Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* 9, no. 3 (2023): 97–105, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2022-0062>; and Caroline Smith et al., "A Randomised Comparative Trial of Yoga and Relaxation to Reduce Stress and Anxiety," *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 15, no. 2 (2007): 77–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2006.05.001>.

³⁵ Bohm email.

riors more lethal on the field of battle, then the effort to initiate an enrichment program will be a herculean task. But it is still one worth undertaking, because the men and women we send into combat are not mindless automatons who get dropped off, find and destroy their target, return to base, and sit and wait to be redeployed. They are thinking, feeling humans who are more than just warriors. They have an innate desire to learn, grow, and become more. Enrichment programs give them that opportunity.

Leadership buy-in is critical to any military venture. If the troops see the enrichment program is something that is valued by unit leadership, they are far more likely to engage in the activities offered. As one student who eventually returned to be a faculty advisor and enrichment program instructor noted, "As an instructor, I observed the enrichment program grow based on student interests rather than staff pressure. I also valued the exposure provided through the EWS enrichments, which involve interaction with senior leaders. I would strongly encourage students to participate in enrichment programs that either support their professional growth, which could demand more time, or align with their personal passions."³⁶

Conclusion

Enrichment programs are more than extracurricular diversions; they are deliberate investments in intellectual curiosity, creativity, and connections that underpin effective military leadership. When designed intentionally, they reinforce the very aims of professional military education by cultivating curiosity, creativity, reflection, and meaningful professional relationships. They provide structured spaces where servicemembers can test ideas, encounter unfamiliar perspectives, and develop the intellectual resilience that complex operational environments demand. As the character of conflict evolves and the margin for error narrows, PME institutions cannot rely solely on formal curricula to produce adaptive leaders. Embedding robust enrichment programs across PME is therefore not an optional enhancement but institutional necessity. The future force will require leaders who think broadly, connect deeply, and innovate responsibly. Enrichment programs are one of the most practical means of developing them. In an era that demands agil-

³⁶ Ponce email.

ity, innovation, and trust, embedding enrichment programs across PME institutions is essential.

As PME institutions prepare students to face increasingly complex operational environments with rapidly changing technology and increased demands on leaders, their task is not simply transmitting knowledge but cultivating officers who can learn, adapt, improvise, and collaborate. Formal curricula remain indispensable, but they cannot provide every experience necessary to develop creative, resilient, and intellectually curious leaders. Enrichment programs offer a low-cost, scalable means of expanding educational opportunities while strengthening the relationships and habits of lifelong learning that military service demands. In that sense, enrichment is not a supplement to leader development; it is one of the ways leader development becomes enduring.

About the Author

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