

Army War College Futures Program studies emerging issues

By John Goulette - USAWC Public Affairs 06 June 2022



Prof. Kris Wheaton (right) shows the Root Hall Futures Lab to Dr. Patrick Baker, Dir. of Army Research Lab (center)



Robot technology is one of many resources available to students in the Root Hall Futures Lab.

Army War College education addresses the importance of planning for the future. USAWC Futures Group faculty help students explore and grapple with issues involving data analytics, cyber security, and foreign policy crises.

Dr. Wheaton, Professor of Strategic Futures, teaches the Futures Seminar course at the war college. This class is a year-long elective that incorporates three of the four elective requirements needed for graduation.

“Forecasting the future is the most important thing we can do,” said USAWC Prof. Kristan Wheaton. “We do not need to be perfect every time, but our correctness can compound. Even if we are just a little bit right with every situation, that will add up in the end.”

“This course gives students a problem at the beginning of each year, formulated by military leaders and experts, which my students then need to work through. These aren’t just simple questions that take a few hours of

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thought, but a question where everything must be considered," said Wheaton.

The questions address specific emerging issues of the future, tied to China, Taiwan, land warfare, biotech disasters, and information sharing. Each student selected the one which they wished to work on. Each student selected the topic that matched their personal and professional interest.

The questions were first developed by senior military officials, such as Lt. Gen. Laura Potter, Gen. Charles Flynn, and Maj. Gen. Bradley Gericke. There are a total of five groups involved, each with five students, and each with their own unique question.

"The diversity of the class is incredibly important when tasked to handle a question like this," said Col. Troy Alexander, a student in Wheaton's Future Seminar course. "Everyone in my group came from a different work background, so each contributed to the problem in their own way," said Alexander, whose topic was information sharing and decision making.

"Week by week Dr. Wheaton taught us new info on how best to complete this project," said Lt. Col. Randy Lefebvre. "It is not just the policy information or guidance, but the guidance on how to publish our report, etc. is what I found helpful".

"I believe in experiential-based learning," says Wheaton. "My students get a question, and then in each of our classes I teach them what they should be doing to answer the question the best way possible. I focus on four steps; how to model the question, how to collect relevant information about the question, how to analyze and calibrate the question and the answer, and then how to produce a high-quality elaborate answer to the question."

While learning about future related issues in Wheaton's Futures Seminar course, Lefebvre was told that his next assignment would be with Army Futures Command in Austin, Texas.

"Now I know heading into my next assignment the kinds of things I will be dealing with. From dealing with a problem asked by a senior officer, improving my executive communication skills, to the importance of imaging, I feel like I am genuinely more prepared for this assignment than I would have been before," said Lefebvre.

"My group got the question, 'What land-warfare related issues will the Army face in the year 2045?'" said Wheaton's student Lt. Col. Andrew Culbreath.

“Our main group focus was on emerging technologies. For me specifically, I focused on strike drones. Drones can make minimal noise and be virtually invisible while being available at a low cost. A swarm of these drones can be extremely dangerous, making this an incredibly important national defense topic,” said Culbreath.

“Our students might have advanced knowledge of battlefield tactics and strategies, but if we were to put them in front of these modern machines, like a 3D printer, they would not know what to do,” said Wheaton. “We do not intend to make them experts with these new technologies, but to give them enough familiarity with them to know that they can be useful in situations they might face in the future.”

The USAWC Futures Program also includes the Futures Lab. Located in the Root Hall library, the Futures Lab includes several 3D printers, advanced computers, and other new technology which are intended to introduce students to their usefulness. Using the Futures Lab is not a requirement of the program, but Wheaton looks for its use to be expanded in the future

"The Futures Lab gives us access to things like 3D printing, drones, and AI, all of which have become pressing issues to national security," said Culbreath, who emphasized the importance of having this education in the war college's curriculum.

By the end of the school year, these groups will have created a series of reports of approximately 200 pages going through their forecasting of this scenario. These reports will be presented to the military officers and experts who originally gave them their questions.

Wheaton received his B.B.A. in Accounting from Notre Dame, his M.A. in Russian and East European Studies from Florida State University, and his J.D. from the University of South Carolina. Before joining the USAWC faculty in 2019, he taught in the Intelligence Studies department at Mercyhurst University. Wheaton also served as a Foreign Area Officer in the Army for 20 years.

