

Regional studies electives expose students to regional issues, challenges

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Danish Lt. Col. Kim Schmidt, a USAWC International Fellow, speaks to the European Studies elective as part of a panel discussion March 22. Photo by Thomas Zimmerman.

April 18, 2012 -- Once the 368 members of the Army War College Class of 2012 graduate and move onto their next assignments, they will realize their focus has shifted from a narrow, tactical focus, to a wider, world-wide strategic one.

To help prepare them for this new world, during the elective period, students are able to take Regional Studies Electives, which focus on a specific region of strategic interest in the world. This article is the first in a two-part series that will look at these elective courses and the faculty who teach them.

The College offers seven RSEs covering Afghanistan-Pakistan, sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas North and South, East and South Asia, Western and Eastern Europe, Eurasia (Russia, Caspian/Black Sea and Inner Asia), and the Middle East & North Africa.

Africa elective

“The electives allow students to gain a better understanding of U.S. policy and specific issues and challenges facing a particular region,” said **Col. Tom Sheperd**, who teaches the Africa elective.

“Africa differs greatly from region to region and we attempt to highlight these differences to provide the students with a basic understanding of how it may affect US policy.”

The elective provides a deeper understanding of the African Continent by examining US national

interests in Africa, how colonization and de-colonization affects nations today and looks at the African Union and the trends in specific areas.

“The continent is huge,” said Sheperd. “You can fit the US in many times over and with 54 nations you cannot use a cookie-cutter approach. That’s what we’re trying to help the students understand by looking at the region trends. This is a very complex continent. “

Sheperd brings first-hand experience to the region as a Foreign Area Officer with six years in Africa including positions in Kenya, and *Eritrea*.

“We have to provide our students the information so that they can ask the right questions,” he said. “The students have to be able to adjust their lens and be judicious with scarce resources to achieve the maximum effect.”

The class looks at current events and US policy in the region.

“A true strategic leader needs to be able to look at an environment and see what needs to be done and have the right acumen to get it done,” he said. “It’s our hope that we are able to provide the students with a baseline understanding of the issues and challenges so that if called upon, they can make informed decisions.”

Europe elective

Col. Charles Van Bebber, director of European studies, leads 40 students in the Europe elective which focuses on the cultural challenges facing the region and the European Union.

“We really take a look at how the identity of Europe and the EU is changing, especially given the financial and immigration issues they are facing,” he said. The elective takes a paced, focused approach at the regions and sub-regions from a cultural standpoint, rather than as a strategic assessment, he said.

“We really allow the students to delve into a specific country and look at the cultural, religious and financial challenges facing them and how it may affect others in the region,” he said. “At the end of the course we really hope that the students see how interconnected these nations are and how it plays into their relationship with the United States.”

One of the most effective ways to gain a better understanding of these issues is from the International Fellows themselves who participate in a series of regional panels during the elective.

“These officers are able to share in 20 minutes what would take years to learn otherwise about a particular issue,” Van Bebber said.

The course examines current issues and the significant cultural differences in the region.

“This course attempts to help the students see Europe through a different lens,” said Van Bebber. “We sometimes forget that Europe is not just one big nation. Cultural differences, competing interests, a migration of religion and the legacies of colonial empire all create a very dynamic region that changes on an almost daily basis.”

Van Bebber has seen plenty of change in the region during his 18 years as a Foreign Area Officer, specializing in Russian and European studies. He has served in a variety of positions in the region, including being the first American student to study at the Romanian National Defense University.

“My career has provided me with some insights to the region that I hope are helpful for the students as they examine Europe,” he said.

U.S. Army War College Archives - News Article - 18 April 2012