



Military's war colleges take steep budget hits

By Merrill D'Arezzo
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As the Defense Department grapples with cutbacks across its broad budget, one of the military's premiere war colleges is feeling the pinch, with a funding drop of 29 percent in the past few years.

But some critics say that even at reduced levels, professional military education is still receiving more than enough funding.

National Defense University, based at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C., has trained scores of future generals over the years, including former Secretary of State and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs retired Gen. Colin Powell, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe retired Gen. Wesley Clark and former Army Chief of Staff and Veterans Affairs Secretary retired Gen. Eric Shinseki.

The National War College and the Eisenhower School, two of the colleges within NDU, train select military and civilian students in big-picture national security strategy, studying the use of all instruments of national power — military, economic, diplomatic and financial — to achieve national goals, said Dr. Joseph J. Collins, director of NDU's Center for Complex Operations.

Dr. David Tretler, a professor and former dean at the National War College, said that school offers an intensive 10-month higher education training program. The courses include strategy, ethics and leadership as well as war and statecraft and non-military instruments of power, which Collins said require up to 80 hours of classwork each.

But NDU's total budget request for fiscal 2015 is \$73.6 million for fiscal 2015, down by \$29.4 million since 2010.

"We've had a tough last few years," Collins said. "We have, as an institution, been slimmed down quite a bit to deal with reduction in funds."

That's being seen in a number of ways. At the National War College, for example, it has meant scaling back programming for students, research support, war-gaming capabilities and even the number of students enrolled, from 224 to 208, Collins said.

"The powers that be essentially said, 'Big cut is coming and we want you to take the cut here in research and other activities and ... to the greatest extent possible, insulate the schoolhouse from the cuts.' And so, internally there was real adjustment," Collins said.

Travel funds that allowed students to visit senior officials and policymakers in foreign countries and experience problems first-hand have been reduced, Tretler said.

The school also could use a “much more robust gaming and simulation center that could model real world national security strategic challenges,” he said, noting that modern national security issues are so complex that the amount of computer power it would take to simulate real events to challenge students costs “big money.”

NDU spokesman Mark Phillips did not respond to requests for comment.

If Congress leaves in place the mandatory budget cuts known as sequestration, further budget cutbacks could mean furloughing employees, which would limit the type of services offered to students. More cuts in student enrollment and the length of programs, Tretler said.

But some critics say the number of officers attending military war colleges may still be too high. “We want our officers to be well educated and to participate in intellectual lives as they advance in the ranks,” said Benjamin H. Friedman, a defense and homeland security research fellow at the libertarian CATO Institute.

But “not everybody who gets promoted to lieutenant colonel needs to go to a war college,” he said. “Sometimes, we are wasting labor.”

Collins, however, said the bottom line for NDU is that “when you have less, you do less.”