

Distance Ed professor enables students to tailor their Army War College academic experience

By Elena Patton, Public Affairs Office 14 January 2022



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USAWC professor, Dr. Joel Hillison, recognized for his teaching excellence in his elective 'Economics and National Security,' bringing together his two sets of expertise—the economic instrument of power and international relations.

Distance education is the Army War College's effort to make the education available for those colonels and lieutenant colonels, primarily Reserve Component officers, whose careers do not support a year in residence. An award-winning instructor enables students to tailor their learning plan through elective choice.

In 'Economics and National Security,' Dr. Joel Hillison brings together two sets of expertise—the economic instrument of power and international relations—to help students understand how the two elements work together and influence the broader national security environment. He was singled out for the excellence in teaching award, based on AY21 student assessments, peer feedback and department leadership recommendations.

"Economics is all about choice. So, it just fits nicely with giving students choices," said Hillison, noting that students select teams representing

different players in the international and global environment—European Union, India, Russia, China, ASEAN, U.S, etc.—and work on projects, papers and exercises from that player’s perspective.

The course uses guest speakers to allow students to engage with experts in the field. For example, they interact with staff from the Office of the United States Trade Representative while they are learning about global and regional trade relations. Hillison provides frequent, detailed feedback on student work, and ties it together with an end-of-course exercise.

“It is a good way to bring together what we have taught them in the core curriculum plus all of the economic lessons they learned in the elective itself,” said Hillison.

The challenge he has mastered is to complete the exercise online across different time zones and students’ competing career demands. He does so through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous sessions, virtual teaching and an online ‘game.’

The Belt and Road Initiative exercise, modified from a game developed by the Center of Strategic Leadership, challenges students to develop strategies, makes decisions, and respond to the consequences, using a digitized global influence map that depicts supply chains and corridors built around the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. Darren Olah, from the Instructional Support Group, was instrumental in writing the program that powers the exercise.

Students get a perspective on how monetary relations, trade, and economic development play out in the global environment against competing players.

Although Hillison, like the other DDE professors, must negotiate different time zones and students’ professional careers that limit synchronous and in-person discussions, the program affords students a significant advantage.

“You can implement what you are learning immediately and get feedback,” said Hillison, about the DDE students’ ability to apply new learning in their full-time careers. “One of my students briefed the Secretary of State on issues, using what he learned in the course.”

In addition to his elective, Hillison is the course director for a core course on national security policy and strategy – for which he earned a teaching award in 2018. He has served in several roles since joining the war college teaching team in 2007, including Director of First-Year Studies, 2009-2012.

Hillison's Army career included experience as a Brigade Fire Support Officer, Professor of Military Science, Budget Officer, and Comptroller for Multinational Forces Iraq. He is a 2004 USAWC graduate and a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Desert Storm.

He earned his B.A. in Economics from Monmouth College, his M.A. Economics from the University of Oklahoma, and his Ph.D. in International Relations from Temple University.

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