

Conference provides enlightening look into ethics

Story and photos by Mike Strasser
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More than 200 students and cadets, representing nearly 95 universities and military academies, attended the 2011 National Conference on Ethics in America at Eisenhower Hall Oct. 16-19. This was the 26th iteration of the conference held at West Point, presented by the Class of 1970 and hosted by the Simon Center for Professional Military Ethics.

Each year, the West Point outreach program brings in industry leaders and experts to engage students on a myriad of topics designed to invoke critical thinking about the practice of ethics. Small group discussions followed each presentation, led by a group of mentors from various professions and institutions to serve as small-group facilitators. Several mentors were from the Class of 1970 and from the English and Philosophy Department at West Point.

Twenty-eight faculty delegates also gathered with the goal of discussing best practices regarding character development and honor-related issues (such as cheating and plagiarism). The results will be published for the first time in NCEA history by the SCPME.

"The goal is for us to publish those best practices and make them available to other institutions, so they can learn and possibly utilize those practices," Lt. Col. Michael Turner, SCPME deputy director, said. "One of our other goals is for the students themselves to take back what they've learned to their colleges and universities."

Class of 2012 Cadet Anastasia Cale was excited to hear what delegates thought about the Corps' "rockbound highland home."

"I was with one of my fellow friends on the Honor Staff, and he asked a delegate what their favorite part of West Point was," Cale said. "He responded that he wished he could be here because everyone was so driven and always seemed to be on a mission."

Cale is the vice chair for public affairs on the Brigade Honor Staff and served as the command sergeant major for the conference. With Class of 2012 Cadet Daniel Shaffer serving as cadet-in-charge of the conference, members of the Corps of Cadets' Honor and Brigade staffs were involved since the initial planning of this year's conference.

"I am just unbelievably proud of my staff," Cale said. "People always say that anything is easy when you appreciate



Small group sessions allowed college students and cadets to speak in depth with mentors on a myriad of topics related to ethics. More than 200 students and cadets, representing nearly 95 universities and military academies attended the 2011 National Conference on Ethics in America at Eisenhower Hall Oct. 16-19.

and love the people you work with and for. And I do. Being CSM for this conference was an unbeatable experience and I am proud to think that my (our) hard work helped make a fellow peer consider the importance of ethics in their lives."

Cadets were responsible for linking each delegate with their cadet-host while handling every logistical detail of the delegation. They also escorted each plenary speaker and provided the introductions before each presentation.

On the final day of the conference, a distinguished panel of 15 senior leaders took center stage at Eisenhower Hall. Retired Gen. Fred Franks set the tone of the conversation to follow by talking about trust and how, in any environment, leaders must establish it to succeed. Afterward, panel members—including retired Brig. Gen. Leo Brooks—joined the small group sessions so delegates could further learn from the experts.

"They did a great job talking about the ethical decisions they've had to make in their fields and what influenced their decisions," Turner said. "I think it all came full circle that it's the values you have as an individual that really sway your decisions. I think the three days gave attendees a lot of time to reflect on their own values."

The conference concluded with a banquet and Arthur Blank, chairman and owner of the Atlanta Falcons, was guest speaker. Shaffer couldn't help but watch the audience's reactions during a unique Q&A format hosted by CNBC reporter Brian Sullivan. Shaffer said the Home Depot co-founder provided great illustration to the topic of ethics through his personal stories that kept the delegates enraptured.

Katherine Walker, a University of Connecticut sophomore, appreciated the diversity of the event, and the chance to meet students from all over the country—both in public and private institutions.

"We're talking about controversial issues important to us today, and it's really great to hear from all different perspectives," she said.

Walker also enjoyed embedding with the Corps of Cadets for a few days.

"I didn't know that much about cadet life, and each one of us gets to live with a cadet. I had no idea about the

wake-up calls and the food they eat. It's really great to get that different perspective on life, and really understand what going to West Point is about."

Caitlin Cloum is an Army ROTC cadet at Vanderbilt University who enjoyed building relationships with her fellow future lieutenants for a few days. However, she also discussed meeting with civilian students and understanding their background.

"It's been very important to meet with civilian students from all over America and understand what ethics means to them in all different sectors of society whether it be military or civilian in a time when America really needs ethics," she said.

Cadet Colin Lewis, from the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School, enjoyed speaking about ethics with peers on a collegiate level during the small-group forums. These discussions followed each plenary speaker, which allowed attendees a chance to dialogue with a mentor moderating the conversations.

"The opportunity to attend this conference was a great way to grow our understanding of ethics in this day and age and how it functions in society and how we can better ourselves through it," Lewis said.

This was the first year where the delegation reached maximum capacity early on and several colleges were declined. Unfortunately as it is to deny students entry, it's telling of the success of this conference.

"That comes from providing excellent hospitality, the best plenary speakers who spur discussion and critical thinking, and from providing a good outreach program which allows students to experience West Point," Turner said. "We are reaching our vision of being that premiere ethical conference in America."

As rewarding an opportunity to be the lead cadet at this conference was for Shaffer, it was somewhat remorseful having never participated as a delegate.

"This conference was life-changing for me even though I didn't even get to participate in it," Shaffer said. "But I'm a firm believer in this ethics conference after seeing what the delegates learned throughout the week."



The first plenary speaker at the 2011 National Conference on Ethics in America was Richard S. Levick, president and CEO of Levick Strategic Communications, who presented the topic "Doing the right thing at the most difficult of times."