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In today's ever-changing academic and global security environment, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) quickly adapted and successfully overcame many challenges that unfurled at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As an institute committed to developing ethical leaders to strengthen democratic partnership in the Western Hemisphere, WHINSEC utilized social media to enhance learning and communication in a unique academic environment.

Surrounded by the pandemic's challenges, this environment presented an urgent opportunity for the Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC) faculty to enhance information sharing through virtual military communities. The use of social media became a useful venue and a valuable tool that built the bridge within WHINSEC to navigate the gap of connection created by the pandemic. Furthermore, we witnessed the unique benefits that emerge when a multicultural group engages in team-oriented work via social media. The use of social media paved the way to myriad opportunities to connect, enhance, learn, adapt, and effectively fill the void of communication precipitated by the pandemic-induced crisis.

### **Multiple Cultures Meet a Challenge Together**

WHINSEC CGSOC is a 47-week course [designed to educate and train intermediate-level military](#), interagency, and partner-nation officers to be prepared to operate in joint, interagency, and multinational environments as field grade commanders and staff officers. This interrelationship provided a unique cultural diversity environment within the WHINSEC CGSOC during the pandemic. For instance, the faculty is composed of selected instructors from Western Hemisphere countries including Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and the United States. These instructors brilliantly collaborated and confronted the challenge of creating a highly interactive setting that inspired sharing, critical thinking, discussions, and participation. Through applications or platforms such as Blackboard, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and more, the faculty learned about exploring and forming a dynamic environment that led to the creation of an internet-enabled group among students, faculty, and leaders. This changing relationship between the faculty, the students, and technology streamlined the multicultural interaction amidst barriers associated with COVID-19 pandemic.

WHINSEC, since its establishment in 2001, has traditionally relied upon in-person education tailored to fit its multicultural academic approach. Despite the unexpected task of a time-sensitive transition to a virtual classroom setting, WHINSEC was able to complete and deliver a transparent switch within a record-setting two days.

## **Making Changes**

Our institute's Education Technology (Ed Tech) department effectively handled the transition by managing our Blackboard learning system to bridge our virtual learning space. During those two days, the Ed Tech department implemented Blackboard Ultra and conducted rigorous faculty training that allowed students to acquire class lectures and share videos and audio while enhancing collaboration. However, because the majority of the faculty are not digital natives (most are Generation X), CGSOC faced several challenges. Simply put, we were not as tech ready as we thought. As a faculty, we had to face the challenges of learning quickly and adapting to new technical skills due to different expectations. However, our multicultural military mindset and background brought us together and became integral in reaching our goal of providing a quality academic platform and environment.

As virtual learning became the norm to reach our students, challenges such as network reliability and cybersecurity coupled with health and personal issues from instructors and students were areas of concern. At this point, the goal of providing quality education, proper resources, and keeping students constantly motivated became difficult and mired with

uncertainty. A compelling need to employ tools for online teaching arose within the organization. To foster effective communication between instructors and students, our team of instructors achieved that objective by employing a series of collaboration strategies. To stimulate creativity and promote a sense of community, instructors welcomed ideas from faculty and students by expressing that a good idea can emerge from anywhere within our organization regardless of rank or country. For example, instructors and students shared links on a variety of current events, new trends, and technology related to their countries and other regions. These links generated active debates and ideas that enhanced our communication while expanding our knowledge and creativity. Therefore, keeping an open-minded approach to diverse perspectives from different military backgrounds was critical to exploring new ways of thinking.

Even though Blackboard is our current learning management system, the WhatsApp application has become a valuable secondary informal source to share real-time information between students and instructors. As a result, CGSOC students and instructors combined Blackboard and WhatsApp to enhance their learning and sharing experience. The CGSOC department is divided into different instructor/student teams. Therefore, each department created its own WhatsApp group based on purpose.

Although these groups were primarily academic-related, they also included various extracurricular and motivational activities, which played an important role in raising collective morale and welfare. For example, regarding extracurricular and motivational activities, the instructors and students utilized their WhatsApp groups to spread inspirational quotes and announcements for class team sports, personal fitness, and family events. We also had situations in which several students faced adversity when dealing with the loss of a loved one. During these unfortunate life events, the class relied on social media to provide help and emotional support during their time of grief. Group members constantly cheered each other up throughout unexpected personal situations, courses, and exercises.

### **Cultural Adaptability of Social Media**

Whether the communication was in English, Spanish, or a haphazard mixture of both, these online groups provided an effective tool for interaction in a multicultural professional setting. Additionally, these interactions assisted many of our international students and instructors in learning or practicing their English skills. For example, simple “Spanglish” phrases such as “today tenemos un meeting,” “por favor enviame el link,” “necesito un update para mi computer,” or “quiero hacer un briefing en Powerpoint” created a useful and fun way for them to learn alongside creative emojis showing their country’s military customs, flags and more. Additionally, these interactions and exposure to the English

language benefited them when conducting non-work-related aspects such as running errands with their families or traveling within the United States.

Another challenge that needed attention was cybersecurity. With the concern of not interrupting classes, WHINSEC had to quickly embrace an online learning environment that presented cybersecurity challenges. As a result, we had to reassess our online teaching strategies to avoid compromising class materials or information. This became a challenge for faculty and students, especially when human errors are always present.

However, in this area, WHINSEC did an excellent job by constantly providing training and educating the faculty, students, and staff on the vulnerabilities and threats within our environment. For example, our training emphasized areas such as protecting controlled unclassified information, personally identifiable information, and phishing attacks. Additionally, the CGOSC faculty and students were proactive by sending constant security awareness messages through WhatsApp and short message service (SMS) to keep everyone informed. Simple but well-timed reminders such as “think before clicking or posting,” “use a unique password,” and “never reply to a spammer” led to security conversations within our different teams resulting in a better understanding of everyone’s role across our organization. Nevertheless, we are always aware that [the online learning environment still struggles with security](#) and requires constant training and vigilance.

Despite the challenges, opportunities also emerged and created advantages in using social media. First, there was a reduction in the number of sick personnel. As students stayed home, the combination of these platforms reduced the risk of getting or transmitting the infections to others. Second, the instructor-student communication became more effective as both groups continued to address social and emotional needs, which encouraged a stronger and more reliable support network. For example, this support network was critical in a time when [digital fatigue](#), excessive screen time, lack of focus, and other distractions were taking a toll on the students. Additionally, despite the students not always having reliable home internet connectivity, the use of social media platforms became a key to empowering the instructors and students to maintain supportive interactions. It was very important that every team acknowledged every member and recognized everyone’s efforts to demonstrate caring and friendship.

## **The Way Forward**

As the pandemic recedes, the CGSOC faculty is committed to providing a full-time in-person learning experience. However, strategies used throughout the pandemic will continue to be beneficial in traditional work and study environments. For example, if a student tests

positive and needs to quarantine, the faculty can quickly implement virtual learning during the quarantine period. In this case, the student continues to actively participate in daily class activities, including exercises and briefings. The already established delivery of instruction will allow for uninterrupted access to rigorous learning until the student physically returns to the classroom. Equipped with our substantial experience that virtual learning can be effective, these practices will remain in our methodology in the near future. In the meantime, as faculty, we will continue to adapt and practice our teaching/learning approach by employing virtual and hybrid interactions supported by social media communication methods.

Comprehensively, social media platforms effectively contributed to the fulfillment of WHINSEC's mission by maintaining training and continuous education while achieving security cooperation in the Western Hemisphere. Through a team effort, the faculty and students found the use of social media positive. In addition, they proved that meaningful academic growth can still occur outside the traditional confines of a physical classroom.

In WHINSEC, the challenges of the pandemic charted a course into the future. During this time, faculty learned how to better support instructors and students in extenuating circumstances and continue to cultivate partnerships across the Western Hemisphere. When it comes to social media, WHINSEC will continue to employ effective pedagogical strategies while coping with constant cybersecurity challenges and the fast-changing features of social media platforms. "Liberty, Peace and Fraternity" is the institute's motto. Therefore, whether in a virtual or in-person academic environment, we are postured to promote transparency, trust, and cooperation among participating nations to strengthen democratic values, respect for rights, and knowledge and understanding of U.S. customs and traditions.

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