

JPWWS

JOURNAL OF PEACE AND WAR STUDIES

International Symposium of Military Academies (ISOMA)
Special Edition, October 2021



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John and Mary Frances Patton Peace and War Center
Norwich University, USA

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ISSN 2641-841X(Print) • ISSN 2641-8428 (Online)

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Intercultural Competence Training at a US Service Academy: Pilot Study

Kelly Lemmons

Abstract: Intercultural competence has been identified as an important attribute for the twenty-first-century officer and is commonly included as a desired institutional outcome within the U.S. service academies. However, intercultural competence has remained difficult and elusive to measure, and it is unknown whether academies are meeting the outcome of increasing cadets' intercultural competence. This pilot study uses a small sample size in a controlled experiment to measure whether or not intentional intercultural competence training courses can increase cadets' intercultural competence, and whether or not the course can be scaled from 40 lessons to 20 lessons to 8 lessons and remain effective. Using small sample size control groups as representations of the student body, this research seeks to understand what intercultural competence gains are being made by students who are not receiving intentional intercultural competence training. Results show that the 40, 20, and 8-lesson intentional intercultural competence training courses have a significant effect on cadet's intercultural competence, with control groups, who receive no intentional training, showing no significant changes in intercultural competence. This paper, along with findings from related research, provide data suggesting that service academies are not meeting intercultural competence outcomes. This paper postulates that 8-lesson intercultural competence training courses may provide cadets with the tools to not only increase their intercultural competence through the duration of the course, but also to sustain and build upon these mechanics for the duration of their study at the academy, meeting institutional outcomes and developing interculturally competent graduates.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence; Study Abroad; Cultural Geography.

Introduction

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), as part of the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Institutional Outcome, states that “our graduates will be required to interact successfully with a wide range of individuals, to include those representing cultures and societies different from their own...being able to prudently interact with...cross-cultural competence.”¹ Similarly, the United States Military Academy (USMA) states that intercultural competence is “one of the important goals of the curriculum,”² that cadets will “engage in and reflect on cross cultural experiences.”³ In conjunction within these “institutional outcomes” is the fact that intercultural competence has also been identified as an important attribute for the twenty-first-century military officer. Uribe, LeLoup, and Haverluk⁴ stress this point by stating that “the nature of today's post-cold war conflicts clearly shows that the men and women being prepared at USAFA as future leaders will face increasingly complex multicultural environments. They will have to lead a more diverse force, work with coalition partners and allies, and interact with members of local populations around the world.”

Intercultural competence may simply be defined as one's "ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways."⁵ However, this definition lacks rigor and is purposefully general, as intercultural competence is difficult to define and lacks a generally agreed-upon definition. Deardorff,⁶ in an article specifically designed to establish a definition of intercultural competence, states that the definition of intercultural competence depends on context, but that the most agreed upon (3.5 out of 5) definition by a panel of researchers and higher education administrators was developed by Byram:⁷ "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role."

Despite being a desired outcome across various U.S. service academies, intercultural competence assessment has proven very difficult and costly. The difficulties will be explained in greater detail later in this article but are namely due to the fact that intercultural competence belongs to no respective discipline, and thus there is a dearth of perspective instructors who might teach the comprehensive course which is needed to meet the outcome. Also, as this article will illustrate in the next section, it has been shown that intercultural competence is not something merely learned across a diverse core curriculum, or even by participating in a study abroad; rather, it requires an intentional process and practice for gains to be realized.

The cost comes from the labor of administering a survey and assessing a percentage of the student body with a pre- and post- intercultural competence survey to measure for changes in intercultural competence over the duration of the cadet experience. If the outcome is indeed institutional, then the statistical sample would be between 300 and 400 (assuming 4,000 cadet student body), with each participating cadet needing to take the survey twice. Surveys vary in cost from \$11 to \$100 per survey. Assuming 350 cadets, needing to take the survey twice, at an estimated cost of \$20 per survey, the baseline cost would be around \$14,000. This cost does not include the labor costs associated with administering such a survey. In the social sciences, an annual request of \$14,000 for a survey is a big request, not to mention the added request of labor costs. Because of these difficulties and associated costs, major assessment protocols at USAFA have waned since 2014. Therefore, there exists a tremendous need to (1) re-assess what intercultural competence outcomes are being achieved, if any; (2) measure the effects of intentional intercultural competence training on select number of cadets; and (3) determine whether or not training can or even needs to be scaled to the entire student body. Through a small-sample, pilot study, this research paper seeks to further understand these three identified needs.

Intentional Intercultural Competence Training

The Georgetown Consortium Project (GCP), to date, was one of the most in-depth assessments involving more than 1,300 undergraduate students designed to measure changes in intercultural competence and second language acquisition.⁸ The study was conducted through Georgetown University's Office of International Programs from 2003 to

2005 with the majority of students being enrolled in study abroad programs at Georgetown University, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Rice University, and Dickson College. The GCP used, in conjunction with other methodology, the same metric as this paper uses to assess for gains in intercultural competence: the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The study found that when students were left to their own devices, i.e., to figure it out for themselves, that they made no significant gains in intercultural competence. It is assumed that universities are teaching aspects of intercultural competence across “the core curriculum” through courses in history, language, geography, political science, and behavioral sciences. However, as this GCP study suggests,⁹ cadets, left to their own devices and not receiving conspicuous instruction in intercultural competence, are likely to have no gains in intercultural competence over the duration of their service academy experience. The GCP and other studies advocate¹⁰ that “interventions in learning” are needed in order to facilitate increases in intercultural competence, or what this paper refers to as intentional intercultural competence training.¹¹

For this research, intercultural competence training has been developed from the body of “intercultural competence literature” and the body of “study abroad literature” as described in the article by Lemmons and Mobley.¹²

In general, the intercultural competence training course uses experiential learning techniques to teach students about culture, views on culture (e.g., ethnocentrism, polarization, minimization, acceptance, large versus small culture),¹³ personal world views (plausibility structures),¹⁴ how to personally reconcile two opposing cultural views (cognitive dissonance),¹⁵ understanding a culture through various means such as reading cultural landscapes, using a cultural “lens,”¹⁶ personal cultural resolution,¹⁷ the pitfalls and dangers of cultural identity crisis (ethnorelativism), and applied traveling techniques (e.g., how to dress, apps/technology, basic language skills). Students are asked to complete a series of tasks as they relate to each of the various aspects above, most of which include some sort of experiential learning activity such as participant observation, repeat photography, and/or journaling.

To provide a specific example, Section 4 of the intercultural competence training course is titled “How to See.” Students are taught a reflexivity technique through a repeat photography exercise. In the exercise, students are given an historical photograph (typically a location on or in close proximity to campus) and are asked to find the location and take a photograph of their own from the same vantage point. Through a series of prompts, the students answer questions about culture, what the original photographer’s intent might have been, and what has changed between the photos. Student responses are then shared in class. As the responses are read in class, students begin to understand that there are different interpretations to the photograph. But how? Aren’t photographs a depiction of reality taken at a moment in time? At this point, we enter into a discussion on how our interpretation of reality is actually influenced by a “cultural lens,” or what the students understand as bias. The reflexivity aspect comes when students are asked to journal about what aspects of their

identity/culture influences the way that they “see.” And if this bias influences the way that they interpret a photograph, might it also influence the way that they see the “other” while traveling abroad, or even others on campus? This section of the course is then reinforced by having students identify and journal about three cultural activities that they can participate in over the duration of the course. The students journal in a specific technique that forces them to realize value judgements made during the activity, and to validate those judgments with a cultural insider in order to help them understand the mental process that they undertake when experiencing something culturally foreign. Once the premise of “seeing” is established, Section 5 then goes on to teach techniques which can be used to understand the “other” rather than project a bias of understanding on the “other.”

The difficulty of conducting research on and developing a course in intercultural competence training is that no singular discipline focuses on intercultural competence; rather, various disciplines are involved with the process. Therefore, research articles, data, and findings about intercultural competence are scattered across the continuum of academic disciplines, in hundreds of journals, making it very difficult to develop a congruent body of thought. The author of the article developed the body of work through cobbling myriad theories, data, and findings together from various disciplines. Although the intercultural competence training course spans across the gamut of disciplines, it is based primarily on findings and theories in human/cultural geography, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, medical sciences, and business/management.

In order to judge the scalability of this course and to understand the effect that different durations/intensity of intentional intercultural competence training has on students, for this study, training courses varied in length from 40 lessons down to 8 lessons. Intensity was measured by the number of times the course meets, with 40 times being the most intensive, 20 times intermediate, and 8 times being the least. The three courses received the same breadth of information regardless of intensity. The longer the course/higher the intensity, the more depth of information/intervention used in the course, as cultural learning is difficult to internalize and requires repetition and practice.

In terms of assessing intercultural competence, there are dozens if not hundreds of assessment tools. Deciding on which instrument to use is a difficult task as many of the assessment tools cost. Deardorff’s 2009 edited book on intercultural competence creates an exhaustive list of all the possible instruments that might be used to assess global mindsets, intercultural competence, cultural sensitivity, and global mindedness.¹⁸ Using this list to compare recommended assessment tools for the purpose of this study there remained a handful of assessments that aligned. Of these tools none have been validated more rigorously or published on as often as the IDI. However, like the other tools, the IDI costs money per assessment, which can be prohibitive if using year over year for large sample groups.

Methods

The original research was designed to take place over the course of two years in order to have a robust sample size, and the ability to demonstrate repeatability year over year. However, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions in 2020 and 2021, all study abroad trips were canceled and associated courses, such as intercultural competence training courses that were designed to prepare students to study abroad, were canceled. Consequently, the 2019 data set is the only one used in this paper. The research design used a total of six groups, a 40-lesson group (40a), a 40-lesson control group (40b), a 20-lesson group (20a), a 20-lesson control group (20b), an 8-lesson group (8a), and an 8-lesson control group (8b), all taught during the spring 2019 semester. Each group took a pre-course IDI assessment before the course started, and a post-course IDI assessment immediately upon finishing the course. The groups are described in detail here:

Group 40a (n 23): 40 lessons, 53 minutes each (a semester-long 3-credit course). Students enrolled in the spring semester 2019 cultural training geography special topics course (GEO 495, taught by the author). Students received intentional intercultural competence training over the course of 40 lessons.

Group 40b (n 20): Students enrolled in the spring semester GEO 310 cartography course. The students received no intentional intercultural competence training and served as the control group against group 40a.

Group 20a (n 23): 20 lessons, 53 minutes each (a one-credit, half-semester course). Students were enrolled into this course if they were selected for a 2019 fall semester Cadet Semester Study Abroad Program (CSSAP) to a civilian university. Students received intentional intercultural competence training over 20 lessons.

Group 20b (n 7): These students serve as a good control group against 20a because students in this group were selected for a 2019 fall semester Cadet Semester Exchange Abroad Program (CSEAP) to a military university. These students received no intentional intercultural competence training.

Group 8a (n 17): 8 lessons, 53 minutes each. Students were enrolled into this course if they were selected for a 2019 summer three-week Cadet Summer Language Immersion Program (CSLIP) to Munich, Germany (n 9) or Morocco (n 8, half of the Moroccan group). Students received intentional intercultural competence training over 8 lessons.

Group 8b (n 16): Students were enrolled into this course if they were selected for a 2019 summer three-week study-abroad program (CSLIP) to Berlin, Germany (n 9) or Morocco (n 8, other half of the Moroccan group). These students serve as a good control group against 8a because they received all of the same training (except for the intentional intercultural competence training) as group 8a because they were going on the same or almost similar trip.

Quantitative Methods

As described above, students were assessed via the administration of the IDI at the beginning of their intercultural competence course (pre-), and at the end of their course (post-). The IDI is the “gold” standard for related research—it has been used in over 100 published articles on the subject and, through these studies, has been proven the most reliable and widely used tool to measure intercultural competence. Pre-, and post- scores will be statistically evaluated using a Paired Sample T-Test and the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to measure the effects of the “interventions” on students’ intercultural competence. The Paired Sample T-Test is the traditional statistical method used for measuring significance between pre- and post- scores and has been used in measuring changes in IDI scores (Keefe [2008]¹⁹ Janeiro [2009])²⁰ in the past, which is why it is used as a method for this research; however, the Paired Sample T-Test assumes that the participants being tested are representative of the general population upon which inferences are being made. In other words, this study would have needed a simple random sample from the population being studied (all USAFA students engaged in a study abroad program in this particular year) and a representative *n* of the students body for a control group in order to effectively use the Paired Sample T-Test. Since this is a small sample pilot study, the participants are not statistically representative of the population upon which inferences are being made and, therefore, there is a need to use non-parametric statistical methods in order to effectively measure for statistically significant changes between pre- and post- IDI scores. Thus, in conjunction with the traditional method of the Paired Sample T-Test, the non-parametric equivalent—the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test—is used, which measures for statistical significance despite the small sample size.

The IDI is a 50-question survey, taking roughly 30 minutes to complete, that quantifies the extent to which a person is culturally competent and culturally sensitive. The “IDI measures intercultural competence on a ‘cultural continuum.’ The cultural continuum describes a set of knowledge/attitude/skill sets or orientations toward cultural difference and commonality that are arrayed along a continuum from the more monocultural mindsets of Denial and Polarization through the transitional orientation of Minimization to the intercultural or global mindsets of Acceptance and Adaptation. The capability of deeply shifting cultural perspective and bridging behavior across cultural differences is most fully achieved when one maintains an Adaptation perspective.”²¹

Five IDI sample questions (below) are provided in an article by Hammer²² and are answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree:

1. People from our culture are less tolerant compared to people from other cultures.
2. People from our culture are lazier than people from other cultures.
3. Our common humanity deserves more attention than culture difference.
4. Human behavior worldwide should be governed by natural and universal ideas of right and wrong.
5. I evaluate situations in my own culture based on my experiences and knowledge of other cultures.

Qualitative Methods

On the last day of instruction for 40a, 20a, and 8a groups, students participated in a 15-minute end-of-course unstructured focus group where they were asked to provide feedback about the course. The instructor provided no prompts, and only took notes on the students' comments. Notes were compiled across the courses and analyzed for themes using content analysis.

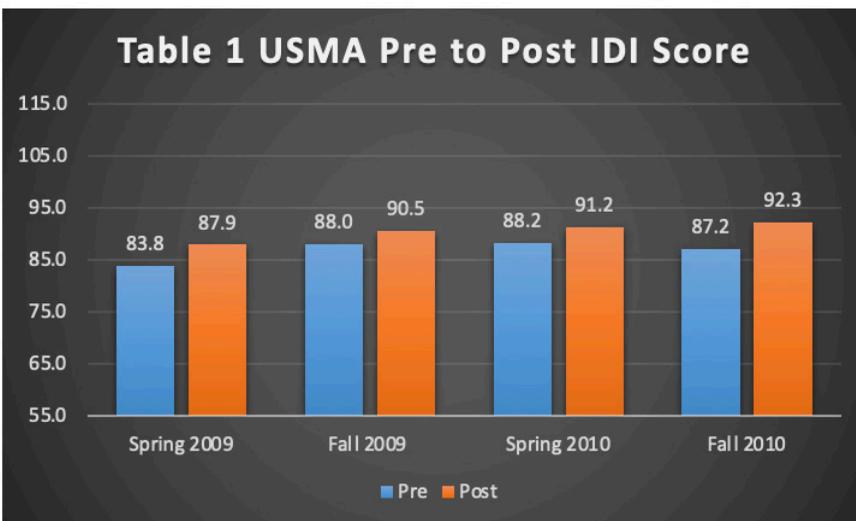
Limitations

Students selected to participate in this study had cause to want to learn the material, as they were preparing to participate in a study abroad program. This self-selection bias may influence results and results may not be the same if the course were taught to a simple-random sample chosen from the student body.

Another limiting factor is the fact that this research design relies solely on the IDI upon which to determine the effectiveness of the course. There may be other outcomes that would not be measured by the IDI, and it is hoped that the focus groups may focus attention on potential future research avenues for such research.

Results

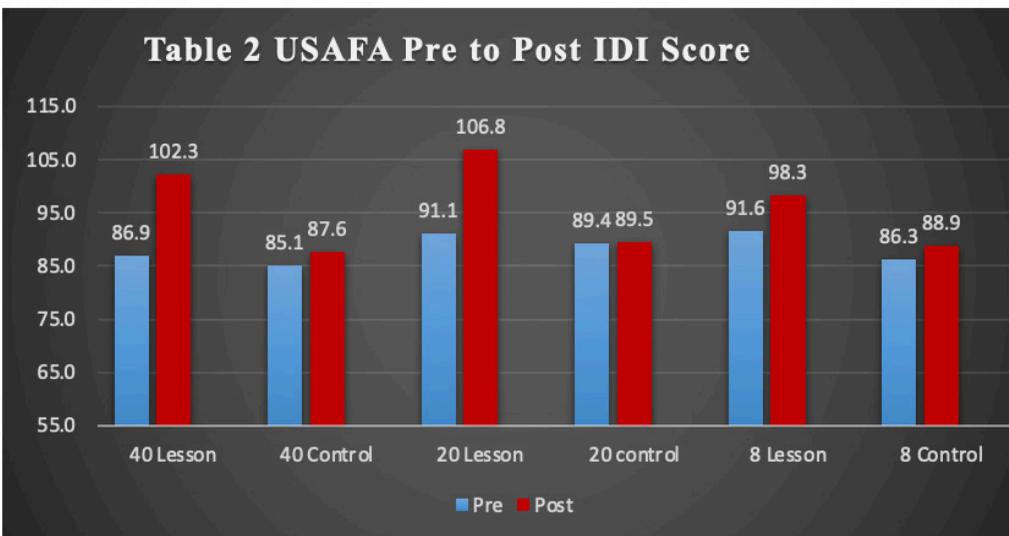
First, to provide some context about IDI scores, USMA runs semester-long study abroad programs similar to those run by USAFA. USMA uses the IDI to measure cadet changes in intercultural competence pre-study abroad and post-study abroad. USMA, in 2013, published results of data collected over the course of four semesters.²³ On average, USMA students participating in a semester-long study abroad program increased 3.68 points on the IDI pre- to post- (see Table 1). These results provide a reference point with which to understand the average increase of students' cultural competence when students are left to their "own devices," receiving no intentional intercultural competence training pre-study abroad.



Students at USAFA in Group 40a had an average pre-course score of 86.91, and an average post-course score of 102.26, an increase of 15.35. Group 40b, serving as the control group to Group 40a had an average pre- score of 85.05, and an average post- score of 87.64, an increase of 2.59.

Group 20a had an average pre-course score of 91.12, and an average post-course score of 106.80, an increase of 15.68. Group 20b, serving as the control group to Group 20a had an average pre- score of 89.37, and an average post- score of 89.46, an increase of 0.9.

Group 8a had an average pre-course score of 91.56, and an average post-course score of 98.31, an increase of 6.75. Group 8b, serving as the control group to Group 8a had an average pre- score of 86.32, and an average post- score of 88.87, an increase of 2.55.



Using the statistical analysis of the Paired Sample T-Test and the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test, group 40a, 20a, and 8a measured with a p value <.001 on both tests. All three groups that received intentional intercultural competence training had statistically significant increases in their intercultural competence pre- to post-. The three control groups had no significant change as all measured within the standard error of measurement for the IDI which is 3.66.

Qualitative Results

Content analysis of the end-of-course unstructured focus groups provided an unexpected result. Of the 63 students that participated, 38 students either explicitly commented on or agreed with comments made by other students, stating that the lessons learned in course helped them understand the need for empathy and perspective taking which they believe increased their empathetic leadership skills. Students commented that

they now had a better understanding of how to incorporate empathetic leadership skills and the importance of this approach in their respective squadrons.

Another important aspect that came up in the qualitative responses that the majority of students agreed with was that students felt the material was important to learn for their overall military careers, that they were intrinsically motivated to learn, with one student commenting, “I internalized this material because I felt it is important to our careers outside of the academy, for when we are stationed in foreign countries, or working with various cultures during mission assignments, much more than other classes at the academy.”²⁴

Conclusion

This research project began by identifying three needs: (1) what intercultural competence outcomes are being achieved, if any, (2) the effects of intentional intercultural competence training, and (3) whether or not training can or even should be scaled to the entire cadet wing.

First, what intercultural competence outcomes are being achieved at a U.S. service academy? The ideal research would assess students from their freshman year to their senior year. This pilot study had a small sample size and only assessed students during the course of a semester, half semester, and 8 lessons. Despite the severe limitations, the findings still give an insight as to what might be the case across the student body—that they measure no significant gains in intercultural competence, as was demonstrated by the three control groups. This shows, coupled with the findings of the Georgetown Consortium Project that students do not tend to increase in intercultural competence when left to their own devices, that intentional intercultural competence training is merited.

The second aspect of this paper aimed to measure the effects of intentional intercultural competence training on cadets. The students that received intercultural competence training increased dramatically in intercultural competence as measured by the IDI. Such double-digit increases as were seen in groups 40a and 20a have never been published on before. These findings are truly remarkable and much higher than comparative studies. Through qualitative responses we also conclude that intercultural competence training may have a positive impact on leadership skills, increasing cadets’ ability to use empathetic leadership, and a greater ability to work with others from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Third, this paper sought to understand the effects of scaling intercultural competence training, and whether or not it is suitable and/or necessary to be taught to the entire student body. This study found that purposeful intercultural competence training, as conducted by the author, has a significant impact on students’ intercultural competence, showing that although the 20-lesson content is compressed from the 40-lesson content, the students were able to extrapolate similar outcomes in intercultural competence. Thus, 20-lesson intercultural competence training can be as effective as 40-lesson intercultural competence training. The 8-lesson group demonstrates that as content is further compressed and the

amount of time to understand these concepts limited, that intercultural competence goes down concomitantly. Still, the 8-lesson group increased by 6.75, which is statistically significant and almost double that of USMA's semester-long study abroad intercultural competence increase. Therefore, intercultural competence training is scalable, with greatest effects sustained at the 20-lesson level, but still significant effects at the 8-lesson level. This makes intercultural training courses an efficient and effective option at the 8-lesson level.

Should intercultural competence courses be taught to the entire student body? The literature states, and this study suggests, with limited data, that students are not likely to increase their intercultural competence through the academy curriculum. Not because the curriculum is poor, but because intercultural competence increase requires purposeful instruction. In subsequent research conducted on study abroad programs, it has been shown that cadets continue to increase in intercultural competence after having had the 20- or 8-lesson course. Focus group feedback suggests that students were able to use the tools and methods learned in the course while on their study abroad and consequently were able to increase their ability to interact with the host culture leading to even greater increases in intercultural competence.

Despite the selection bias limitations of this research that used only students who were probably already interested in the topic of intercultural competence, this data suggests that as students learn intercultural competence methods, they might be able to continue to implement these methods across their academy courses and leadership experiences. In other words, the service academy curriculum may not provide conspicuous instruction on intercultural competence, but after taking a course in intercultural competence, students may be provided the tools to identify akin information across the curriculum and their experiences to further develop their intercultural competence.

If U.S. service academies have and value intercultural competence as an academy outcome, and as much as an 8-lesson course can increase cadets' intercultural competence significantly, along with potential increases in empathetic leadership skills, then academies should consider purposeful instruction in intercultural competence in order to meet not only the institutional learning outcome but an outcome that may be a tremendous benefit to the twenty-first-century soldier.

Future Research

This research project is part of a greater research endeavor that seeks to understand not only the effects of an intentional intercultural competence training course, but the effects of the course on students participating in a subsequent study abroad program. Groups 20a, 20b, 8a, and 8b were assessed for a third time upon the return from their respective study abroad programs. Results demonstrated that students not only retained their intercultural competence but also continued to increase their intercultural competence score through the duration of their study abroad program. Once COVID-19 travel restrictions are lifted

and study abroad programs re-commence, a repeated study will be conducted to measure this phenomenon year over year. Due to these astounding results the author is now working with the U.S. Air Force International Affairs Office (SAF/IA) to develop an 8-lesson online course for Foreign Area Officers (FAO) to take before they do their in-region host country training. Research will be conducted on the effectiveness of an online course, and the effect that the training has on FAOs post- in-region host country training.

Kelly Lemmons, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He received his bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University, his master's degree from the University of Massachusetts, and his Ph.D. from Texas A&M University. He currently is conducting research within cultural geography, foreign area studies, and cultural immersion programs, with past publications on the topics of "Overcoming the Hurdle of Short-term Study Abroad by Preparing Students to Have Meaningful Cultural Experiences," "Culture and the Path of Least Resistance," and "Using Repeat Photography to Overcome Cultural Hurdles." He also is currently conducting research with the U.S. Air Force to develop online cultural training courses for FAOs.

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24. Student 1 Group 40a, focus group conducted by Dr. Kelly Lemmons, May 3, 2019.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The journal accepts a manuscript on the understanding that its content is original and that it has not been accepted for publication or review elsewhere. All papers will undergo anonymous peer review. The reviewers, who are selected based on their expertise in the area of the submitted papers, will evaluate the manuscripts on the basis of creativity, quality of scholarship, and policy relevance. Once accepted for publication, copyright resides with the journal. Authors should submit their manuscripts via e-mail to peaceandwar@norwich.edu

The length of a research article should be between 7,000 and 9,000 words (student papers: 5,000-7,000 words), including endnotes and references. Each article must include an abstract of less than 200 words and 5-6 keywords. All manuscripts should be submitted in Microsoft Word format, and text should be double-spaced, Times New Roman font point 12 (including references) and left justified.

SPELLING AND STYLE: Note that we conform to *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and *The Chicago Manual of Style* in matters of spelling, abbreviation, punctuation, etc. On first use of an acronym or abbreviation in the manuscript, please spell it out in full.

FIGURES AND TABLES: All figures and tables should be professional in appearance. Provide figures as separate data files instead of as pictures embedded within the Word document. Location of illustrations should be indicated by a note in the text (e.g., "Table 1 about here").

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: authors must include a brief biographical sketch, including institutional affiliation, primary publications, and relevant experience. Length should be 200 words or less.

REFERENCES: JPWS uses *The Chicago Manual of Style's* notes and bibliography system with endnotes. For further information on references, please consult *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition.

Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33

Book chapters: Terence Roehrig, "Stability or Instability? The US Response to North Korean Weapons," in *North Korea and Nuclear Weapons: Entering the New Era of Deterrence*, eds., Sung Chull Kim and Michael Cohen (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 129-56.

Journal articles: Friedberg, Aaron, "The Future U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 32, no. 2 (2005): 7-35.

Online sources: Bonenberger, Adrian, "The War No One Notices in Ukraine," *New York Times*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/opinion/ukraine-russia.html>.

For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference.
Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*, 73-78.
Roehrig, "Stability or Instability?," 131.

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