

Dr. Celestino Perez honored for creating a tailored experiential learning approach to educating strategists

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The Carlisle Scholars Program director, Dr. Celestino Perez, was honored for creating a tailored experiential learning approach for the students in the program.

The Carlisle Scholars Program, an enhanced curriculum program for selected Army War College students, takes a problem-based learning approach to develop and educate strategists. The program's director was honored for creating a tailored experiential learning approach for the students who opt into the program. Further, he was recognized for his work in sharing innovative concepts with other Professional Military Education

institutions and policy-oriented civilian schools.

Dr. Celestino Perez, the newly appointed Chair of Executive and Strategic Leadership, received the Army War College Excellence in Service award for his work with the CSP. Selected students complete the Army War College curriculum in a year-long program of accelerated curricular learning and client-based research. Students conduct research and produce recommendations of benefit to external partners, e.g., the Department of State, Army Staff, Joint Staff, Cyber Command, and U.S. Army Europe and Africa.

“The projects are both developmental for the students and value-added to the clients and organizations,” said Perez. By the time students finish their course work, they will have engaged in 15 problem-solving, group-based, multi-day exercises. The problem-solving approach is an alternative to the traditional graduate-level seminar Socratic dialogue, he said.

“We believe that by putting students in situations where they are working on real-world problems, where they feel how difficult it is intellectually and emotionally to actually produce a strategy, that they will get better at it over time,” said Perez, who noted that his 2015 student cohort in the pilot CSP produced research on emerging strategic insights about Russia.

Each year, the CSP students develop a strategy for a particular country or region. This year, students will focus an academic exercise on Syria, as a learning project. They'll research regional dynamics and other countries' interests, map concepts learned in the classroom to better understand how they are connected, and apply that knowledge to the strategy they develop, said Perez.

“One of the most important things strategists need to be able to do is engage in perspective-taking—strategic empathy,” said Perez, explaining why each student group will produce a plan from the perspectives of rebels, government, and allies.

Last year, Perez coordinated a debate between the War College and Ecole de Guerre-Terre, the army war college of France.

“One of the innovative approaches to teaching, I believe is debate,” said

Perez: "Participants must do research, work together to craft arguments from both sides, which means engaging in perspective taking. They must verbally defend those arguments and think on their feet. This engages almost every intellectual muscle and skill you want out of an educational program."

Perez shares his philosophy and methodologies for developing a strategists' mindset through podcasts for the USAWC War Room and Over the Horizon; publications in Strategy Bridge and War on the Rocks; conducting studies; and engaging PME/policy audiences with YouTube videos.

His next projects will continue to advance his philosophy. Perez is working on an open-access course centered on this problem-solving approach to strategy. And, he is developing the concept for a 3-day strategy competition among students of the nation's Services colleges -- competing in the very thing they are designed to do, to build problem-solvers.

A retired Army Col., Perez first taught at the Army War College in 2017 as an associate professor, teaching War, Policy and National Security. He has worked with the CSP since 2019. He's been applying some variation of this problem-solving approach since he created and led the Local Dynamics of War program at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, 2011-2014. After graduating from USAWC in 2015, he spent two years at U.S. Army North as the Chief of Theater Security Cooperation Plans and, later, as the Director of Plans.

Perez earned a B.A. from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and the USAWC master's degree in Strategic Studies. He holds a master's and doctorate degree in Political Science from Indiana University.