

# West Point's Minerva Initiative gains new ground

## *Minerva Fellows, new research and workshop make for exciting opportunities*

By Mike Strasser  
Assistant Editor

Winning hearts and minds has long been an extension of military operations during wartime—often becoming a sociological conflict when dealing with a populace entirely unfamiliar to American Soldiers.

Recognizing the need to focus on these cultural and environmental conditions—and include experts in the field of social sciences into the conversation—the Office of the Secretary of Defense launched the Minerva Research Initiative in 2009.

This Department of Defense program has provided competitive funding for dozens of colleges and universities, to which West Point recently was granted an extension through 2013 for two Minerva Fellows.

Col. John Graham, associate dean for research, is West Point's lead proponent in making the academy more research-minded and the Minerva Program is one way of making that happen.

"We are really excited about this because of what it's doing for the academy," Graham said. "It's changing how we see ourselves participating with the Department of Defense and Department of the Army."

Last year, the academy opened a Minerva Program office in Jefferson Hall and John Willis, director of Research Operations, serves as the program manager there.

"The good news here is that a deeper understanding is being gained in the socio-cultural context in the areas where the Army operates," Willis said. "For West Point, this will



Luke Gerdes is one of two Minerva Fellows at West Point. His research is on "Social and Cultural Network Topology of Asian Communities." COURTESY PHOTO



further push our research agenda, partnerships and support to the Army. In addition, this will support cadet research and cadet learning as well."

Kristine Ringler serves as a research associate at West Point's Minerva Research Initiative. She received her master's degree in Global Policy for International Development from the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and deployed to Iraq and Kosovo as a Civil Affairs Reservist.

Before coming to West Point, Ringler had conducted on-the-ground research in the Basra and Ninewa Provinces in Iraq for the Army, State Department and other government agencies. Last year, she served as an instructor and developer on the District Stability Framework in Afghanistan for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"With her experience with (Army) Civil Affairs and on human terrain teams ... we lucked out, if you will, and got this amazing asset for the academy," Graham said.

Graham said competing for and receiving the two Minerva Fellows, Dr. Makame Muhajir and Luke Gerdes, was a huge win for the academy.

"We put in our bid and we don't just win one, we win two ... that hasn't been done at West Point before," Graham said.

### Minerva Fellows

Muhajir is the former Surveys and Urban Planning Department director in Zanzibar, Tanzania and director of the World Heritage City of Zanzibar's Urban Conservation Program. He received his doctorate in 2011 from the University of Kansas, specializing in human geography and urban planning fields.

Muhajir's research will focus on Social, Spatial and Cultural Topologies of African Villages, and is working out of the Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering.

Luke Gerdes previously conducted research at the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College and studied extremism in Southeast Asia at the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore. Gerdes is the Behavioral Sciences and Leadership Fellow for the "Social and Cultural Network Topology of Asian Communities" research project.

The West Point Minerva Fellows will conduct research that will be presented in September at the annual Minerva Conference in Washington, D.C. As well as providing socio-cultural research, the fellows will offer seminars in African Studies, Geography, Social Network Analysis and Understanding Islamic Ideologies to cadets starting next semester.

The West Point Minerva Program has already made an impact on cadet education. Class of 2013 Cadet Vincent Schuele, an electrical engineering major, has traveled to Qatar this semester where he is currently analyzing Islamic ideologies in the Far East. The location where he's operating from has satellite universities from Georgetown University, Texas A&M, Qatar University and the Islamic Studies Center.

"He has a really good opportunity to gain access to (Qatari) graduate students and U.S.-based graduate students who are studying culture within the social sciences," Ringler said. "He's also connected with the Public Affairs Department at the U.S. Embassy in Doha."

The cadet research will be incorporated into the material Gerdes is developing and Schuele is tentatively scheduled to present it at the Minerva conference in D.C.

### About the Minerva Initiative

- West Point's Minerva Research Initiative will develop inter-departmental partnerships and synergies within multiple disciplines throughout the academy.

- West Point's Minerva Workshop is scheduled for April 16-17 at the Thayer Hotel. It will serve to launch USMA's research efforts and build connections in the Department of Defense Minerva community, providing the foundations for progress in understanding regional connectivity of people, information and resources through social, cultural and spatial dynamics.

West Point's Minerva Research Initiative is also in the business of developing departmental partnerships and merging the talent pools across disciplines in research efforts. Collaborations are ongoing with six academy departments, as well as the Network Science Center and Combating Terrorism Center.

The West Point Minerva Program will host a workshop April 16-17, which will work toward developing those connections, according to Ringler. West Point cadets, scholars, practitioners, military and civilian experts will attend sessions focusing on Africa and Asia within a variety of topics.

"The workshop is three-tiered. It's (intended to speak) to the big picture of where social science sits within the military and within academia," Ringler said. "Underneath there are the subjects of geography, urban planning, African studies with Network Science embedded within it. Then the third tier is where the USMA-Minerva Proposals reside, the specifics to the research."

Dating back to the start of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, there was a concern among academia about military applications of sociology associating it with doing harm rather than helping the populace. Sociologists work downrange as human terrain teams to better assist commanders in understanding the host nation demographics.

"Their science is something the military depends on ... the understanding of people, how they operate and predictions of what they'll do in a given situation has become a key and core competency for the Department of Defense," Graham said. "Kristine (Ringler) was a member of one of those groups, and they play a critical role in helping commanders understand what the population is thinking or doing."

Since then, DOD and the White House have further reached out to experts in these fields to examine the impact of deployments on military families, while sociologists have briefed Congress on socio-cultural factors affecting military recruitment and retention. The Minerva Research Initiative is bringing cutting-edge resources into the equation, Graham said.

"(The Minerva Initiative) is designed to bring in these sociologists to basically spend time with the military and understand who we are—we're human beings—and our goal really is to help," Graham said. "West Point is now at the cutting edge of anthropology and sociology, not only from a scientific standpoint but also from a policy standpoint," Graham said.

To learn more about the DOD Minerva Research Initiative, visit <http://minerva.dtic.mil/> and at West Point, [www.netscience.usma.edu/minerva/minerva.htm](http://www.netscience.usma.edu/minerva/minerva.htm).