FUTURE HUNTERS ELECTIVE AT THE COMMAND AND GENERAL STAFF OFFICER COLLEGE: EXPOSING EMERGING LEADERS TO THE POWER OF STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The *Future Hunters* course at the Command and General Staff Officer College provides emerging Army leaders with vital tools and skills to understand and make decisions regarding long-term future operational environments. The course starts with the premise that the future is uncertain, complex, and unpredictable. Students learn to manage, even profit from, this uncertain environment through strategic foresight, a discipline in which systematic thinking and rigorous frameworks are applied to complex, uncertain environments to generate logical projections of potential future conditions, which serve as decision support tools. Through immersion in *future*

hunter concepts, students learn to appreciate those provocative ideas, even absurd ones, that might help move us out of our comfort zone. The challenge with thinking about the future is that we often envision it as similar to the present when it is decidedly not so. Ridiculous or edgy ideas make us think more broadly and help us to prepare for a plausible future, especially if it is one in which we do not want to live. Ridiculous ideas can help lead the Army's change, ultimately preventing surprise and reducing risk for our national security. The *Future Hunters* course is being incorporated into the curricula of several of our university partners as a form of applied learning.

Keywords: *creative thinking, critical thinking, future hunters, strategic foresight, scenarios, drivers of change, trends*

INTRODUCTION

The Command and General Staff Officer College (CGSOC) provides emerging leaders (general staff officers) with a 10-month resident course to hone warfighting, historical, leadership, and decision-making skills. The intent is to engender expertise in combined arms formations and the ability to operate in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments. Staff officers must master multi-domain operations in contested environments and counter adversarial threats.

There are three phases to CGSOC: the common core, the advanced operations course, and the elective phase. The *Future Hunters* course is taught during the elective phase and is sponsored by the Department of Command and Leadership, one of six teaching departments of the Command and General Staff School. The Leadership Department emphasizes critical thinking and lifelong learning skills that enable field grade officers to accomplish their missions while improving their organizations. Since 2019, the course has provided emerging Army leaders with the tools and skills to understand and make decisions regarding long-term future operational environments. The course instruction consists of eight lessons (three-hour blocks) and is detailed below. In addition, students are tasked with reviewing a future-oriented book and creating their vignette, a short story derived from one of their scenarios developed during the course.

Lesson 1: Introduction to Future Hunters

Lesson one provides students with an understanding of the importance of planning for and making decisions regarding long-term future operational environments. To be effective leaders, students must know how to prowl for signals of future change in the present and pursue the implications of potential change to shape their decision-making and enhance their organizations' readiness. This lesson introduces the world of strategic foresight. It lays out the framework for the course and the expectations for successfully achieving the objectives: a review of critical thinking and teaching the importance of rethinking.

Lesson 2: Mindsets

In this lesson, students learn that the ability to be a *future hunter* starts with understanding the strengths and weaknesses of one's cognitive processes and identifying ways to strengthen areas

where growth is beneficial. Students explore the importance of a growth mindset that facilitates continuous learning from the environment. Students assess their inherent and known biases and unproductive habits and learn to modify their state of mind to become more productive and creative. Students explore the importance and the power of creative thinking. Students also uncover the importance of cultivating a *futures mindset*, the ability to imagine their lives in the distant future, and make plans to optimize their future selves.

Lesson 3: History Lessons

Lesson three provides students with an understanding of the importance of planning for and making decisions regarding long-term future operational environments. To be an effective leader, students must understand that the past is not always a reliable predictor of the future. History allows us to put signals of change in perspective.

Lesson 4: Signs of Change

Lesson four gives students an understanding of the importance and application of environmental scanning and its role in strategic foresight. To be effective leaders, students must understand how to prowl for signals of future change in the present. Students practice combining signals into unique combinations to create a range of plausible futures. Students also explore the importance of edgy or ridiculous ideas for driving innovation.

Lesson 5: Scenario Planning

In lesson five, students employ their signals and drivers of change lessons learned in lesson four to develop scenarios that describe a range of plausible futures. Students learn how to create multiple 2 x 2 matrices and use the archetype methodology to explore a range of plausible futures. Students discuss the strengths of developing scenarios and how they can be misused.

Lesson 6: The Operational Environment

In lesson six, students explore the concept of the operational environment and how and why it is generated for Army training, education, and leadership development. This lesson also introduces students to strategic foresight in the Army, the National Intelligence Council, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Strategic Foresight program. Major corporations have used strategic foresight tools for decades. Students are introduced to some of these products and their methodologies and spend time creating their operational environments.

Lesson 7: Working Your Future

In lesson seven, students leverage previous lessons to develop and use scenarios to inform strategies that enhance organizational readiness as a form of applied learning. This is an opportunity to bring in strategic foresight practitioners to demonstrate how they use the tools to shape decision-making in other organizations. Students explore the importance of strategic leadership, taking the time to think and reflect critically.

Lesson 8: Final Presentations

In lesson eight, students present their coursework to their peers, provide feedback on the course, and make recommendations on how to improve the overall design of the course for "future" *future hunters*.

METHODS

Forty-four students in two courses (Term 1 and Term 2) completed the Future Hunters course, and 37 provided feedback via an After-Action Report (AAR). The AAR response rate was 84%, with very little missing data. Students were assessed on their ability to achieve the course learning objectives through preparation, contribution to the group's learning, a course project in which students created their future scenarios, and a book review. At the end of the course, students were allowed to provide feedback on improving the course. The students were given nine questions to which they could respond on a Likert scale whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements. Questions 10 and 11 asked the students to comment on what they liked best about the course and what they thought should be added. The course instructors analyzed the course and the outcomes that emerged.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides consolidated responses to the quantitative questions (1-9) from Terms 1 and 2 (modules 5 [morning] and 6 [afternoon classes]) for Academic Year (AY) 2021.

Table 1. Participant Feedback Terms 1 and 2, Questions 1–9

Question	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
1. Skills to understand future O.E.	29	7	1	0	0	37
2. Clear course framework	25	11	1	0	0	37
3. Importance of mindset	29	7	1	0	0	37
4. Importance of past	30	7	0	0	0	37
5. Constructing a Future O.E.	23	12	1	1	0	37
6. Horizon scanning	26	11	0	0	0	37
7. Developing scenarios	24	12	1	0	0	37
8. Practice skills	23	14	0	0	0	37
9. Recommend course	34	2	0	0	0	36

SA= strongly agree; A= agree; N= neither agree nor disagree; D= disagree; SD= strongly disagree.

Based on the AAR results, students professed an understanding of the course requirements and that the course accomplished the established goals. There was a strong sentiment to continue the course and to recommend it to other students. In the qualitative section of the AAR (Questions 10 and 11), students expressed an interest in expanding the course to allow for more time to use the tools. The students also recommend this course as a pre-requisite to the School of Advanced

Military Studies. Table 2 below provides responses from Term 1 (Modules 5 and 6) 2022. Term 2 is in process. The results were unavailable for this article.

Table 2. Participant Feedback Terms 1; Modules 5 and 6

Question	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
1. Skills to understand future O.E.	16	3	0	0	0	19
2. Clear course framework	13	5	0	1	0	19
3. Importance of mindset	15	4	0	0	0	19
4. Importance of past	16	3	0	0	0	19
5. Constructing a Future O.E.	12	3	3	0	0	18
6. Horizon scanning	17	2	0	0	0	19
7. Developing scenarios	15	4	0	0	0	19
8. Practice skills	15	4	0	0	0	19
9. Recommend course	16	3	0	0	0	19

SA= strongly agree; A= agree; N= neither agree nor disagree; D= disagree; SD= strongly disagree

ANALYSIS

The students in *Future Hunters* were bright, energetic, curious, hard-working, and motivated to learn. They contributed to class discussions, and many sought extra help when uncertain about a concept after class. At first, many students were baffled by the class' principal requirement, which was to create a scenario about the future. The concept of storytelling to critically and creatively envision a range of plausible futures needed time to sink in. Instructors should expect this in future lessons.

The second term had the advantage that the instructor could provide exemplary products from the first term. Students initially professed anxiety about the scenario requirement. However, most students provided rich, thoughtful work products. Many of these products should be published, and the instructor is working with Army University to create an opportunity to do so. The *Future Hunters* course has inspired other instructors and other courses and was featured at a 2022 Army University Learning Symposium.

The students are creative and excellent writers. One class requirement was writing a book review about the future or an emerging concept. Many of the students elected to brief the class on the books they read and included them in their presentations of their future scenarios. Students were keen to create a summer reading list and share recommendations.

During Term 1, the instructor had the luxury of a co-instructor interested in strategic foresight. This allowed the primary instructor to observe the class and different instructional methods. The co-instructor was creative and leveraged the Avenger Science Fiction Series (Affinity War) to explore plausible future scenarios. The students were very enthusiastic about the Avengers and science fiction. Future classes should be enriched with science fiction exemplars (films, multimedia, interactive media, and games). Bringing in science fiction writers and actors would be a powerful way to open creative potential in the student corps. One of the biggest challenges

of teaching this course is constantly keeping the material updated and accessible to the students. Thus, an unexpected outcome of this course is the need to introduce strategic foresight toolsets to the staff and faculty of CGSOC and other components of Army University.

DISCUSSION AND WAYS AHEAD

TRADOC invests in the *future hunters* methodology to further the Electronic Intern (E-Intern) program. Since its launch in 2016, the E-Intern initiative has accomplished its goal of enabling college students to collaborate (in virtual environments) with Army leaders to gain practical, real-world experience. It informs Army efforts to maintain a high-quality, diverse, talented, and professional workforce. It continues to grow with the number of students, universities, and collaborators. More than five universities have ongoing relationships with the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) to support the E-Intern initiative. Three were active with the Critical Thinking Enterprise Future Hunters line of effort, as described in the following paragraphs.

The Institute for the Future (2023) posits in its *Futures Thinking Specialization* course that provocative ideas, perhaps even perceived as absurd, are extremely helpful in moving us out of our comfort zone. The challenge with thinking about the future is that we often envision it as similar to the present when it is decidedly not so. Ridiculous ideas make us think more broadly and help us to prepare for plausible futures, especially in dystopia-like environments. Ridiculous ideas can help lead the Army's change, preventing surprise and reducing risk.

The purpose of this project is to enlist the support of students to prepare future scenarios that, at the outset, might seem improbable. Scenarios are simply stories about the future. We use them to describe a possible reality that might play out over the next decade. The scenarios are specific and concrete, an immersive short story. It allows us to consider this plausible future world and ask ourselves what we would feel like if we woke up in this world. The objective is for the students to apply a strategic foresight methodology to create one-page future scenarios that help the Army to envision the emerging operational environment. Students will choose two or more vastly different, unrelated signals of change and explore how they could converge to create a surprisingly different future. Mostly, these stories inform the TRADOC G2, which leads to change for the Army by characterizing the emerging operational environment. These stories are shared with our business partners in the Department of Defense and elsewhere in the U.S. government. Key aspects of the strategic foresight methodology include:

1. Students will think in ten-year timeframes. We explore change by looking forward five to 10 years into the future and looking back ten years to understand the force of change.
2. Students will collect and analyze signals of change. Signals are phenomena that are perceived as different. A signal is anything happening today that could be a clue to the future. The signal can be analyzed by exploring the direction in which the signal is taking us. The change's direction will help us identify its driver.

3. Students will use these signals to identify drivers of change. Drivers are the force behind the signal; what is causing the change. It is the "why" behind the signal happening.

4. Students will combine signals and drivers into forecasts. Forecasts are statements of how things will change. A sample forecast is, "In the future, X will lead to Y." It is how a student sees a complex system coming together and changing.

5. Students will use their forecasts to create short, concise (one-page) scenarios. Scenarios are simply stories of the future. They help us imagine what living in this world would be like.

6. Students should not be afraid of ridiculous ideas. As McGonigal (2022) stated at the Institute For The Future, "practice strong opinions, lightly held." Students are asked to consider all of the science fiction movies that help us to imagine plausible future worlds.

OUTCOMES

The strategic foresight program is growing in scope. The initial iterations of the program produce a diverse range of problem-solving opportunities. Successful implementation of the E-Intern initiative is based upon several factors, including high-quality engagement with university faculty and staff, basic training (fundamentals of strategic foresight), collaborative work environments, and access to quality research data and tools.

The work products developed by the E-Interns have been posted to the All Partners Action Network (APAN) website under the "Final Products" page. This website is closed to the E-Intern Community of Practice, and access is by invitation only.

This project achieved its goal of developing a network of emerging leaders who create and sustain a variety of high-quality forward views and apply the emerging insights in organizationally valuable ways for the Army and TRADOC. This project engenders a community of "future hunters" who will continually assist TRADOC in understanding, planning for, and making decisions regarding long-term operational environments. These future hunters will allow TRADOC G2 to anticipate the needs of the Army and sense emerging issues before they reach a crisis stage.

FISCAL YEAR 2023 FUTURE HUNTER PROPOSALS AND INITIATIVES

TRADOC continues to grow the E-Intern program through the G-1/4 Office as a critical aspect of the Army People Strategy, and the Future Hunter Interns will rise in support. The following paragraphs describe the proposed focus areas for Fiscal Year 2023.

Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Security (College of William & Mary)

This proposal describes a multi-year/multiphase E-Intern pilot project focused on developing emerging leaders with technical skill sets in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity to address emerging threats to our nation. The *Army Cybersecurity Strategy* states that the

> The United States is a target for malicious cyber activity against personal, commercial, and government infrastructure. New threats to commercial and military uses of space are emerging, while digital connectivity across all aspects of personal life, business, government, and defense creates significant vulnerabilities. Much of the Army's technological developments come from the commercial sector, meaning adversaries also have access to them. Adversaries also threaten the security environment with sophisticated capabilities, including advanced computing, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence—the same technologies that ensure U.S. and coalition partner success on the present and future battlefield. Our adversaries' growing lethality across all domains challenges Joint force capabilities to create overmatch.

Brigadier General Paul Stanton, Commanding General of Army Cyber Center of Excellence, has identified a problem: graduates of cyber-school are not ready to conduct their missions. They must complete various follow-on courses to get certified to execute operations (Pomerleau, 2021). There is a need to develop emerging leaders with technical skill sets in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity to address emerging threats to our nation.

Hunger and Obesity in the Army (Auburn University)

This proposal describes an E-Internship project that explores creative, long-term solutions to fight obesity and food insecurity in military families, recognizing these as essential family and mission readiness challenges. E-Interns will employ the Future Hunters methodology to develop future scenarios for an imaginary leap into the future. This proposal focuses on food insecurity and obesity as readiness risk factors for the Army. It also expands and formalizes an ongoing university-based partnership. Investing in this partnership provides the Army access to establish scholars in diverse disciplines, including but not limited to hunger studies, nutrition and wellness, global studies, human development, family science, evaluation science, marriage and family therapy, as well as connections to talented, hard-working students invested in improving the future for individuals and families. The Army also creates a workforce pipeline of trained talent for future employment by including students in this work. By collaboratively addressing food insecurity and obesity, this project develops a sustainable model for cooperatively addressing additional family and mission readiness risks. For instance, in future years, this collaboration can develop scenarios for other prevalent risks to preparedness, such as family violence, financial literacy, military sexual trauma, and retention of diverse military members. A key advantage of building this sustainable model for talent acquisition is ensuring that the military has access to the next generation of problem solvers equipped to address issues that threaten military family readiness, thereby creating a talent pipeline that harnesses the expertise of emerging leaders.

Technology, War and Strategy (Purdue University)

This proposal describes a multi-year/multiphase E-Intern pilot project focused on developing emerging leaders with strategic skillsets in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and information

technology applied to command and control to address Department of Defense modernization priorities and other emerging threats to our nation. Interns will collaborate with TRADOC staff to develop a technology, strategy, and conflict elective course that puts emerging leaders in the role of grand strategy policymakers and executants. The program will use a competency-based training framework combining technical (programming, user experience, systems thinking) with teamwork and communication competencies. The ultimate goal is to create winning training strategies that combine human, material, technological, and psychological factors adaptively.

Climate Change (The University of Nebraska and the College of William & Mary)

This proposal addresses the Secretary of the Army's third priority: climate change resilience, adapting installations, acquisition programs, and training. Climate change is a reality and the time to address it is now. The Army must adapt across its entire enterprise and tap into the creativity, capabilities, and commitment of Army professionals operating on every continent and leverage best practices from many sources. As temperatures warm due to climate change and populations continue to grow, water will become increasingly scarce in many parts of the United States and the world. Restricted access to water can trigger civil unrest, as demonstrated by the conflict in Syria, and a military base drawing upon local water resources may become increasingly controversial.

The *Hampton Roads Sanitation District's Sustainable Water Initiative for Tomorrow* pilot project in coastal Virginia, which involves treating wastewater to the potable level and injecting it into the groundwater aquifer, is an example of the cutting-edge, out-of-the-box thinking required to address the military's increasing need for diminishing freshwater resources. Providing a sustainable, reliable water source also is a partial solution for military installations' need to access personnel, water, and utilities from off-base. This initiative leverages our university partners' efforts to engage with local communities and foreign partners to ensure mutual readiness and security in a rapidly changing environment. This aspect of the proposal provides a unique opportunity to improve our defense capabilities and become a more efficient force while securing a better future. The Army has been challenged to examine climate threats, prioritize resources, and take swift action.

Students have applied a strategic foresight methodology to help the Army explore emerging challenges regarding the malevolent use of climate change-reversing technologies. Some of the issues addressed are:

- What are the existing climate change reversal technologies and capabilities?
- What will a security environment look like if natural disasters are weaponized with current technologies for strategic purposes?
- Is the Army prepared to confront the challenges identified in the future analysis of weaponized natural disasters?

CONCLUSION

As the *Future Hunters* program continues growing to support the Army People Strategy, we seek to build state-of-the-art talent management toolsets. We strive to leverage the Cadet Portfolio suite of toolsets adopted by Cadet Command. Modest investments in these programs could produce a significant return on investment for the Army and its talent management goals.

The *Future Hunters* course provides emerging leaders with vital tools and skills to understand and make decisions regarding long-term future operational environments. *Future hunters* learn that their agility in an uncertain, complex, and unpredictable world is augmented through strategic foresight skillsets based on critical, creative, and systematic thinking concepts. Future Hunters learn to generate logical projections of potential future conditions: possible, plausible, and probable scenarios. These scenarios ultimately help organizations to reduce risk and identify opportunities to achieve positions of relative advantage. The scenarios form the basis for organizations to test, refine, and create strategies and develop indicators to alert them if aspects of a scenario are becoming a reality.

The *Future Hunters* course has been incorporated into the U.S. Army TRADOC Intern Program with enormous success. Through immersion in *future hunter* concepts, students learn to appreciate that provocative idea, perhaps even perceived as absurd, are extremely helpful in moving us out of our comfort zone. The challenge with thinking about the future is that we often envision it as similar to the present when it is decidedly not so. Ridiculous or edgy ideas make us think more broadly and help us to prepare for a plausible future, especially if it is one in which we do not want to live. Ridiculous ideas can help lead the Army's change, ultimately preventing surprise and reducing risk for our national security. Moreover, the course is being incorporated into the curricula of several of our university partners as a form of applied learning. It also forms the basis for a substantially larger intern/fellow program at TRADOC.

The Future Hunters course also aligns with the Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education and Talent Management. *Future hunters* demonstrate proficiency in critical strategic thinking, creative approaches to joint warfighting, and a deeper understanding of disruptive technology. *Future hunters* are on the path toward intellectual overmatch-officers who think critically and creatively apply military power to inform national strategy, conduct globally integrated operations, and fight under conditions of disruptive change.

Linking the Future Hunters elective and methodology to the TRADOC Intern program enables the Army to recruit talented emerging leaders adept at thinking about complex problems in an uncertain world. Modest investments in these programs can produce a significant return on investment for the Army and its talent management goals.

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