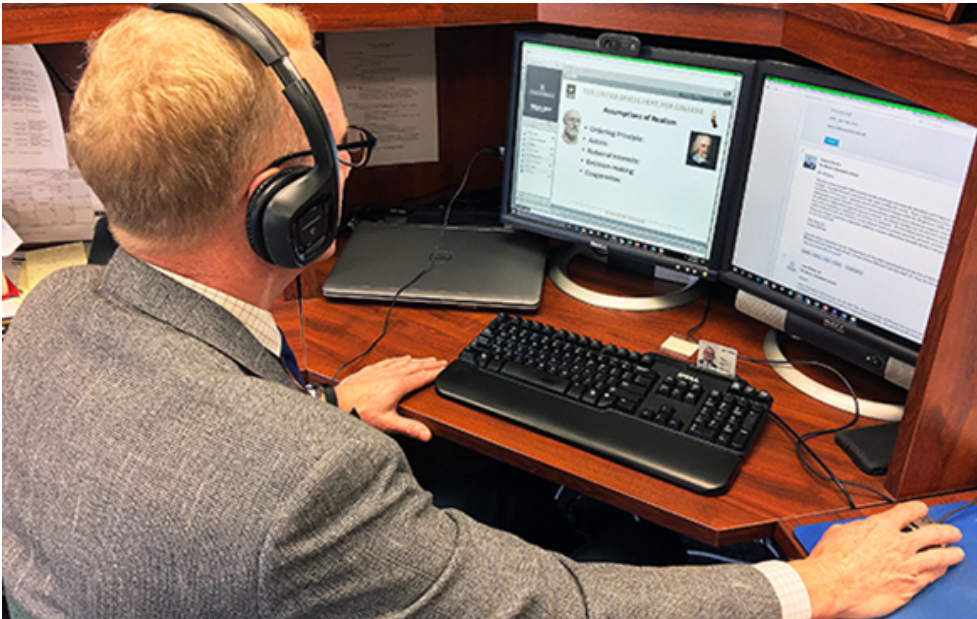


## War College online education: Collaborating across distances

By Public Affairs Staff 24 October 2017



*Dr. Joel Hillison, Professor of National Security Studies, demonstrates a synchronous online forum. Students participating in synchronous forums weigh in at the same time from locations around the world, e.g., South Korea, Germany, the Pentagon, and O*

A program within a program, the Joint Studies Program is an Army War College Distance Education Program proof-of-concept that will hopefully lead to a Joint Professional Military Education-II accreditation. Currently the program has four seminars with the student and faculty requirements to create a joint educational experience.

The first proof-of-concept seminars graduated in July 2017, when 48 graduates from three seminars received the JMPE-II curriculum; the majority of the student body was awarded JPME-I credit as well as a Master's of Strategic Studies and USAWC Diploma. As the second iteration unfolds, the Army War College is examining future options to meet the JPME-II standard of no more than 60 percent of faculty and students from a single Service. In July 2018, the Distance Education Program will undergo a Joint Staff accreditation review to certify the program as JPME-II, like the Resident Education Program.

## ***Distance Education Program Promotes Collaboration***

The benefits of joint collaboration might not be on the mind of the distance education student starting the two-year online war college curriculum.

Come graduation however, he or she will have benefited from the experiences and perspectives of classmates from sister services, civilian agencies, congressional staffs and foreign militaries around the world.

Collaboration with fellow students and faculty begins at a voluntary resident orientation in Carlisle, Pa., in May. The colonels and lieutenant colonels who have been selected for senior service education meet colleagues assigned to the same seminar for year one, and start building the professional collaborations that can last a lifetime.

When the program begins, in July, distance students balance individual studies, online coursework with their full-time occupations and, often, with Guard or Reserve duty. Decisions to carve out time for study are as unique as the individuals: lunch breaks, early mornings, or after the children have gone to bed. As they proceed through case studies, lectures and discussion forums, they'll develop how-to-think skills about complex issues and geopolitical and strategic topics through case studies, lectures and discussion forums.

"This is a distance education version of the resident course with all the same hurdles and the same material covered," said Col. Albert Morris, director of the final two-week resident phase that's capped by graduation.

By the middle of September students have completed their orientation classwork and the Strategic Leadership course, and have moved into the National Security Policy and Strategy course which will continue until December. While the bulk of work calls for independent reading, study, and writing, the experience is broadened by seminar online interactions. Duplicating the collaborative element of graduate studies, the online forums provide the space for students to interact, trade perspectives and professionally critique one another.

"This is a good analog to sitting in a seminar room and talking," said Dr. Kevin Weddle, Professor of Military Theory and Strategy. "Different, but I think the way we do it is very beneficial."

For the typical distance education student, the seminar comprises about 16 to 18 students, overwhelmingly Army Reservists or Army National Guardsmen. Importantly diverse perspectives are provided by officers from the active Army, other branches of military service, civilian employees of

Defense and other federal agencies, congressional staffers and international students. In academic year 2018, for example, the 379 members of the non-resident (or distance) student body includes 323 Army, 15 Marine Corps, 5 Air Force and 3 Navy senior officers, 6 congressional staffers, and 18 civilian employees from executive agencies like the Departments of State, Justice and Public Health Service; the 9 International Fellows include senior officers from the United Kingdom, Lithuania and the Czech Republic.

“Students are not just introduced to but have the opportunity to interact with those of other services, DoD employees and the foreign students in the non-resident program,” said Morris.

“We can’t give them a seminar experience during the course of the school year, so in order to give them an experience that’s similar, at least in some ways, we provide several opportunities for them -- one online forum per course as a minimum,”he said.

“We recently finished the first forum in Strategic Leadership,” said Weddle about using Blackboard to support both synchronous and asynchronous forums that complement the student’s course work. Each forum can last between eight and ten days, with pre-scheduled sets of questions that are posted according to a plan for each segment of the forum. All seminar members responds to the questions, and to each other’s posts.

The distance student’s online collaboration is supplemented by a two-week resident phase in Carlisle: in June between the two years, and in July at the end. The resident phases offer in-person interaction with fellow students, faculty and guest speakers, such as the Chief of Staff of the Army, Commandant of the Marine Corps, U.S. Ambassador(s), and other prominent leaders and decision-makers in national security policy.

“It’s that interpersonal communication that you can’t get online, and you can’t do on the phone,” said Morris when speaking to the importance of the two two-week resident courses. “That interaction is very important.”

In the second year, students complete four additional core courses and electives before returning for the second resident phase. Electives offer a new set of relationships while pursuing in-depth focus on specialized subjects, such as Strategic Leadership Case Studies, or Economics and National Security.

“The vast majority would rather be here if they could, but if they can’t, they see this as a really good alternative, because they have so many

competing things [in their lives], and because our course is really rigorous, said Weddle. “When they’re done, they’ve earned a Master’s Degree, and they know it, and they are very proud of that.”

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