

Negotiation skills strengthened at annual conference

Story and photos by Mike Strasser
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The third iteration of the West Point Negotiation Conference closed March 30 with a simulation exercise at Trophy Point. More than 100 cadets and invited participants interacted with role-players as they applied negotiation tactics in a pair of scenarios to conclude the two-day conference hosted by the West Point Negotiation Project.

“The West Point Negotiation Project is a cadet-run, faculty-facilitated program at the academy that was created basically because Army officers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan were seeing a real need for strong negotiation skills,” Class of 2014 Cadet Doug Taylor, cadet-in-charge of the conference team, said.

The WPNP supports the Army with a mobile training team comprised of cadets and faculty who can assist units pre-deployment with classes and simulations to strengthen these skills.

Class of 2013 Cadet Luke Hutchison, the WPNP cadet-in-charge, has participated in several of those excursions.

“When we went to teach the team leaders and team sergeants of the 1st Special Forces Group, they said that negotiation was the

About the Negotiation Conference

- The 3rd annual West Point Negotiation Conference was sponsored by the West Point Leadership Center and the Network Science Center.

- The conference is designed to build negotiation skill through interactive presentations, practical negotiation exercises and debriefs.

- Attendees hear from recently-deployed junior officers and experts in cross-cultural negotiations.

No. 1 skill they needed to improve on,” Hutchison said. “To me that is remarkable. That the No. 1 skill a Special Forces unit needs to work on is negotiation, and that it is a group of cadets and officers from WPNP who are filling that need is pretty amazing.”

Hutchison, who was the cadet-in-charge last year, has attended all three of the conferences and said it gets better each year.

“I think it is unique in that it is very hands-on and focused on making better negotiators,” Hutchison said. “We don’t just talk about negotiation, we actually do it. The attendees must negotiate several different

First Lt. Bryan Rodriguez, Class of 2009, joined fellow West Point alumni on a junior leader panel during the Negotiation Conference held in the Haig Room in Jefferson Hall March 29. Rodriguez spoke of his experience as a platoon leader while deployed in Kirkuk, Iraq, where he was in charge of several checkpoints operated by U.S. and Iraqi forces. All the speakers on the panel were also graduates of the MG390 course, Negotiation for Leaders.



This year’s West Point Negotiation Conference was entitled “Negotiation: A Tactical Asset for Leaders.” More than 100 cadets, negotiation instructors and researchers tested this asset March 30 during role-playing exercises at Trophy Point. Among the conference participants were cadets from the Royal Military College of Canada, Norwich University and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

cases before they complete the conference.”

One of the co-founders of the WPNP and former West Point instructor, Maj. Aram Donigian, is currently deployed in Afghanistan but was able to follow the conference via Facebook, which Taylor updated regularly. During one negotiation exercise, a scenario was introduced based on an actual failed negotiation Donigian experienced early in his career. The lesson learned, Taylor said, was that throwing money onto a problem is not an effective solution.

“It didn’t buy trust ... it didn’t build a relationship; in fact, it damaged the relationship,” Taylor said.

Attendees broke into small groups to work this and other negotiation scenarios, and the results naturally varied.

“There’s never one right solution,” Taylor said.

The conference also featured distinguished conference speakers like Brig. Gen. H.R. McMaster, the incoming commander of the Maneuver Center of Excellence, and Elizabeth McClintock, who consults, designs and implements negotiation, conflict management and leadership training programs for private and public sector organizations. Former West Point graduates joined a junior leader panel and discussed how negotiations weighed heavily on mission success while downrange.

One of the conference highlights,

Hutchison said, was hearing from a cross-cultural negotiation panel with Col. Timothy Kirk and Hussein Hassan. Kirk, a 1993 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, is the senior Afghan Hand in the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force on anti-corruption. Hassan is an assistant professor at the Defense Language Institute and had served as an interpreter in Iraq for the U.S. forces.

During the final simulation exercise, conference attendees had another chance to apply their skills to real-world negotiation scenarios, based on actual events that occurred in Afghanistan. If the conference is somewhat a condensed version of the negotiation elective taught at West Point, the exercise was like a speed-round of the final exam cadets will take on Constitution Island later this month.

“The final simulation for the conference had some similarities with the exercise on Constitution Island, but it was much simpler (the scenario) and did not require as wide a range of negotiation skills,” Maj. Zachary Mundell, WPNP co-director, said. “Conversely, the final exercise for MG390 incorporates difficult counterparts, more complex situations and adds in multi-party negotiations.”

To learn more about the West Point Negotiation Project, visit www.dean.usma.edu/departments/bsl/programs/wpnpi/index.htm.

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