Intellectual Force-on-Force: Using Panel-Based Multi-Disciplinary Student Presentations to Promote Interactive, Integrative, and Applied Learning

Keith W. Benedict

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Introduction

While the broad core curriculum at the United States Military Academy at West Point rightly exposes cadets to myriad approaches to solving complex problems of relevance to the Army, remarkably few academic experiences challenge cadets to integrate their multi-disciplinary education in a capstone academic setting. In general, the first two academic years emphasize breadth, and then students pursue a degree of depth within their chosen major(s) the latter two years, increasingly focusing their efforts within a particular department’s labs or classrooms. Though academic depth in many fields is both developmental and desirable for Army officers, nesting those chosen disciplines within relevant and multifaceted challenges remains a critical step towards ensuring that these future leaders can apply their expertise towards the multifaceted challenges that they will face in the Army and beyond.

Many cadets do present commendable capstone projects, often during their senior year, but these projects are largely assessed based upon the quality of their efforts in line with discipline-specific problem solving methodologies. Whereas Cadet Leadership Development Training developed in light of a recognized need for a culminating leadership experience, no comparable academic experience currently exists. Like perishable military or lingual skills, the languages of the different core courses taught at West Point must be practiced and assessed on a routine basis to avoid surface learning and to ensure retention of key problem solving approaches. As the Academy seeks opportunities to promote multi-disciplinarity and situational learning – to educate leaders capable of understanding complex problems and leveraging diverse organizations for the nation’s defense – it needs to consider how best to fill this void.

Though a number of different academic exercises could provide a capstone academic experience, this particular research project analyzes the use of a panel presentation to a diverse audience as perhaps one way of challenging cadets to think critically and nest their particular interests and academic research within wider social contexts. I argue that the use of force-on-force academic interaction provides the most useful feedback for assessing students’ abilities to apply their broad liberal arts education. By conducting a dissertation-style, group panel presentation, cadets can simultaneously work together to identify their individual academic strengths and weaknesses and be challenged to analyze their own positions from multiple perspectives.

Merits of Force-on-Force

Arguably one of the more important revolutions in military training affairs took place in the 1970s and 1980s. The advance of military technology, specifically the combined use of eye-safe lasers and blank ammunition, allowed leaders to develop more realistic two-way training scenarios capable of providing soldiers and leaders at all levels with invaluable real-time feedback. The ability to refine doctrine based upon the outcome of simulated missions, to inculcate best practices and identify training shortcomings throughout the force, and to encourage leaders to continue thinking about and forecasting likely missions scenarios, significantly enhanced the mission readiness of the overall force. In fact, many cite the
perfection of warfighting skills through the simulation of a realistic, active enemy with the success of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.¹

Though this particular training approach initially evolved with a specific Soviet threat in mind, the overall approach and even the training centers themselves (the Joint Readiness Training Center, the National Training Center, etc.) remain critical to the professional all-volunteer force to this day. The Army continues to train units pending deployment at these training centers, often as a capstone exercise immediately prior to their actual departure. Though in recent years most training scenarios focused on counterinsurgency scenarios in Iraq and Afghanistan, some units have already recognized the need to evolve those scenarios in light of the changing strategic landscape. Units in Europe have reintegrated non-counterinsurgency training scenarios back into their training regimens,² and even regionally aligned units have begun rotating through the various training centers prior to their scheduled deployments.

In the end, the Army has recognized the need for this type of responsive exercise with a realistic, thinking adversary to develop innovative doctrinal approaches to address known and anticipated threats and to perfect those methodologies through measured, deliberate practice. Short of real-world operations themselves, these centers provide incomparable opportunities to integrate and synthesize individual and collective tasks in light of the anticipated challenges deploying units face.

**Academic Approaches to Force-on-Force**

Given the complexity of the situations Army leaders face and the known benefits of frequent testing for sustained learning,³ cadets at West Point should also be challenged with routine, realistic academic exercises that similarly require them to integrate their broad liberal arts education in an interactive fashion. Though the Thayer Method, employed to varying degrees in different departments, can train students to become self-learners by assessing their knowledge of material within individual courses upon their arrival to class (via quizzes, seminar questions, etc.), that method fails to then build upon amassed, disparate learning through routine, coherent, multi-disciplinary assessment. There are, however, several other academic exercises that can provide responsive, experiential, multi-disciplinary evaluations, including thesis defenses, debate, and computer-adjusted testing, among others.

Thesis defenses (or now “committees”, in some institutions) certainly do challenge many undergraduates – and perhaps the majority of post-graduates – to respond to probing questioning concerning the quality of research conducted and the academic depth underpinning submitted written work. Yet the size and quality of this particular environment has evolved, potentially limiting the rigor of the overall academic exercise. Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, argues that whereas defenses in the 19th century attracted large crowds, many now “tend to be intramural affairs, attended by graduate students and sometimes faculty members in the dissertator's department.” Further, he argues that defenses, particularly in the sciences and mathematics, have largely become “teaching displays”, rather than a “shooting gallery in which expert faculty marksmen fire hollow-point questions at the candidate.”⁴ Regardless of the differences between disciplinary approaches to defenses, the somewhat restricted academic perspectives of the committee and the cloistered manner of defense execution could limit the multi-disciplinary rigor of this culminating exercise.

Certainly, different forms of seminar learning and classroom debates can challenge students to apply learned information and integrate and synthesize across disciplines. However, the logistics (time, classroom space, and class size) can severely inhibit the ability for all students in a particular class to participate in a substantive fashion. Though even observing debates can challenge students to follow complex argumentative approaches, the bulk of the learning occurs for those formally involved in the proceedings. The audience has limited engagement with the subject matter, so they are not truly tested to retrieve applicable facts and arguments to the same degree as those assigned specific roles in the debate. MAJ Steven Vargo also outlines some of the shortcomings (and benefits) of using certain types of debates in a classroom setting. One concern, in particular, is “dualism,” described by Professor Tumposky in *The
Debate Debate, which implies that – instead of causing students to consider a multiplicity of perspectives – debate “might persuade students to view an issue as having only two positions (yes or no).” Debates also can force participants to assume certain positions that may not adhere to their own opinions, which can limit the sincerity and genuine nature of the discussion.

Beyond development and assessment via verbal exchanges, several forms of academic assessment have similarly employed interactive tools to more accurately assess student preparedness for higher education. The Graduate Readiness Exam has employed computer adaptive testing models to assess preparedness for graduate school, namely adjusting the difficulty of questions based upon the correctness of previously submitted responses. Though not explicitly intended or perhaps designed for multi-disciplinary assessment, and while research has questioned whether this technique does in fact identify better prepared students than the traditional pencil-and-paper exams, I would argue that this type of responsive testing can allow assessors to better gauge the true depth of a students’ learning and potential for further study.

Shortcomings of West Point’s Assessments

Understandably, West Point seeks to produce graduates “prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army,” which provides ample justification for the broad liberal arts education. In the end, graduates must have the requisite skills, knowledge, and understanding of a variety of real-world issues to best support the Nation’s defense. Over the course of the four years at West Point, students take a variety of academic, military, and physical courses, but the assessment of their overall development in each of those regards remains inconsistent.

Physically, West Point does administer culminating fitness tests to assess cadets’ holistic wellness and their readiness for service as a commissioned officer. For instance, after learning individual movement techniques, students do take the Indoor Obstacle Course Test – which is a graduation requirement administered almost two years after they take the course their freshman year. We similarly administer the Army Physical Fitness Test routinely to enforce a physical fitness standard over the course of each cadet’s careers. Similarly, with respect to military development, students take military science courses throughout their cadet careers and then apply some of that knowledge throughout their military training here at West Point and abroad. The basic soldier skills they learn during Cadet Basic Training are retrieved and reapplied at a more advanced level during Cadet Leadership Development Training and elsewhere. Yet, academically, West Point does not force students to revisit or apply their broad liberal arts education in a structured, consistent format. Though issue panels (discussed below) may not be feasible based upon the resources required, the institution certainly should revisit how it ensures that students retain the key lessons for their future service.

Though the knowledge that students at West Point have a designated profession upon graduation could stifle the potential benefits of a broad liberal arts education, this fact can also serve as a vehicle for relevant, multi-disciplinary exercises. Army officers deal with innumerable challenges, regardless of their specific branch or post assignment. At the end of the day, however, they are involved with, impacted by, and executors of policy. Though disciplinary depth is particularly helpful for certain branches of service (engineers, medical service corps, etc.), general strategic policy discussion can serve as a conduit for learned discussion that grounds those disciplines within social choice. Though not directly involved with the day-to-day decisions made by elected leaders, strategic leaders throughout the interagency must have a working knowledge of the social, political, economic, and other impacts of proposed courses of action. Whether testifying before congressional committees or working with interagency partners in a deployed environment West Point graduates must become lifelong learners aware of the multifaceted complexities of the many issues that do affect the Nation’s defense.
Scholarship Application Process as one Vehicle for Multi-Disciplinary Learning

The United States Military Academy Scholarship Program, currently housed within the Department of Social Sciences, has existed formally for a little over a decade. This faculty team, on behalf of the Dean’s Scholarship Committee, supports the Academy’s mission to “educate, train, and inspire” by providing top-performing cadets with unique multi-disciplinary opportunities for personal and professional development. While the Academy and the Army certainly benefit from supporting graduate school scholarship winners, the focus of this particular program is on contributing to civil-military dialogue and providing broadening, integrative experiences for cadets.

Beyond the numerous unstructured ways through which this program supports cadet development, one course is offered to selected students to enable a series of such enrichment experiences. XH497 Critical Thought, a course taught by two faculty members from Department of Social Sciences to 30 members of the junior class, seeks to challenge students with a series of multi-disciplinary tasks, using graduate school scholarship applications and interviews as a vehicle for that professional development (in two and three dimensions, respectively). This application process requires students to consider their individual experiences, strengths, and ambitions and consider how graduate school fits within their vision for future public service.

Though only a fraction of those who participate in XH497 do, in fact, win scholarships and go straight to graduate school, the vast majority of the students do find the process beneficial for their holistic professional development. The objectives for the course itself focus on professional skills vice the applications (or outcomes) of the scholarship process. According to the AY 13-2 syllabus, as a result of XH497, each cadet will:

- Develop and become skilled in employing an analytical method to frame issues, objectively consider conflicting positions, discern the sources of disagreements, build a position, and articulate and defend that position;
- Use this framework to consider controversial issues involving the US Army;
- Consider fundamental questions of ethics and morality;
- Develop a clearer vision of how they can use their personal strengths to make a contribution to society, considering the role further education and military service will play in supporting this vision;
- Broaden their perspectives through frequent debate and interaction with peers, faculty, and guest lecturers from a variety of fields;
- Improve their speaking ability by learning and practicing interview and communication techniques.

Over the past decade, course directors have employed a number of techniques to foster this type of holistic academic development. The course itself seeks to promote critical thinking but, more importantly, it stresses students’ strengthening their ability to share and express their opinions and deductions both in writing and orally. Applications for graduate school scholarships serve as a vehicle for refining techniques in the former, while individual interviews help assess the latter. In previous years, course directors have assigned an “Issue Brief”, where students sign up to present a topic of interest to them and then respond to questions and feedback from the class. Though perhaps more applicable to an individual interview, the quality of the conversation that followed the individual brief was sub-optimal. Briefers had limited capacity to respond effectively to a wide range of questions, and the audience may not have interest in or requisite knowledge on a very specific topic to ask substantive questions.
Exercise Methodology – Issue Panels

To promote greater depth and breadth during the exercise, this semester (AY 13-2), MAJ Brian Babcock-Lumish and I decided to assign a group issue panel presentation rather than the individual issue briefs. Recognizing that individual students may not have the capacity to recall arguments from all of their core classes in response to oblique inquiries, students now could work as a small team (3-4 people) to break a large topic of relevance to any audience and approach analysis of that topic from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Students were afforded an opportunity to self-organize, selecting both their partners in the project and their overarching topic. They then had approximately two weeks to prepare for the event, knowing that they would present before an audience comprised of the other members of the class (approximately 25 classmates), both instructors, and other faculty and guests.

Objective: Assess students’ abilities to employ analytical methods to frame relevant social issues, objectively consider conflicting positions, discern the sources of disagreements, build an informed position, and articulate and defend that position.

Assignment: Provide 5- to 7-minute oral presentation on a current issue or debate as a member of a 3-4 cadet panel, followed by a discussion period with the audience (total time, 55 minutes). Each panelist will provide a one-page summary and fact sheet in support of the panel to all cadets and audience members. Possible topics include (but are not limited to): Afghanistan, American foreign policy toward the Pacific, civil-military relations, international law and institutions, social issues in the military, mental health in the military, defense budget sequestration, ethics of modern war, the presidential election, energy security, art and war, healthcare, veterans, the draft/national service, private military companies, etc.

Beyond the execution of the panel, each panel member then watched the video of their panel, providing candid feedback on themselves and their group members.
Student Assessment – Initial Findings

Based upon the course objectives, we assess that this particular group of students (hand-selected, largely from the top five percent of the class of 2014), demonstrated the following strengths and weaknesses, using a normal (A to F) grading scale:

Frame relevant social issues (C+)

Perhaps the greatest weakness among this group of highly successful cadets was their seeming inability to recognize the strategic essence of the issues they chose to present and discuss. Very few of the students could clearly and successfully explain how and why their particular topics or positions on those topics matter to wider society. Though many of these students have taken six or more classes within their major(s) – and completed the majority of their core requirements – they seemed unable to translate their discipline-specific methodologies effectively or nest their arguments within wider contexts. For instance, the infrastructure/energy group – though quite proficient at explaining the science behind certain energy options – had difficulty outlining the different social, political, economic, or other second- and third-order effects of their proposed positions with respect to energy production and usage. Groups consistently struggled to address the fundamental “so what” of their topic, and thus much of the question and answer session worked around the margins of the issues, rather than enabling debate about the fundamental issues at hand.

Consider conflicting positions (B+)

Whether or not students had considered or were even aware of alternative perspectives on their topics before their presentation, many of them acknowledged and adapted to salient points raised by the audience. Students could proficiently make measured concessions on their arguments, while staying true to their core beliefs. They also generally demonstrated good social nuance and conversation skills conducive to a learned discussion. Though not all confliction positions were envisaged beforehand, students did well considering them on-the-spot.

Discern sources of disagreement (B-)

Largely because of the seeming inability to nest disciplinary arguments within a wider social context, both panel and audience members struggled to discuss and delineate the specific sources of disagreement. Granted, part of this may have derived from the limited time afforded to each group (55 minutes total), but students visibly struggled to “zoom out” or recognize that decisions about the domestic education system, for instance, ultimately are influenced by a number of different societal values and positions. Through the course of the discussion, moderators and panel members grappled with a number of different issues but could not clearly delineate or individually discern the origins of fundamental disagreements on those values and positions.

Build an informed position (A-)

Unsurprisingly, this group of cadets did prove themselves to be quite proficient at gathering evidence to develop and present an informed position. Individually and collectively, they successfully gathered many of the appropriate facts and figures that could support their initial arguments. The group presenting a discussion about drones successfully considered the constitutional, just war theory, international, and domestic aspects of using drones both domestically and internationally. In general, each presentation was clear, eloquent, and relevant, but several fell short of considering the full range of potential counterarguments, which would have reinforced their stated positions.
Articulate and defend position (B)

Perhaps at least in part due to their inability to recognize the full range of multi-disciplinary approaches to addressing the topics they selected, students had difficulty responding effectively to questions that pushed them out of their disciplinary comfort zones or that sought to drive the conversation towards framing overarching issues. Panel members did concede when they either lacked the requisite knowledge or had failed to consider a particular position, but frequently did not respond appropriately to tough, multi-disciplinary questions, at least in the time allotted.

Exercise Assessment Methodology

To assess the effectiveness of this particular exercise, the course director and I sought feedback from the senior faculty that observed the interactions and, perhaps more importantly, requested survey feedback from the cadets themselves.

Upon first observing a panel and the interaction between the class and the presenters, Dr. Scott Silverstone, who has taught at the undergraduate level for well over a decade, stated that he had “never seen something like this at the undergraduate level.” In a later email to other senior faculty, he recounted, “On a personal level it was incredibly inspiring to see these cadets in action, but it also gave me an important opportunity to further mentor several cadets I've been working with.”

As far as the two instructors for this course, we found this format to be a marked improved from previous iterations of the aforementioned “Issue Brief.” Audience members were much more engaged, and those on the panel had to learn how to work together to respond to multi-disciplinary questions. We certainly identified areas for improvement – both for the students themselves and for the exercise (outlined below) – but overall the exercise effectively tested students’ abilities to respond to difficult questions about a topic of relevance to them as future leaders.

For the students, we nested a series of inquiries within the standard survey questions that cadets provide for their end-of-course feedback. However, rather than quantitatively assessing the experience based upon its own merits, we asked students to compare this event to other graded events that challenged them to learn through knowledge application. We also solicited qualitative feedback concerning the best and worst part about the exercise and recommendations for future iterations.

Compared with other graded events, students generally seemed to have found the exercise broadly worthwhile and challenging, though certainly improvable (Appendix 1). Collating those that “strongly agree” or “agree” as those who found the exercise more successful at attaining learning outcomes, out of 19 respondents:

- 16 believe that this event contributed to their learning and were motivated to continue learning more than a written exam, graded debate, or facilitated similar;
- 18 similarly found that this stimulated their thinking more than other retrieval exercises;
- 15 found that their understanding of different perspectives expanded;
- 13 cite that they helped learn their academic strengths outside of their major; and
- 16 assess that they learned more about their academic weakness outside of their major.

Surprisingly, the results for those who found this exercise to have helped them identify strengths and weaknesses within their majors were quite mixed, as were the comparisons between this and other graded events as far as changing or altering their worldview or fundamentally changing how they interpret articles.
Qualitatively, several students found the exercise helpful as far as assessing their demeanor, one citing “viewing the video-recording afterwards and learning from the presentation” as the most beneficial aspect of the panel. This provided a rare opportunity for students to see their command presence (or lack thereof) in this environment. The majority of respondents also cited the value of having to respond to myriad questions from a diverse audience, which required them to “think on their feet” while sitting in the “hot seat.”

As far as the critiques of this exercise, many complaints centered on the limited time spent on each topic during the session and the technical nature of a few topics. Though panels should have spent less than half of the time afforded to give their presentations, several went well beyond the 5-7 minutes per presenter, leaving limited time for critical engagement on the designated topic. “The opening statements got a little long,” cites one student, “If those could be capped at 3-5 minutes a person (for a 4-5 person group) I think that would provide more time for discussion.” Several also felt that the relevance and quality of the presentations, as well as the sheer number of audience members with questions, limited the overall benefit of the exercise.

Further Research

Based upon student and instructor feedback, exercises like these issue panels certainly warrant further consideration for teachers seeking to challenge cadets to integrate and synthesize across academic disciplines. Though the course director and I did invite faculty from other departments, few were actually able to attend, which limited the diversity of the faculty-level supervision and questioning. Further cross-departmental participation would undoubtedly increase the degree of difficulty and expand the potential lines of inquiry. Dr. Silverstone notes that “having faculty members in the audience helps improve the rigor of the discussions and can provide invaluable feedback and ideas the cadets can carry forward in their continued development.”

This semester, the syllabus only allowed for each member of the class to participate on a panel once. Though resource-intensive and time consuming, conducting this exercise multiple times with a smaller group may allow for more discussion and for students to assess their improvement between successive iterations. Students certainly benefitted from experiencing the “hot seat” and later observing their verbal and physical ticks by watching the video, but they did not have an opportunity to experience growth by placing themselves into that environment a second time.

Further, expanding the diversity of the audience members could also enhance the quality of the discussion. Maximizing the number of different perspectives involved in the exercise can challenge students to consider the viewpoints of others and apply different lines of reasoning and academic languages to establish and defend their positions.

Conclusions

Conducting issue panels in XH497 has allowed the West Point Scholarship committee to assess top students’ abilities to integrate and synthesize across disciplines. In the process, we not only have identified strengths and weaknesses for potential graduate school scholarship applicants, but also have observed significant shortcomings with the current assessment of scholarship, in general. Even top students, once placed well within their majors, struggle to infer connections and nest their academic and personal interests within wider social strata. As future Army officers, West Point graduates should be versed in the many different approaches to problem solving and have the capacity to understand fundamental conclusions of all main-stream academic disciplines. That said, the current model – which does not necessarily ever reassess students’ abilities to recall and apply core course material – may risk limiting the quality of the overall liberal arts education. Scholarship applications have provided one mechanism to challenge top students in this regard, but ultimately all students would benefit from more force-on-force capstone academic opportunities.
Appendix 1: Student Survey Data (19 Total Responses)

Question 1 – Compared to other academic activities (exams, writes, debates, seminars, etc.), the Issue Panels exercise:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: Compared to other academic activities (exams, writes, debates, seminars, etc.), the Issue Panels exercise:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributed to my learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintained me to focus and to concentrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulated my thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased my critical thinking ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made the subject matter interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged my participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed me to do my best work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me to understand my world view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed the way I view political or ethical ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified my academic strengths within my major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified my academic weaknesses within my major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified my personal strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me understand a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Contributed to my learning</td>
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<td>15.79%</td>
<td>73.86%</td>
<td>10.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintained me to focus and to concentrate</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulated my thinking</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
<td>21.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased my critical thinking ability</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made the subject matter interesting</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>26.32%</td>
<td>38.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged my participation</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed me to do my best work</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16.79%</td>
<td>38.84%</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helped me re-construct my world view</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>21.00%</td>
<td>42.11%</td>
<td>31.89%</td>
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<td>Expanded my understanding of different perspectives</td>
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<td>0%</td>
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<td>15.79%</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changed the way I view political or ethical ideas</td>
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<td>0%</td>
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<td>31.89%</td>
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<td>Identified my academic strengths within my major</td>
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<td>21.00%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified my academic weaknesses within my major</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>16.79%</td>
<td>21.00%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identified my personal strengths</td>
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<td>15.79%</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
<td>82.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me understand a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
<td>82.62%</td>
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Question 2 – Best Part of this Exercise (17 Responses):

- For my growth and development, the most important part was having to craft an argument and defend it in front of others, something I struggle to do concisely. The most fun part was learning about what excited the other people in the class, and see some people who have been quiet become passionate before the class.
- Viewing the video-recording afterwards and learning from the presentation.
- The preparation that was required to give an interesting and informative brief, coupled with the pressure to perform well in front of my peers. This combination was potent and led to some of what I consider to be my best work.
- I really enjoyed learning from my classmates and hearing many different viewpoints.
• The most valuable part of the exercise, for me, was answering questions on the panel my group presented.
• Preparing to brief the class and then responding to questions was the most valuable part of the exercise.
• Working with a group to answer questions/formulate opinions.
• Breadth of topics.
• Seeing all of the talent and expertise existent within the "cohort." The critical thinking, presentation, rhetorical, and problem-solving capabilities became apparent in this exercise, watching each presenter speak on a topic they are passionate about. I also enjoyed the ability to easily participate by engaging the panel members with questions, challenges, etc.
• The best part was the experience of fielding questions and thinking on my feet - I need continued practice in this area, and it gave me a good idea of where I was at.
• The AAR.
• It forced me to think critically to defend and articulate my views on an important subject that people may expect me to be an expert on.
• Being in the Question and Answer Session on the hot seat.
• Having the freedom to pick the topic what we wanted to do.
• Learning to ask complex questions, and figuring out how to answer them in return.
• the open discussion after the group was done with their opening statements. I also liked that we posed challenging questions to one another, which really helped me think on my feet while still being able to provide a thoughtful answer.
• Getting an idea of what issues are important to my peers in XH497.

Question 3 – Worst Part of this Exercise (18 Responses):

• The superficial nature we had to address most of the issues. I was not a subject matter expert in any of the issues presented, and I don't think many of the panelists were either.
• Topics that weren't very interesting or well-presented.
• There was really nothing bad about this exercise.
• I spent an extremely long time preparing, because I was quite nervous I would be asked something and not have an answer, but on the day I was barely asked anything. I also would have rather done another topic, but both of these things I could have changed.
• The worst part of this exercise was trying to remain impartial when some presentations gave seemingly politically-charged recommendations.
• Some of the topics that were chosen were extremely dry and technical.
• When people were not short and to the point with what they were trying to say.
• 1 hour was not enough for each panel.
• Preparing and particularly, the hand outs.
• The worst part was doing the AAR under such short notice.
• Trying to ask a question.
• Some of the presentations were too technical with respect to discipline specific details and were difficult to topic. I would have liked to see presentations framed from more of a multidisciplinary approach.
• Not allowing follow-up questions.
• Everyone felt like they should be the expert on their topic, and thus felt compelled to answer questions, even if they didn't really know.
• Time crunch. I feel like many of the conversations were cut short.
• Many panels spent the majority of their time on their 'briefing' rather than answering questions.
• The opening statements got a little long. If those could be capped at 3-5 minutes a person (for a 4-5 person group) I think that would provide more time for discussion.
• The back-to-back panels made it difficult to stay interested.

Question 3 – Recommended Improvements for this exercise:

• Bite-size topics that actually have some common knowledge that everyone in the class has.
• I realize this would be time-intensive, but perhaps an initial screening of the group to ensure the topics are relevant to others in the class?
• Possibly a different venue, like one of the rooms in our library. That room just felt stuffy.
• Questions should be limited to within the scope of what the panel talks about, there were times when time was wasted because of questions that were irrelevant to what was talked about. Also, panels should be more focused or perhaps with less people so there is deeper more focused discussion.
• My recommendation for improvement is to more strictly moderate the Q/A process, and to limit the presentation time to allow for more Q/A and discussion for the entire class.
• Having a panel of 3 people, and splitting up the two sections would allow for increased participation from both the briefers and the audience
• Better use of visual aids.
• Have an instructor mediate and keep control of time hacks
• Make the hand-outs optional (truly optional, like recommend not producing and distributing hand-outs unless they actually facilitate your presentation). They took time and were largely ignored during the presentation and likely discarded immediately following.
• I would recommend that there be general guidelines established before the panels start occurring. These guidelines should include more specified guidance on what direction the panelists should go into (perhaps a less technical focus, a more policy-central focus), how questions should best be fielded, etc. Although it would be decent experience for the panelists to determine these practices for themselves, there is limited time so I think more clear guidance will encourage the kind of conversation that will best benefit both the panelists and the audience.
• We should do this in smaller groups so it’s easier to facilitate meaningful dialogue.
• Limit the size of panels to three members. The panels with 4 or more members often did not have adequate time for questions and answers.
• Run a conversation down to the ground. Every group took such a broad topic that no one was able to carry any conversation in depth. We barely touched on lots of different topics and tried to go into depth, but whenever we started getting into it, we moved around.
• Do breakout groups so that everyone can get their questions answered, and then come back to a large group to go over some of the better questions.
• Maybe bring in guest experts that we could put on our panel with us.
• Panels should select topics on which the majority of the class is fairly conversant. This could cut down 'briefing' time. Also advising cadets to send out less read-ahead material would be beneficial, as dozens of pages on various topics invariably will not be read by much of the class.
• Cap the opening statement time, and ensure every group provides a one sheet summary of the high points. Any more than one sheet becomes too much. This will also help each group pick out what is most important, because in the future when they are giving big presentations to lots of stars, they may not have the luxury of a 3-4 page packet.
• I recommend that only 1 panel present per day and the second half of class be actual class time for something else.
End Notes


