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Georgetown Politics Professor Builds Critical Cultural Skills Among Foreign Area Officer Community

August 31st, 2010 posted by tjohnson

The following post is by [Tristan James Mabry, Ph.D.](#) Dr. Mabry is the Executive Director of the Joint Foreign Area Officer Skill Sustainment Pilot Program and a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs, School of International Graduate Studies, at the Naval Postgraduate School. Dr. Mabry came to the NPS in July 2009 from the Department of Government at Georgetown University.

In February, the Quadrennial Defense Review called on the Military Departments to prepare commissioned and noncommissioned officers “for the full range of complex missions that the future security environment will demand” by “building expertise in foreign language, regional, and cultural skills.” With the assistance of outstanding colleagues at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), I’m doing just that! We’re building the [Joint Foreign Area Officer Skill Sustainment Pilot Program](#), JFSSPP for short, to provide resources and educational opportunities for the rapidly growing Foreign Area Officer (FAO) community.



Dr. Mabry teaching at one of the seminars

The JFSSP was my first experience in military education and was quite a culture shock from teaching international politics at Georgetown University (where I was for the past 2 years). For a civilian plunged into a military institution, there are some mistakes that are inevitable but that you quickly learn to never make twice. When I arrived, how was I supposed to know that only pilots wear brown shoes, or that a captain in the Navy is a much higher rank than in the other Services?! (If that seems pretty dumb, try to remember how much you had to learn in the first six weeks of your military career.) But it is just this kind of mistake that can have grave consequences in other circumstances, especially when working to build trust with coalition partners overseas or trying to anticipate enemy behavior. It’s a lot easier to know how someone will act if you know how they think. This is why enhanced knowledge of languages, regions, and cultures – the acronym is LREC – has never been greater. This is also why I came to NPS – to help support the spec ops of LREC: the Foreign Area Officers.

The JFSSPP coursework is vast. It includes distance learning modules – on topics from security assistance to working with non-governmental organizations – as well as consolidated language resources, such as products from our neighboring institution here in Monterey, the Defense Language Institute, as well as the Joint Language University and the Critical Languages portal (CL-150). There are also joint community resources, including a directory, calendar, discussion boards and even live desktop video conferencing

available from any computer with a camera.

As I've learned over the past year, it's the opportunity for officers from different services working in the same AOR to learn and travel together that brings the most remarkable professional benefits. Not only do the FAOs share best practices and discover new thinking about old problems, but they also forge personal networks that can overcome institutional obstacles. The in-residence courses include participants from all Services, but the content is tailored to the countries of each COCOM. Each course includes a week in Monterey working with NPS professors and DLI experts, and a week overseas dedicated solely to regional affairs.

It is a great privilege to support the Navy FAOs: they are a dedicated group of specialists with a sincere passion for their work. They are also an incredibly valuable resource with a rising profile in defense operations. In my work for the Navy, I've learned a lot, but I'm most proud of my work contributing to this mission of building expertise in foreign language, regional, and cultural skills and am looking forward as we build the pilot program into a robust organization advancing the professional development of Foreign Area Officers.