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Web 2.0, Homeland Security Issues Highlight Alumni Conference

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Across the ornate Hermann Hall Ballroom more than 100 of the nation's homeland security professionals sat in small groups where they debated, at times cordially and at times fiercely, the foremost security issues facing the nation.

More precisely, the question of the day was, "What should homeland security leaders be talking about?" The question sparked 35 different answers that served as topics that were explored in individual, free-forming groups during the course of four hours. This "open space" exercise capped off the first day of the Center for Homeland Defense and Security's Annual Alumni Conference held Feb. 3-4 at the Naval Postgraduate School.

During morning forums alumni and faculty explored the promise and peril of using Web 2.0 technologies in the homeland security and emergency management arena as well as hearing the status of evolving curricula for the Center's academic offerings. In remarks kicking off the two-day conference, Tim Manning, FEMA Deputy Administrator, Protection and National Preparedness Directorate, offered his outlook on the future of the profession (see related article). Also on hand was FEMA's number two leader, Deputy Administrator Rich Serino (Serino and Manning are graduates of the CHDS Executive Leaders Program) The second day of the conference was highlighted by a speech from Paul Stockton, a CHDS founder and current Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and America's Security Affairs (see related article).



Hot Topics

The open space session allowed alumni and faculty to generate topics for discussion.

Participants moved about freely to issues they thought interesting and were equally free to move to another discussion if they felt they were not engaged in the topic discussed.

"Just be prepared for a little chaos," said Kevin Eack, president of the CHDS alumni group, jokingly warned those in attendance.

In the ballroom and on the balcony small groups convened, changing subjects each hour.

Discussions included long-debated homeland security subject matter such as the role of federalism in homeland security, building a resilient nation and where the next terrorist attack may occur. Other topics were more unique to the security profession with discussions on whether "acceptable loss" should be part of the public discussion, whether lumping all-hazards and terrorism prevention together is "mixing apples and tomatoes" and whether the Department of Defense should be more involved in homeland security.

Organizers and alumni acknowledged that perhaps no problems were solved in an afternoon, but the value of the process is in the exercise of discussion by professionals from varied backgrounds.

"It kind of allows for a free-flowing form of thought," said alumni John Wilson of U.S. NORTHCOM. "You have the

kinds of debate you would have in the classroom."

Lawrence Greene of the U.S. Coast Guard agreed.

"I think it was a good opportunity to discuss these difficult problems with people from different backgrounds," Greene said. "We gained a better understanding of what the problems are."

Web 2.0 – Keeping Up with the Kids

Utilizing social media such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook have become part of a new public communications model, said John Bilotta, a panelist during the session titled "Social Networking and Web 2.0: Implications for Leaders of Homeland Security and Defense."

Moderator, and CHDS Adjunct Professor, Robert Josefek, illustrated the popularity of Facebook alone with a string of statistics: There are 55 million updates daily on the site; some 2.5 billion photos are posted per month; and, 3.5 billion pieces of content per week are added by users of the site.

The public, especially the age 20 to 40 demographic, has embraced social media as a prime communications medium even if government entities have been slow to follow.

"The institution has to reach out to the community," Bilotta said. "My big worry is, if you're not playing aggressively in this field, you're going to get left behind."

Some agencies have embraced the new technology, albeit by necessity. Panelist Rob Dudgeon, Deputy Director of the San Francisco Department of Emergency Management, said his agency was motivated to utilize social networking as a communication tool after a 2007 oil spill that resulted from a freight ship hitting the Bay Bridge.

Bloggers took to posting information at a dizzying pace. That drove activists who in turn drove the politics and tactics surrounding the spill. The spill was relatively small, Dudgeon said, but the quick communication of the blogs without a counter-message from government resulted in the public perceiving the spill as more severe.

So, for the past two years he has found ways to use social media.

"I got into this because I had to," Dudgeon said. "If you don't engage (in social technology), you're going to get rolled over by it."

For example, engineers in Dudgeon's department update street projects via blogs on the department website. Before that, the engineers would write lengthy paper reports that were filed and available to the public. But the blogs give residents a convenient update without them having to go to the Public Works Department offices, Dudgeon said before the session began.

Some speakers in the audience expressed concern about the ability of their agency to quickly issue accurate information on social media sites, noting that government agencies are held to a greater standard of accuracy than anonymous citizens who can post information at a rapid pace without being held to such a standard.

Also, using this technology can open up agencies to being hacked and spoofed with inaccuracies, said Craig Mastapeter, Chief of DHS Intelligence Enterprise Continuity Programs.

"We can be spoofed; we can be intruded upon," Mastapeter said. "We need to learn how to use this so as not to lose our credibility. We have to be right. In order to do that, we need to be able to digest, vet and evaluate that information."

Others suggested the need to balance accuracy with timeliness.

"I wonder it it's better to be pretty good, close, but able to adapt by updating the information," Josefek said.

Some participants voiced concern about the impact social networking has on employee productivity as the technology can be a temptation for workers who spend a great deal of time on the computer.

Rock Clapper, a panelist and noted Silicon Valley technology investor, recalled a story of an employee fresh out of college who accumulated about two hours a day on Facebook while on the job.

"We have had that problem in the corporate world," Clapper said. "How you control it in the workforce is a big issue."

CHDS Academic Outlook

The second morning session was titled "The Evolution of CHDS" and offered a glimpse into new and revised initiatives in the Center's academic programs.

New developments in the coming year include a leadership program for fusion centers led by Professor Robert Simeral and an initiative led by Professor Nadav Morag to establish a sort of applied policy think tank comprising CHDS faculty and alumni.

The fusion center program would be similar to the Executive Leaders Program, Simeral said, aimed at orienting the personnel that staff these centers to leadership in homeland security.

The think-tank would be focused on providing answers to real-world policy issues facing the Department of Homeland Security, Morag said.

Nightcap

After the day-long conference alumni, faculty and staff mingled on the Quarterdeck of Hermann Hall for a reception attended by Naval Postgraduate School President Daniel T. Oliver.

Oliver told the students to use the Naval Postgraduate School as a resource in furthering their work in homeland security. NPS is a research and educational institution, he said, but also a "service provider."

"Think about what we can provide from NPS to help you to do your job when you get back," Oliver said. "We are in the business of providing service to people in the national security arena who need whatever NPS can provide."

Oliver thanked alumni for the jobs each one performs in making the nation safer.

"All of you are out there creating the future," he said. "I have a lot of confidence that the future is a lot brighter because you individually and collectively are taking all you have learned here and working together to forge a community that did not exist before."

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