

The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation

A History

The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation was established in public law with the signing of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2001, Section 2166, to provide professional education and training to eligible persons of the nations of the Western Hemisphere within the context of the democratic principles set forth in the Charter of the Organization of American States. The Institute opened its doors on January 17, 2001, with Army Colonel Richard D. Downie as the first Director (later changed to commandant).

Paz, Libertad, y Fraternidad—Peace, Liberty, and Brotherhood—is the WHINSEC motto. The Institute's mission also includes fostering mutual knowledge, transparency, confidence, and cooperation by promoting democratic values; respect for human rights; and an understanding of U.S. customs and traditions. Specific subjects set by Congress include leadership development; counterdrug; peacekeeping; democratic sustainment; resource management; and disaster preparedness and relief planning. In every course offered, eight hours of democracy and human rights instruction is mandatory.

The Institute is a Department of Defense facility. The Secretary of Defense named the Secretary of the Army as the executive agent for the operation of the institute; the Secretary of Defense retains oversight responsibilities. Oversight includes an independent, federally chartered Board of Visitors with members of Congress and eminent clergy, academicians, and business persons. (The annual reports of the Board of Visitors can be found on the federal committee website.)

Faculty and staff are composed of members of all the armed services of the United States and other countries; other U.S. government agencies, including the State Department and the Drug Enforcement Agency; civilian professors; visiting researchers and lecturers called Fellows; and interns. This multi-service and multinational team educated 780 students during 2001, 800 in 2002, 1190 in 2003, and another 995 in 2004. Students are men and women—military, law enforcement, and civilians—taking one of 24 professional courses that range from NCO Professional Development to a fully accredited Command and General Staff Officer Course. These courses range in length from two weeks to 49 weeks long.

To fulfill its requirement for fostering 'transparency, confidence and cooperation,' the Institute employs a variety of activities beyond the classroom. The Field Studies Program extends the familiarization with US customs and culture with trips to local government as a minimum, with longer courses also visiting state government and even national government branches, plus sites of cultural interest such as Andersonville NHS, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial, and the Carter Center. WHINSEC offers annually a Democracy and Human Rights Week, the initial academic week of the CGSOC. In the Festival of the Hemisphere, activities acquaint the local communities and schools with the cultures of our region.

In 2002, and again in 2004, the American Council on Education sent a team to evaluate all courses, assigning value to each that could be used in appropriate civilian degree programs. Each course was determined to be eligible for credits, including six courses that have graduate-level value. Troy (AL) University, Norwich (VT) University, Florida International University, and Webster (MO) University are applying these credits to their students' programs. Jones International University, an accredited online school, applies credits to four Masters Programs.

As with every military organization, uniformed personnel are rotated into and out of WHINSEC. This is true of the commandant as well, so on March 11, 2004, Col. Downie passed command of the institute to Col. Gilberto R. Pérez, an Army Special Forces Officer with extensive experience in Latin America.

Each year, a person noted for achievements in the struggle to attain freedom and respect for the peoples of the Western Hemisphere presents the Simon Bolivar Democracy and Human Rights Lecture, and is given a bust of the Great Liberator. Jorge Santistevan de Noriega, former ombudsman from Peru, was recognized in January 2002 for his life-long efforts in defense of civil liberties and in the resolution of conflicts. Dr. Aura Celeste Fernandez Rodriguez of the Dominican Republic, a champion in the efforts to protect children from abuse and families from violence, was honored in October, 2002. Dr. José Adán Guerra Pastora, Nicaragua's Minister of Defense, spoke in January 2004. Dr. Guerra has been a dedicated advocate for removing land mines, and for compensating victims of land mines. Ambassador Luigi R. Einaudi, acting Secretary General of the Organization of American States, presented the lecture in March, 2005, and was honored for his extensive record of diplomacy and peace-making throughout the region.

The Institute is on the military reservation of Fort Benning, Georgia. It occupies Ridgway Hall, named for Army Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway. This historic building was the headquarters of Fort Benning and the Army's Infantry School from 1935 to 1964, when Infantry Hall opened. Until 1984, Ridgway Hall housed various agencies of Fort Benning; when the Army's School of the Americas left Panama, it was given this building and remained here until December 15, 2000, when it closed.