

School of Strategic Landpower introduces Comprehensive Exams

by Carol Kerr

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Austrian Col. Rudolf Zauner, an International Fellow in the Class of 2013, answers questions from faculty members Col. Dave Dworak, Navy Capt. James Boswell and Dr. Craig Bullis. The new “comps” initiative requires students to demonstrate the ability to synthesize concepts across the core curriculum.

Academic rigor, communication skill and mastery of strategic concepts are on review for students facing the pilot program for oral comprehensive exams at the Army War College.

“One of the main charters we’ve set for ourselves is to show students’ transition from the tactical and operational world they came from to operating at the strategic level of war and national security policy,” *said Col. Richard Lacquement, dean of the School.* “This is a key mechanism to learn whether they’ve done so, and to do so in a short period of time and in a pretty demanding environment.”

“I hope that most of the students will see this as an opportunity to gauge themselves against the standards – to take the challenge and face a very intelligent panel of questioners who will give them some fairly deep questions and see how well they can verbally create a coherent, intelligence answer that, frankly, deal with pretty profound topics of national security,”

The comprehensive exam requires a student to integrate understanding from across the nine institutional learning objectives of the core courses to respond in detail to a question like this: **What are the enduring characteristics of war that have stood the test of time, and what challenges should we have been better prepared for in the past 10 years?**

If we were to ask a student what we’ve learned from the last 10 years of war, he or she should be able to draw on the theories of war and strategy that we’ve addressed as part of the core curriculum, such as

Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, modern theorists, counterinsurgency doctrine, and actual events. The student would apply that understanding for contexts as diverse as the Afghan conflict and the Peloponnesian War of more than 2400 years ago. The discussion would reveal the student's knowledge of the past; events of the recent past and contemporary actions; and a sense of what this means for the military profession going forward.

The student's challenge will be to inter-relate theory, research and practice of the core course subject areas: strategic thinking, strategic leadership, theory of war and strategy, national security policy and strategy, theater strategy and campaigning, and Defense management, according to Brig. Gen. Carol Eggert, who developed the comprehensive exams concept for the School. "This is not a simple set of questions-answers," she said.

Comprehensive exams close out the core curriculum for academic year 2013: an opportunity for the School of Strategic Landpower to invest in one-on-one sessions with each student, evaluate the process, and revise the 'oral comps' program before full implementation in AY 2014.

"We've had several opportunities to engage them with written assignments throughout the core curriculum, and they've had some requirements for oral presentations in seminar, but this is the one opportunity to see how well they integrate the key concepts across the core curriculum.

For both the school and the student, it's an opportunity to see how well they 'get it.' Do they think at the strategic level? Do they understand the dominant challenges strategic leaders face, and how to deal with them?

"How well they 'get it' is a function of the partnership between the school's resources for their education and the students' responsibility to participate in their education", said Lacquement. "As with any evaluation, we expect the oral comps to give us feedback into our curriculum review and our course refinement process."