

Eisenhower Series Reaches Across the Civil-Military Divide

By Col. Leon Perkowski 08 July 2023



Lt. Col. Joe England, Col. Tony Bennet, and Lt. Col Rachel Sullivan discuss China at a panel discussion hosted by UPenn's Perry World House and moderated by Dr. Avery Goldstein.



Penn State students continue the discussion after class with Lt. Col. Kirk Daniels, LTC Rachel Sullivan, BGen Atul Bhat, and Lt Col Brent Chastain.

What do the following groups have in common: students in a “Covering Conflict” journalism class at Northeastern University, UCONN Army ROTC cadets on a sub-zero winter day, graduate students in GA Tech’s Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, business executives attending MIT Sloan’s executive education program, young women studying international relations at Spelman College, AP history students at Bethel Park High School, and community leaders attending a luncheon at the Atlanta Council of International Relations? They all engaged in candid dialog with students in the US Army War College’s Eisenhower Series College Program (ESCP) this year.

For more than 50 years, the Eisenhower Series College Program (ESCP) has provided Army War College students with the unique opportunity to improve their strategic communication skills while fostering better civil-military relations. As in past years, ESCP students prepared short talks about national security issues that were presented to diverse civilian audiences across the country. After three years of COVID restricting travel,

ESCP roared back to full operation reaching more than 2,300 people at 35 different universities and civic groups during the Spring semester.

As the current director of ESCP, I have an ever-deepening appreciation for the benefits this program provides our students, the Army, and the audiences they engage.

Helping Accomplished Officers Communicate More Effectively

From October through December, each of the 14 competitively selected ESCP students worked collaboratively with faculty and their peers to develop talks on two topics of strategic relevance. Then from December through May, the students traveled to colleges and civic groups across the country to engage in frank discussions with civilian audiences who usually had little prior exposure to the military.

Participants in this year's program included seven active-duty Army officers, two Army reservists, a Guardsman, and four international fellows from India, Australia, Canada, and Norway. All of them were already good speakers when they entered the program. Nonetheless, as they developed their speeches and interacted with audiences, each one discovered various practical ways they could still get better at discussing complex national security issues with the public and agilely addressing their questions.

Colonel Eric Landry of Canada noted, "This elective was the best class I took all year and certainly the highlight of my year at the Army War College. It provided me tools I can use for the rest of my career and even beyond the military." Colonel Justin Schlanser, likely the first Army veterinarian to participate in the program, added, "Every trip was an incredible experience and also helped me with my ability to answer questions with wisdom and reflection that were not related to my area of expertise." The highlight of COL Schlanser's experience was his presentation about the global health and national security implications of wildlife trafficking to more than 110 veterinarian students at the Cornell College of Veterinarian Medicine.

ESCP's emphasis on candid dialog in our question-and-answer sessions also helps improve another important attribute for rising strategic leaders who will increasingly deal with non-military leaders: strategic empathy, or the ability to see the world from others' perspectives. Our students quickly learn how to adjust their explanations for easier comprehension by civilians, and they hear perspectives and some misunderstandings about national security issues that they often didn't anticipate. During and after each trip, ESCP students refine their presentations to help close the gaps in mutual understanding revealed during our discussions, so they are able

to better anticipate and address questions the next time. Both the faculty and students themselves notice the improvement as the year progresses.

All the travel and collaborative preparation also builds additional friendships between our students beyond their core seminars that help make ESCP the highlight of the year for many of them. COL Rachel Sullivan said ESCP was “by far the best part of my Carlisle Experience! I learned so much, met so many wonderful people, and truly felt like I was a part of something critical and important that our Army needs to do MUCH more of.”

As Colonel Tony Bennett of Australia summarized, ESCP “provided a platform to think and engage at a genuine strategic level. The opportunity to interact with a spectrum of audiences on such diverse issues has, without doubt, better prepared me as a senior officer as I work with inter-departmental and international partners. In short, ESCP gives students the opportunity to practice the most important attribute needed to achieve influence at the strategic level: communication.”

Improving Our Audiences’ Understanding of National Security and the Military

One of the things I love about ESCP is that the process of improving our students also improves civil-military relations, and this year ESCP became affiliated with the US Army War College’s new [Civil-Military Relations Center](#) (CMRC). As we visited places such as University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, Cornell, Northwestern, University of Arizona, Penn State, Sewickley Academy, University of Missouri St Louis, the Denver Rotary Club, and the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the audiences we engaged gained new insight from seasoned practitioners regarding shaping and implementing national security policy. Significantly, our talks help transcend stereotypes, so our audiences get a more authentic understanding of the people who are serving to protect and defend them. It is not uncommon for audience members to remark how reassuring it is to hear our officers discuss complex issues so thoughtfully. Our host at Boston University’s Pardee School of Global studies host said many in the audience “wished we had more events like this and for everyone to see US and allied military officers as strategic thinkers.”

ESCP’s international officers provide another important avenue of connection. They are popular with our audiences and are likely the first foreign officers our audiences have ever met. Moreover, their presence on the ESCP team physically embodies and reinforces the National Security Strategy’s continuing emphasis on the importance of US allies and

partners. This year our four NATO and INDOPACOM partners fielded numerous questions about the war in Ukraine and competition with China.

Our visits also provide an opportunity for citizens to get a sense that their government is listening, something I underappreciated until this year. Whether at elite universities where students typically have few if any friends and family in the military, or at historically underserved communities at places like the country's largest HBCU (North Carolina A&T), our visits allow our fellow citizens to make direct and meaningful connections to their military. As junior Emily Dewhurst poignantly pointed out to Boston University's student newspaper, "I just think that fostering civilian-military dialogue is really important because I think we often feel our voices aren't heard."

Another benefit of ESCP that may be underappreciated is our potential to positively influence the faculty as we visit their classes, and the beneficial ripple effects those visits can have long after we leave a particular classroom. As a young assistant professor wrote to us in appreciation, "My students have never been engaged in class so actively, and I learned the importance of connecting the real-life experiences to the concepts and theories they learn in class to make true learning happen."

Finally, when possible, we also include visits to ROTC units on campus. Our students get to hear the perspectives of the rising generation filling the ranks of their units while also supporting "preemptive" retention by providing ROTC cadets with new insight into various pathways and perspectives regarding a successful career in the military.

A Ray of Brightness

At a time when experts like Dr. Peter Feaver say our civil-military relations are becoming ever more "brittle," the Eisenhower Series College Program continues to be a bright spot in civil-military relations, as it has for decades. During their eight months in the program, ESCP students discover the power of the next level of effective communication and storytelling, and apply the frameworks they learn in their courses to better explain ongoing national security issues. In the process, they model healthy civil-military relations, build trust and goodwill, and improve mutual understanding of national security.

"I am beyond grateful for this opportunity this year," wrote LTC Nate Minott. "I was allowed to engage with the public in a way that few of my peers have been able to in the past. It also solidifies my conviction that dialogue

is essential to solving some of our day's most significant national and international challenges.”

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