

Responding to COVID-19 Pandemic: Teaching Defense Support of Civil Authorities Virtually at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

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ABOUT U.S. ARMY COMMAND AND GENERAL STAFF COLLEGE

COVID-19's devastating impacts were felt across all institutions of higher education, and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Officer's College (CGSOC) located in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, was no exception. CGSOC courses are also delivered at satellite campuses at Fort Belvoir, Virginia; Fort Lee, Virginia; Fort Gordon, Georgia; and the Redstone Arsenal, Alabama. The CGSOC teaches approximately 1,250 students in a resident ten-month curriculum as part of the nation's Joint Professional Military Education (Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020). CGSOC's curriculum comprises core operations, advanced operations, and elective phases of instruction and provides mid-level career education for U.S. Army as well as all U.S. military branches as well as mid-level federal civil service workers and international military officials. Students are selected by their respective agencies.

In March 2020, traditional CGSOC elective courses migrated from traditional face-to-face (F2F) to online (OL) platforms. Primary challenges included moving the courses and courseware (educational software) into our learning management system (LMS), Blackboard (Bb) and ensuring that students and faculty could effectively navigate Bb and its ancillary tools.

The CGSOC faced the uncertainty inherent to our new operational environment with a limited understanding of our remote OL capabilities. At the time, CGSOC offered over 200 different elective classes to 1,200 students, most of which were traditional F2F classes. These electives were taught by faculty from six resident teaching departments that include sustainment, force management, history, leadership, tactics, and joint/interagency and multinational operations.

The primary elective phase, consisting of two academic terms, allows students to take courses that provide specific skills and experiences that are tied directly to current and future assignments. This paper focuses on one those electives, Sustainment in Support of Defense Support of Civil Authorities Operations.

PRE-COVID-19

In early January 2020, CGSOC considered the possibility of delivering some or all of its F2F courses remotely should the then emerging COVID-19 crisis result in a widespread epidemic/pandemic. As students and faculty prepared for the traditional Spring break in March, the COVID-19 threat intensified. CGSOC re-envisioned its new operating environment. The class of 2020—1,200-plus mid-level officers, Department of Defense and other federal civilians, and international partners—would continue their CGSOC program OL for the remainder of the two elective terms.

In the first week of April, CGSOC students were scheduled to enter the first elective term of CGSOC. Faculty and staff mastery of OL pedagogy and Bb, however, was limited. Few faculty members understood the inner workings and capabilities of Bb's many applications and particularly Bb-Ultra, a multipurpose collaboration tool. For the past few years, Bb was used mostly as a repository for course content. This proved useful as faculty delivered course files via Bb's content tool rather than distributing hard copies of course documents.

IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

In previous academic years, effectively delivering the 200 electives within the two four-week terms to meet the eight-credit requirements for graduation presented challenges such as coordinating student preferences and instructor availability, new and emerging threats and organizational policies and practices, and miscellaneous logistical concerns. The new OL operating environment exacerbated those challenges. Preparing for and teaching OL required a great deal of planning, hard work, and time. One critical decision that was made by CGSOC leadership was that students would be required to complete six electives instead of the usual eight to graduate at the end of Academic Year 2020. This decision provided faculty and staff with the needed time to update their courses and load content and courseware to Bb.

SUSTAINMENT IN SUPPORT OF DEFENSE SUPPORT OF CIVIL AUTHORITIES OPERATIONS

Instructors had approximately two weeks to update and finalize their courses. The authors' class, Sustainment in Support of Defense Support of Civil Authorities Operations (A430), was scheduled for delivery. The course is part of the authors' Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) specialty area within our Homeland Security Program (HLS). There are several electives that comprise the DSCA and HLS areas of instruction offered to students. They focus on doctrine, procedures, and skills required to react to a DSCA or HLS event or incident.

In May 2020, Sustainment in Support of Defense Support of Civil Authorities Operations focused on military support to civil authorities to disasters such hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires as well as pandemics. The first task was to teach the class without overfocusing on the current COVID-19 crisis. The second task was to change the mode of instruction from F2F to OL delivery. As faculty, we were asked to develop OL courses that challenged earlier

experiences, relationships, and technology (see Chiasson, Terras, & Smart, 2015). Our previous experiences had been F2F exclusively. Changing the format and information required a great deal of effort and time, but provided an opportunity for radical and positive reform of the process and content (see Lairson, 1999). The instructors were already making significant changes to the course in accordance with U.S. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-28 (*Defense Support of Civil Authorities*), which was updated on July 31, 2019. The instructors stood up a collaboration team to assist in transiting the F2F course to an OL platform. The team included a senior faculty member and two junior faculty members. All had a diverse set of experiences in DSCA and HLS. We developed discussion board questions and prompts, role-playing scenarios, and a revised reading list. Sustainment in Support of Defense Support of Civil Authorities Operations was scheduled for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday time slots. The instructors met several times to review the curriculum and establish a redesigned forum of OL education. All instruction and coordinating activities were housed in Bb' Collaborate Ultra app.

Another significant challenge for us was establishing a social presence with the students. York, Yang and Dark (2007) posited that OL courses that lack substantive and meaningful interaction contribute to student isolation. Social presence activities include introduction and inclusion of all students. OL instructors must make a concerted effort to ensure students' social presence on virtual platforms. With this in mind, we paid particular attention to ensuring each student connected with us and with one another to establish a sense of belonging to the course. Previous sessions included various collaboration exercises where students would gather around a virtual whiteboard, which would be missing in a traditional virtual environment. The potential for student isolation was a significant consideration during our planning sessions for the course and each session of class.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 forever altered higher education: virtual learning platforms are here to stay. This is not to say that colleges, universities, and military institutions will forego all F2F learning platforms. Rather, institutions of higher education will explore combinations of traditional F2F, OL, and hybrid course delivery. Thrust into OL course delivery, CGOCS adapted to the new learning environment. This was accomplished through planning, just-in-time training, and technologies such as LMS, collaboration tools, and videoconferencing platforms. Moving forward, instructor training and preparation will include all aspects of OL teaching and especially andragogical approaches that address potential student isolation issues and technology adaptation.

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