

First Year Residence Course in a Virtual World

By Elena Patton, Public Affairs Office 29 June 2020



Dr. Weddle presents a noon time lecture entitled "Antietam" for the FRC students. For the first time, the FRC was conducted virtually this year.

For the first time, the First Resident Course of the USAWC Distance Education Program did not take place in residence at Carlisle, because the COVID-19 crisis made travel for a two-week course unnecessarily risky. FRC leverages the war college infrastructure to emphasize seminar collaboration, experiential learning, and engagements with prominent national security speakers. This year, the distance education instructors applied innovative approaches to meet FRC learning outcomes in a virtual environment, June 14-26.

Each year, the Army War College graduates roughly the same number from both the distance and resident education programs. Distance education extends the USAWC signature course to a student body that consists mostly of colonels, lieutenant colonels -- predominately in the

Army Reserve and National Guard -- who have to balance online learning with civilian job, Reserve duties, and home life. This year's FRC students began their studies last Summer.

Dr. Joel Hillison, distance education instructor, said that the FRC prepares them for the second year. "Their second year is very different, academically, from their first year. We are providing them with a foundation and setting them up for success in their second year," he said, referring to the deliberate shift from individual reading and writing to collaborative group work.

The challenge for the FRC instructors was to meet all the FRC learning outcomes with methods shaped for the virtual environment: establishing collaborative groups that will work together all year, exposing students to guest speakers, providing experiential learning via D.C engagements and the Gettysburg staff ride.

Transitioning collaboration to a virtual environment

Today's technologies like Blackboard Ultra, the school's learning platform, make it possible to achieve a similar collaboration, said course director Col. James Lincoln. "We are coming into a time of digital learning at the right time. It just happens to be the year when we need to conference at great distances and share information around the world. It is a great time in the Information Age given the fact that we have all these wonderful, easy to use communication tools."

During the first year, most work is asynchronous – accomplished according to the students' schedule. To maintain the value of the leader lecture-student seminar model, a number of senior leader engagements were scheduled asynchronously. These include Michael O'Hanlon a senior fellow and director of research in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Egypt, Daniel Kurtzer, and former senior economist at RAND, Dr. C. Richard Neu, among others.

Seminar students said they embraced the virtual challenge and the opportunity it afforded. Student Justin Berg is a foreign service officer with the State Department, assigned to Azerbaijan. His geographic location shows the challenge of trying to do a synchronous webinar when the students are literally around the world. Yet, real-time interactions enabled by synchronous lessons were the most enriching aspect of the course, he said.

"We were communicating on a couple of different levels," said Berg.

"Listening to the speaker, but also having side chats to share additional thoughts and resources to make it a more interesting conversation. So, it sounds challenging but, at the same time, that's what makes it richer: knowing there are real people communicating with one another in real time."

This style of learning also functions as a tool for gauging one's own knowledge of the material, suggested student Col. David Paravecchia, a 24-year Army Reserve officer now serving as Senior Advisor to the Chief of the U.S. Army Insider Threat Operations on the Joint Staff.

Students took the initiative to establish rapport and ensure valuable relationships in the second year of studies, and beyond. "We set up different MS Teams pages, WhatsApp accounts, and email exchanges to converse and stay in touch outside the normal War College community to get through the next year," said Paravecchia.

"The first year is self-learned and self-paced, and really a lot of it through reading. FRC allows us, in a group setting, to learn from each other and share our thoughts and ideas with one another," he said.

FRC methodologies shift from self-paced learning to group-focused learning experiences

Seminar dialogue is based on the Socratic form of learning, where you learn from others' experiences and points of view, said Lincoln.

"It's a fantastic diversity of experiences and ideas that they bring not only from their military experiences but also their civilian roles," said Dr. Kevin Weddle, another FRC instructor.

"They have worked very hard to be here and are very grateful. So that is something that really helps the dynamic of the group," said Hillison. "We have commanders, lawyers, business owners, judges, doctors, and elected officials. We have a fantastic group of students that bring a really unique perspectives to the discussions we have. We learn as much from them as they do from us."

Speakers and experiences

"What we tried to do is give them as close to an FRC in-resident course as we could," said Weddle. "The same lessons and topics were covered including American grand strategy, diplomacy, information as an instrument of power, the economic instrument of power, and the future of military power."

They also maintain the seminar approach indicative of a graduate education. “In the morning, the same world-class speakers that usually come to Bliss Hall gave a live webinar, with a live Q&A. In the afternoon, a seminar discussion based on the webinar was conducted virtual, along with a series of readings,” he said.

“We are trying to reinforce the golden threads, which carry throughout the whole two-year curriculum ... like critical thinking, understanding strategy formulation, and interest objectives -- and bringing it all together for unified action and global understanding. The FRC helps us get at those threads,” said Hillison.

The American grand strategy lesson is one example of how FRC weaves the theme of ‘strategy formulation’ throughout the curriculum, he said, posing an overarching question for students: “How do we as a nation set out a strategic vision for what we want to accomplish and how do we want to get there?”

The typical year includes national security visits in Washington D.C. and the Gettysburg Battlefield Staff Ride. This year, the FRC instructors coordinated more than 20 virtual expert engagements with DC-based agencies.

The faculty have been really innovative in how they make that work for the virtually environment,” said Berg.

Distance education students study and apply lessons concurrently

A unique element of the distance program is the student’s ability to apply lessons and insights immediately. Strategic discussions broadened him both personally and professionally, said Paravecchia.

“Many of the tools taught in the first year, specifically the strategic leadership pieces, the self-awareness parts, the critical thinking parts, have come into play very well with what I am doing now with the insider threat because a lot of the information we get often times comes from disparate sources,” said Paravecchia. “I have taken some of the lessons I’ve learned at the War College and actually have sat down my analysts down and we’ve reviewed ways of doing self-recognition associated with biases and critical thinking methodology in order to have the best, holistic, clear view of the information that has been presented to us.”

Comparing the current FRC experience to his other virtual learning

experiences with the War College's first year and a prior master's degree, Paravecchia said, "I would say that this is probably the best distribution of both the way it is laid out and the methodology that I've had over these last two years."

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