

Putting a strategic twist on college panel discussions

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(April 9, 2010)-- Traveling across the United States to colleges and universities speaking to both undergraduate and graduate students, the Eisenhower Series College Program has been showing American institutions of higher learning just what senior military officers are made of.



Col. Irving Smith and Col. Aaron Webster were two of the five team members on the UMASS visit. Discussions with students included topics such as nuclear policies and the surge in Afghanistan. Photo by Erin O. Stattel, Army War College Public Affairs.

“The speakers were really engaging and really relaxed the audience,” said Caitlin Coughlan, a junior and journalism major at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. “I am interested in the subjects of Iraq, Afghanistan and national security and to have these officers here brings good commentary. The students definitely benefited because they don’t get this from the news and just sitting in classrooms. This is coming from people who have had experience with these topics because it is part of their careers.”

Members of the Eisenhower Team engaged in a dialogue about military issues during several of Dr. Laura Reed’s political science classes at UMASS. Topics of discussion included the use of drones to conduct air strikes, as well as terrorism through cyberspace.

“This experience has truly been invaluable,” said Reed. “Just to have the academic piece is invaluable, but to incorporate these presentations into our curriculum is just wonderful.”

On this trip, Col. Burl Randolph, Col. Aaron Webster, Col. Irving Smith and Col. Don Degidio offered their viewpoints and their experiences during panel discussions moderated by Air Force Lt. Col. David Bolgiano. The April 8 panel discussion topic was “The War in Iraq and Afghanistan: A Status Report.”

“These students are very current events savvy,” said Smith. “Ironically, they are a lot more militaristic in their world view than we are. They want to know all about Iran and what is next for President Karzai in Afghanistan.”

The Eisenhower panel includes 12 Army War College students, but is pared down to a handful of students for individual trips, creating a more intimate setting, which fosters in-depth and thoughtful debate and discussion.

The panel engaged students during a busy afternoon at UMASS with a panel discussion addressing issues brought up by students, -- mostly undergraduates. Questions ranged from the use of UAV's, to the way ahead in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Students were most concerned and curious about how wounded warriors will be cared for and employed as they return from theater.

“One student said that this was the most realistic and educational forum he had had since he had been at UMASS and he would like to have more dialogue like this,” said Col. Aaron Webster. “The Eisenhower program is probably one of the most valuable parts of the Army War College that should be expanded to reach even more of America and our future strategic leadership.”

In addition to the most recent trip to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, for the 2010 academic year the Eisenhower Series College Program has ventured to 10 schools throughout the nation including the University of San Diego, the University of South Carolina, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and the World Affairs Council in Pittsburgh. The format of the program is varied, but consists of Army War College students engaging with undergraduate students at colleges and universities throughout the country. Army War College students present their experiences and give students the chance to ask senior military officers how their life in the service has shaped their careers. Eisenhower participants apply are selected through a competitive process.

“Across the board the questions and the insights from the students at UMASS were in the top tier in comparison to the other trips we have been on,” said Lt. Col. David Bolgiano, faculty instructor. “The experience from this series gives me great personal hope for the United States of America because on average the students have been engaged and switched on to important strategic issues of our day.”

Current topics, such as the surge in Afghanistan, as well as other relevant topics like terrorism through the use of cyberspace, are discussed on an intellectual basis, giving college students an idea of how the subject matter they are learning in the classroom translates to real life.

“We have been very well-received at these colleges this year and that has led to really great interaction with the students,” said Capt. Bill Davis, director of the Eisenhower program. “At several schools, in fact most of them, the students are so interested in what our team has presented that they want to stay after classes and get more information from them.”