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The Foreign Area Officer is one of DoD’s most rapidly expanding officer communities, and for good reason. Most experts agree that in today’s global society, the United States must enhance its diplomatic relationships with nations large and small, many with incredibly diverse populations. And to do that, you must have an intimate knowledge of the people who live there.

“Relationships with different countries really come down to individual relations with the people in that country, and we look to the Foreign Area Officer to be the expert on the culture, the language, the history and the type of nation we’re dealing with,” said Pete Verga, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Integration.

In late 2008, it was this very notion that compelled then Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Dr. David Chu, to contact the joint chiefs of staff, all regional commanders, and all assistant and under secretaries of defense, among others, to strongly encourage them to support advanced continuing education for their respective FAO programs.

“It is not enough to build a cadre of FAOs,” he said, “we must also support them throughout their careers and provide options for them to sustain and enhance their expertise to meet the ever-changing demands of the global environment.”

Just a short time later, Chu selected NPS to develop the Joint FAO Skill Sustainment Pilot Program (JFSSPP), a comprehensive educational and training program that provides this much-needed support through intensive educational programs, as well as engaging those FAOs stationed around the world via the Internet.

“This program is dedicated to the support of an essential core of regional experts across the armed services,” said Dr. Tristan James Mabry, Executive Director of the JFSSPP. “We teach, we train, and we support a growing community of professionals, the Foreign Area Officer.”

The program consists of two primary components, an intensive educational program – half held on the NPS campus and half in country – tailored to the specific regions FAOs operate in, and FAOweb, a blossoming online portal of critical and diverse cultural information and language resources.

“When a FAO is assigned to a Combatant Command, the Pentagon, the Joint Staff or the Office of the Secretary of Defense] they have specific skills they’ve been trained in,” explained Army Col. Robert Duggleby, FAO and U.S. Defense Attaché for Budapest, Hungary. “Specifically for senior FAOs, they have a tendency to get away from their basic FAO skills, like language. I think it’s important that if they can’t sustain those while they’re in these busy jobs – [where] they just don’t have the time – that they get an opportunity to break away,” he added. Duggleby was part of the inaugural Eurasia track course held late last year.

“Overall assessment of the Joint FAO Skill Sustainment Pilot Program is highly positive,” said Army Lt. Col. Edward Bonfey, currently stationed at the U.S. Defense Attaché Office in Bogota, Colombia and a participant in JFSSPP’s latest education focused on Latin America. “This venue offers one of the only opportunities for all FAOs to take a step back from our current assignments and ponder the future of our region, careers, and the FAO service-based training and development programs. In the current global environment the demand for regionally-trained and culturally-aware political-military experts is crucial.”

Another participant in the Latin American program, Army Lt. Col. Mathew Anderson, currently stationed at Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Pentagon noted, “High points for me were building and reinforcing professional contacts and relationships with U.S. services and host nation officers and the seminars in Peru that discussed relevant topics in the target language.

“A great thing about this program is that we can leverage the technology that’s out there, use of the Internet, various programs the Defense Language Institute [also in Monterey] has, and great ways to collaborate to improve the training,” said Air Force Lt. Col. Chris Moffet, FAO and Air Force Academy Instructor.

In addition to the education programs, invaluable information and training will be distributed to officers in the field and fleet via the program’s portal, FAOweb, which launched in full in February of this year. FAOweb will not only deliver self-paced, job-relevant education to FAOs worldwide, but will also foster a tighter joint community through increased and instantaneous interaction. And have it all available exactly where they need it, where they operate.

“This is what FAOweb is all about – providing critical resources to Foreign Area Officers in the field,” Mabry added.

Created by NPS’ JFSSPP office, with technical development by the university’s Information Technology and Communications Services (ITACS), FAOweb offers myriad professional networking and cultural education programs previously unavailable to this rapidly expanding community of warrior-diplomats.

“FAOweb is a breakthrough. It is exactly the right catalyst to create a joint community for Foreign Area Officers,” said Army Col. Mark Chakwin, U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer Chair and NPS’ senior FAO. “At last, all FAOs from all Services in all duty assignments, anywhere, can access our professional world – for language, for professional exchanges, for education, or even for fun,” he continued.

“We are global and operate in foreign cultures to shape or support U.S. defense efforts. We need a common digital space to share best practices, to train at different paces, and to network our profession. Until now, FAO skills and knowledge were acquired only through long years in diverse assignments, this will raise the overall awareness and skills level of FAOs and we can start creating a common operating picture of our entire career field,” added Chakwin.

From the IT development team’s perspective, FAOweb provided a unique aspect to the work ITACS typically provides while supporting the educational quality at NPS.

“In IT’s role of supporting the educational mission of NPS, we often see the rewards for our efforts on campus, but are rarely in the position to see the benefits of our services with officers operating out in the field,” said Jon Russell, NPS Director of Academic and Media Systems. “FAOweb was an avowed contrast to this. We were able to create something.

http://www.nps.edu/Academics/Schools/SIGS/News/JFSSPP_overview.html
director of academic and media systems. “FAOweb was an exciting contrast to this. We were able to create something that provided immediate impact to people performing critical work in some of the world’s most tumultuous regions. Before we even launched, FAOs operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan contacted us, imploring us to launch their portion of the site early. We were fortunately able to do that, and being able to support these officers was very satisfying for our team.”

Ultimately, the JFSSPP program is about connecting FAOs from every service, allowing the community to improve and unify through active engagement.

“For the FAOs from the different services to get together in an environment where they can openly talk about each other’s experiences, jobs, and then just enlighten each other with what they’re doing out there in the field – that’s the way we all get better at what we do,” said Duggleby.