

A 2020 AWC grad returns to serve the distance education students

By Elena Patton, Public Affairs Office 28 June 2021



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nas returned with a vision for integrating active learning.

Col. Heather Smigowski became chair of the Department of Distance Education in April 2021. She comes to AWC from the Pentagon where she was the Politico-Military Planner and the Executive Assistant for the Deputy Director for Africa, Joint Staff Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate, 2019-2021. There, she represented the Joint Staff at meetings with the National Security Council on S.E. Africa.

She began her masters from AWC while she was working at Headquarters of Department of the Army as the Senior Training Programmer, responsible for the 5-year programming of the budget for training—to include education—across the Army, 2017-2019.

In addition to dealing with the budgetary aspect of professional military education across the Army, she also created content for Joint Knowledge Online, 2006-2009 and supported the concept of PME at TRADOC with their Human Dimension Task Force, 2011-2013.

“The future of distance education, for me, is active learning. When you are in person, you are sitting in a classroom having discussions, after doing all the reading, which turns those discussions into active learning. When you are educating through distance learning, you have to figure out ways to recreate that.”

The DDE program consists of two years of learning independently, each year ending with a two-week in-resident course at Carlisle Barracks. Smigowski’s vision is to revise those periods when students are learning independently by incorporating methods like these: recording sessions for students who cannot be there, more synchronous activities, group projects, and new technology that will allow for more interaction between students, faculty, and advisors.

“Students in this diverse student body have experiences and thoughts that they can lend to the rest of the students,” said Smigowski. “The engaging piece is for yourself, but it is also for your fellow students. That is why I want more active learning.”

Smigowski’s vision for the relationship between DDE and the Resident Program moving forward centers on the exchange of ideas and information. “The biggest thing is the sharing of information,” said

Smigowski. "Faculty on both sides are in the same area of study, but everybody approaches their area a little differently. It is not that one person is doing better than the other. It is about that exchange of ideas."

This approach is working. "The methods that we used when we had to make FRC virtual made it as engaging as possible so that you got to learn who was in your seminar," said Smigowski. "You did get to learn personalities. You got to learn people's strengths."

In terms of in-person or distance learning, it is not about which one is better. It is about which method best fits one's life circumstances, career, and educational goals said Smigowski.

Her vision for distance education is rooted in her own online learning experience. She completed her first M.A. degree from Clayton College of Natural Health. She earned her Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from Capella University, as well as the master's from AWC.

"I've done every form of distance learning, from the box of books to proctored exams to synchronous and asynchronous methods," said Smigowski.

Smigowski spent the first five years of her career on active duty, before transition to the Army Reserve. She worked three years as a DA civilian and now is an Active Guard Reserve Soldier.

She received her commission as an intelligence officer from Western Michigan University in 1998. She became an Army Strategist in 2020.