

USAWC academic event addresses race, diversity, and inclusion

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Retired Gen. Carter Ham on Bliss Hall stage and retired Gen. Vince Brooks online supported the Army War College forum on race, diversity and inclusion, Nov. 5. Students and guest speakers engaged in both face-to-face and virtual academic discourse.

Opening the USAWC forum on Race, Diversity and Inclusion, Commandant Maj. Gen. Steve Maranian observed, “What better way to begin than to ask experienced leaders to talk candidly about sensitive topics and difficult conversations,” about the first of three academic events on the subject this year.

Post-event, retired Gen. Vince Brooks said, “Ideally they heard something today that really stimulated them and makes them say, ‘I need to take another look at myself and how I view things. If I can look at it objectively, I can really make a difference,’” said the former commander of U.S. Forces Korea, United Nations Command, and ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command; as well as US Army Pacific, and Third Army.

Retired Gen. Carter Ham said, “If I could ask the students to think about one thing, it would be this: This is not somebody else’s job. This is their job. They are the leaders of this Army. They’ll continue to rise in more senior positions, and they’ve got to take ownership of diversity and inclusion and what that will mean for the Army moving forward,” said the former commander of U.S. AFRICOM, U.S. Army Europe, and 1st Infantry Division.

Brooks and Ham were among the five Army leaders engaged by Army War College students, Nov. 5. Two leaders in Bliss Hall and three participating

virtually responded to questions from the student body – more than 300 in a virtual audience and a representative sampling of the student body in socially distanced Bliss Hall seats.

Embedded as part of the regular academic discourse, the session, tagged 'Let's Talk', was shaped by student interests which explored the phrase, "culturally astute" as well as action steps by which leaders can understand and make systemic change.

Maranian positioned this panel discussion as a pressing priority for leaders, directly related to the fundamental purpose of the Army War College -- the preparation of officers to serve and lead at the strategic and enterprise level.

"Leading diverse formations is not new for us," he said. "These formations are drawn to a common purpose and drawn from a multitude of backgrounds – race, culture, religion, gender, national origin, and experience. The time is now, however, ... to better prepare ourselves to lead through change and to demonstrate agility which considers, respects, and values inclusion of the perspectives of others.

"The overarching objective for this program is to add a dimension of understanding, sharpen critical thinking, expand creativity, and contribute to your future formations of cohesive and diverse teams in which all are confident and proud members," said Maranian.

Guest speakers summarize key points

Because the forum unfolded under not-for-attribution ground rules, the guest speakers later reiterated the key point they hoped had landed with the leaders in the Class of 2021.

"I'd like to reiterate the point of being bold – bold in what we do and bold in how we look at people. And, be compassionate and be open, said retired Maj. Gen. Linda Singh, who served as The Adjutant General for Maryland and commanded Maryland's National Guard. "One of the things that's helped me interact with people from no-matter-where and no-matter-what background ... is because I truly care, and I care to know about them deeply. I care to know what their challenges are, and then, how can I help?" Army leaders are often detoured by the notion that officers need to be strong, and that we can't care, she noted.

"With this younger generation, being a compassionate leader is going to get you further -- and with the technology that surrounds us, you have to

learn that level of compassion,” said Singh.

Retired Maj. Gen. Ron Johnson underscored that change starts at the top and it begins with the leaders in this audience. “This is a difficult topic, but they are being educated at the top strategic leadership institution. They should embrace the challenge and spread this throughout the formations, to include civilian agencies, all U.S. Services, and allied militaries,” said the former commander of the US Army Installation Management Command. He is a veteran leader in many fields: Army, Georgia Tech, the NBA, Goodwill, and the Boys and Girls Club of America.

Retired Col. Dwayne Wagner, now a CGSC instructor, enjoined each leader “to self-reflect on their own unconscious bias; to be willing to treat each person with dignity and respect; and to challenge themselves to reach out to others who are not like them, don’t look like them, and come from a different experience.

To the question of senior officers as role models for inclusion, Wagner turned to his own experience as an African American Army officer. “I became a colonel, and successful, because five bosses became mentors who helped me. All five were white males.” From 1978 to 2008, his white male mentors were honest about the existence of discrimination, and steered him to other, inclusive leaders, he said. “I am absolutely convinced that there are senior leaders who think about race, gender, branch, component, generational and international. We need to push back on the narrative that white males have no place in the conversation. Wagner proposed that all leaders enter the conversation, with this mindset: “I am the leader; I lead all. I need to know your story so I can better understand you -- so we can create a positive unit environment.”

Retired Gen. Vince Brooks echoed a student’s comment that addressing diversity and inclusion is part of a larger context of military culture. “View the problem as a system. Don’t try to address one thing – race and diversity and inclusion. You have to look at the climate, the culture, the approach to diversity and inclusion, the causes of failure to achieve [diversity and inclusion].

Technique matters in these conversations, said Brooks. Getting in someone’s face is a hostile confrontation. If you see someone in your unit using slurs, for example, your role is to intervene, asking, “Why is that okay?” he suggested.

“I hope that everyone who heard this has something to think about and has a need to put their own experience into a slightly different context,” said

Brooks.

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