

USAWC distance students taught negotiation skills through exercise

By John Goulette - USAWC Public Affairs 01 July 2022



A negotiation exercise was performed on June 28 to improve negotiating skills of the class of 2023 distance students. Stock photo.

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Strategic leaders are continuously in positions requiring negotiations, commonly with stakeholders outside of their organization. Each year the Army War College conducts a negotiation simulation to better equip students with the tools necessary to handle these intense situations.

From June 20 to July 1 the war college hosts its distance education class of 2023 students, who come to the college for their first time since starting this two-year program. The students sit in on classes, attend seminars, go on a Gettysburg tour, and now conduct a negotiations simulation. Students learn how to be more effective strategic leaders from each event.

The negotiation exercise scenario chosen was a salary negotiation between a business and a hiring agent. In this scenario, the business urgently needs to find a replacement for a position that few could fill.

"At the strategic level, you have to work with peer-level organizations outside of your own all the time," said distance student Mary Foster, who is also a resident program faculty member. "I think everything is a negotiation at some point, and this exercise gives you a sense of strategic empathy. The other side has their own interests, and you are not looking to humiliate anyone, just maximize our organization's position."

The hiring agent knows their client is the best-qualified person for the position, which is why they can negotiate as aggressively as they see fit. Also to be considered is the budgetary restraints of the business, matched with the salary desired by the agent. These budding interests create an intense situation, with both sides trying to leverage their advantages.

"It forces you to be creative, to change your mindset, put yourself in the other person's shoes as well as try to maximize your own position," said Foster. "It makes you think a lot harder about the problem."

This was not a team event, but an individual event, since this method gave each member an opportunity to negotiate on their own. Each person had approximately an hour where they could prepare for the negotiation, where they could consider what their leverage points were, what they were willing to concede and determine what arguments the opposing party could bring up. One member from each side met in an isolated room and began an hour-long negotiation.

"We looked at all of the scenarios that could happen in the negotiations, from the best case to the worst case," said distance student Col. Christopher Flaugh. "There was leverage in each way, and alternate situations I could bring up to try and throw someone off their guard. But, I was also thrown off my guard because things were brought up to me that I never considered".

This exercise was designed to also exemplify how a diversity of thought and professional background could bring differing perspectives when in a negotiation. Each student pair came from a different professional background, which was done deliberately to show students what it is like dealing with strategic leaders who are not experts on the same subject. For example, Foster is a professor of national security, while Flaugh is a medical professional.

"It was great to have people from so many different federal agencies, our class is incredibly diverse," said Ryan Leong, Foreign Service Officer at the Department of State. "It was the first time many of us had to formally negotiate. Getting the basic framework of negotiating gives us something

to work with in the future."

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