

# Experiential education: Distance Education enriches learning

*Carol Kerr, Public Affairs Officer*

## **Experiential education: Distance Education enriches learning**

Experience got them here, and experiential education keeps them engaged and challenged. Senior national security professionals of the USAWC Distance Education program experience learning differently than resident students, but no less connected to faculty and peers. The majority of students in the two-year program are senior Reserve and Guard officers balancing a civilian career, a military one, and a master's program; others are pursuing the USAWC degree while deployed.

USAWC Distance Education faculty gathered in a conference room to discuss the online student experience. Recreating the kind of threaded discussions that students participate in were **Col. Marty Wilson**, deputy chair and exercise director; **Col. Joel Hillison**, director of First Year Studies; **Col. Brett Weigle**, 2nd Year director; **Dr. Kevin Weddle**, retired Army colonel and director for War and Military Strategy; **Dr. Jeff Groh**, director of Contemporary Military Issues.

### **Threaded discussions aka Distance Education forums**

Groh: "Our students are deployed, and on the go. They read in airports and while commuting for hours in Los Angeles."

Weddle: "The thing we try to do here is to replicate the seminar experience, that they can't get otherwise, in several ways and every class has an online forum, perhaps discussing a faculty instructor's question or role-playing an interagency policy committee to develop policy in Iran or China. It could be a debate on the classical theorists."

Weddle: "Clausewitz is the greatest theorists ever – and you'd be surprised how well they understand after several days of developing pro-and-con arguments."

Hillison: "Taking a position in a debate forces them to look at a problem from different perspectives and identify the arguments, and reconsider theirs. It forces them to question their own assumptions and get into the details – a vehicle to think critically and question logical fallacies."

Hillison: "Online forums are asynchronous and more thoughtful – with time to think and reflect on

other comments, as opposed to the free flow conversation that was my [resident student] experience. Studies show that online discussion will get to a higher level of discussion.”

Weigle: “This is graduate work and we evaluate at the graduate level. We expect well-thought-out comments with citations.”

Weddle: “You can’t wing it in a forum. It allows faculty instructors to reach the best students and the weakest. You can get to the sophisticated level for the smartest student and everybody benefits when they see the back-and-forth.”

Hillison: “In the Regional Studies Course for Europe, the discussion about US national interests in Europe may introduce the economy and, from there, debt crisis ... European Union ... US trade with Europe. A new thread may be that US security interests are paramount ... a student may chime in about collaborative efforts with crime. Students who are struggling will reach comprehension. Advanced students can get to analysis and synthesis.”

Wilson: “We use a carrier exercises as a vehicle to facilitate student learning. For the class of 2013, the exercise has a China – Iran focus. During the First Resident Course [between 1st and 2nd year studies], speakers address our interests in China and Iran. In a seminar about the interagency process, they’ll engage about strategic culture. In the regional studies course, they’ll engage in studies on China’s and Iran’s interests vis-a-vis each other – all in the context of US interests and foreign policy. A strategy formulation exercise – our capstone exercise – brings it all together.”

Weigle: “For example, students are doing joint operations planning processes for multinational intervention in the Sudan in some ‘future.’ One room is working constraints and restraints ... another one, assumptions and facts. Everyone has access to all [online] rooms and can track and even post in other ‘rooms’.”

Weigle: “One student leads with initial draft, and other students add, discuss and refine the final product.”

Weddle: “It’s generally dispassionate. You don’t get the passion in a controversial issue such as strategy for Afghanistan. The forum tamps down emotion and gets to the heart of the issue.”

Weigle: “And, by the way, every forum includes someone in Afghanistan.”

Groh: “What gives me personal satisfaction is how this experiential learning is applied immediately: ‘I’m using this in the job – and now I get it,’ they say.”

Weigle: “We get comments like, ‘We’re doing Mission Analysis right now in my command and now I

can contribute at a higher level.”

### **1st resident phase includes staff rides**

Weddle: “We offer two staff rides [during a 2-week resident phase at Carlisle]: Gettysburg, and Antietam ... Antietam is outstanding for theater strategy learning ... the battle had great strategic significance.”

### **Electives offer choice**

Weigle: “Electives create a student-centric choice. Why give everyone the same thing? If you have a passion, you can pursue it through an elective – and 98 percent of them include a paper and a forum.”

Weigle: “In another example, one officer is writing a personal experience monograph about his experience in working operational design to build a theater security cooperation plan.”

### **2nd resident phase includes academic visits to DC-based agencies**

Groh: “It’s an amazing experience for a few hours [in seminar, post-DC] to hear different perspectives around the [seminar] room. It’s all about relationships in the Guard and Reserve world. After two years, they go to meet people who practice policy development.

Groh: “We have 16-17 students for a full [2nd] year and I can objectively tell that they move to a better level of strategic thinking .... Writing is important for senior leaders and they do improve through experience.

Groh: “The Effective Writing Seminar offers additional guidance, with video support – and that’s available online to anyone.” *For more <https://dde.carlisle.army.mil/default.cfm>*