

# Interdisciplinary Knowledge for a More Secure World

Mershon Center  
for International  
Security Studies



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



## Mission Statement:

The mission of the Mershon Center is to advance interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to international, national, and human security.

# A Strategic Plan: 2019–2023

The nature of international security has changed radically over the past several decades. The line between international, national, and human security has eroded. Issues such as state failure, terrorism, sectarian violence, gray zone conflicts, climate change, and migration have become critical security problems for the United States and other powerful nations.

One of the key characteristics of all of these global challenges is their complexity. The world's problems defy simple categories that universities often place

on the development of knowledge. For example, the political dimensions of terrorist activity cannot be separated from their social, economic, or psychological foundations. Similarly, migration represents an entangled and emergent consequence of political governance, economic development, military conflict, and social structure. Moreover, all of these challenges to our security present a complex combination of normative and legal questions about how our world ought to be ordered as well as empirical and strategic questions about how to get there.

Participants in the What is Realist Foreign Policy conference, held March 1-2, 2019, at the Mershon Center.

Photo by James DeCamp







Photo provided by Moritz College of Law

Peter Mansoor (left), Gen. Raymond E. Mason Jr. Chair in Military History, played the part of the U.S. president during the Ohio State National Security Simulation organized by Dakota Rudesill in 2016.

Universities have both an obligation and an opportunity to address these complex challenges. While policymakers and practitioners face deadlines that make it difficult to reflect more deeply on underlying patterns that shape our world, those engaged in academic research have been given the time and resources for analysis. Scholars at land-grant universities have an especially strong obligation to ensure that this opportunity is used to serve and engage the wider community.

The Mershon Center is ideally situated to be a place where scholars come together to address the pressing concerns of international, national, and human security. We are privileged to be at The Ohio State

University, a land-grant institution that has become one of the premier public research universities in the world. Moreover, we are fortunate to be surrounded by outstanding scholars and disciplinary programs across the College of Arts and Sciences and the wider university who are deeply engaged in the study of global security issues from both normative and empirical perspectives. The Mershon Center's role should be to serve as a catalyst that brings these resources together and engages them both with one another and with those outside the university who are addressing our security challenges and opportunities.

The resources already exist for us to serve this role. What is needed is a new sense of mission, and a new

sense of intentionality about how we engage with one another and with the world.

We began our strategic review in November 2018 with an analysis of Mershon's current stakeholders, the strengths and weaknesses of various connections that the center has both inside and outside the community, and the assets that those relationships represent. Next, in January, February, and early March 2019 we conducted a series of focus groups and individual interviews among Mershon stakeholders, including faculty, graduate students, and ASC leadership to discuss Mershon's history, its current assets and challenges, and its possible futures. Based on the results of these focus groups, in late March we circulated a survey to all Mershon affiliates about their views of the center and directions for the future. In May and June, Mershon's leadership reflected on the input from all of these stakeholders to develop a plan for maximizing the contribution of the Mershon Center

to Ohio State, to the academic community seeking to understand international security in a global context, and to the wider community seeking to build a safer and more secure world.

This process yielded three key goals that will guide the activity of the Mershon Center for the next several years, along with specific strategies to support the implementation of each of these goals. The strategic goals for the Mershon Center for 2019-2023 are:

- producing interdisciplinary and collaborative research
- building an inclusive and engaged intellectual community
- connecting our research to current challenges in international, national, and human security

The remainder of this document reviews each of these goals and the strategies that the center will pursue in order to achieve them.

A student asks a question at a Mershon faculty panel discussion of "Revolution in the Middle East and the Future of U.S. Foreign Policy" on March 8, 2011.





## Goal 1 – Producing interdisciplinary and collaborative research

As noted above, the world's security challenges defy simple categorization, including the categories that we generally use to define academic research. We are fortunate at Ohio State to have a number of nationally recognized programs across various disciplines that participate at Mershon. The Mershon Center has long been supportive of scholarship from many of these disciplinary perspectives, but most of the research and programming we support does not explicitly seek to bridge any of these disciplinary divides. Most academic work is understandably structured around disciplinary distinctions. But such divisions are inevitably arbitrary when we shift our focus to substantive problems related to security.

Participants in our focus groups and our survey consistently expressed an admiration for interdisciplinary work, but acknowledged that Mershon has often fallen short of this goal. Part of this limitation

is rooted in a lack of emphasis on collaborative projects. The time and expertise required to reach the cutting edge of any disciplinary research program implies that truly excellent interdisciplinary work will almost always be collaborative.

The comparative advantage of the Mershon Center in advancing our understanding of international security lies precisely in the opportunity to bridge disciplinary divides as well as the divide between normative and empirical scholarship so that we can approach common problems from diverse perspectives and learn from one another in the process. Sharing and learning from one another in this way helps us to ask better questions about the nature and sources of international security, supports us in finding more creative answers, and equips us to meet the needs of our complex world.

Principal investigators from around the world gathered in Marrakesh in 2013 to collaborate on the Comparative National Elections Project, supported by the Mershon Center.

Photo provided by Richard Gunther





Mershon affiliated faculty and graduate students discuss a Spring 2013 presentation by Alan Mikhail, professor of history at Yale University.

## Strategy 1 – Research clusters

Mershon's largely multidisciplinary (rather than interdisciplinary) approach has been facilitated to some extent both by a lack of structure in our grant-making program and by our reliance on research foci that do not direct scholars toward common substantive problems across disciplines. Fewer than one in five of the respondents to the strategic planning survey strongly agreed that the Mershon Center has a coherent vision of its scholarly mission. We plan to address this problem by identifying key areas where faculty and graduate student research interests connect across disciplines to address common substantive problems. Focusing on these concrete issues will also allow Mershon to reach out more effectively across campus to identify potential new affiliates among the Ohio State faculty.

Mershon's research clusters will become the foci of our research funding, programming, and efforts to support collaborative activity. As we complete implementation of this plan, our research and programming funds will largely be distributed through the research clusters. Cluster leaders will then have the ability to facilitate interdisciplinary and collaborative work among interested faculty and graduate students. Centering these clusters on substantive security problems will also support cluster leaders in reaching outside the Mershon Center to attract financial support.

Over time the nature and identity of Mershon's research clusters will inevitably evolve in response to faculty interests or changes in the world around us. Mershon leadership will make regular evaluations of



the progress and activity of its research clusters in order to create the best opportunity for excellence at the center and determine whether and when changes in structure are appropriate. But we must choose a near-term focus if the center is to continue to strive for excellence in its research and programming efforts. The center will begin with three substantive research clusters with room for a fourth to be added depending on faculty interests. Our three foci were selected based on extensive consideration of input from the focus groups and survey data. While these foci cannot

fully encompass all the research interests of Mershon's faculty and graduate students, they represent some of the strongest areas of overlapping interests and our best chance to stand out among our peer institutions. For the 2019-2023 period the center's three core research clusters will be:

- American foreign and military policy
- Security and governance
- Recovering from violence

### *American foreign and military policy*

American national security is central to Mershon's mission in a variety of ways. Ralph Mershon himself, of course, was an American military officer, and one of his central aims in funding the center was to promote the civilian study of national security. Gifts for two of the endowed chairs at the center – the Gen. Raymond E.

Mason Jr. Chair and the Wayne Woodrow Hayes Chair – are also closely connected to American national security. Moreover, the research agendas of numerous Mershon affiliates already focus on this critical topic. It is one of the core strengths of the center. We are well-placed to be an international leader in this area.

Panelists (left to right) John Mueller, Peter Mansoor, and Max Boot discuss “America in Afghanistan” with students from the Alexander Hamilton Society on March 3, 2018.







Photo by James DeCamp

Kelly Greenhill of Tufts University speaks during a break in the What is Realist Foreign Policy conference held March 1-2, 2019, at the Mershon Center.

## *Security and governance*

Governance at the international, national, and even local levels has emerged as one of the key facets of international security over the past two decades. Democratic governance, citizenship, and the stability and viability of international law have all become highly contested dimensions of international, national, and human security with the rise of hybrid warfare and gray zone conflict. Both citizens and national, regional, and international institutions are challenged to manage conflict, and/or emerging drivers of conflict,

whilst themselves have become targets of political and informational warfare. Fortunately, the Mershon Center already has key strengths in this area with our long-standing support of the Comparative National Elections Project. Additionally, the center can build on strengths in international law and governance across various scholars in Arts and Sciences as well as Moritz College of Law and elsewhere. Once again, this focus represents an area of excellence for Mershon and an opportunity for leadership.



Photo provided by Department of Theatre

Student actors rehearse for *Forbidden Zones: The Great War*, an original play to mark the 100th anniversary of World War I researched and written by Mershon affiliates Lesley Ferris and Bruno Cabanes and performed in Spring 2017.

### *Recovering from violence*

The collapse of societies in the wake of civil violence, international intervention, or war has become one of the most critical issues in international, national, and human security over the past two decades. Political violence has devastated the lives of millions for years and even decades after the official end to any wars, and the world has struggled to help these societies find the road back to peace and prosperity. The Mershon Center has a long history in the field of peace studies dating back to the pioneering work of Chad Alger. More recently, the endowment of a chair in Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution and the launching of an International Conflict and Peace program provides an opportunity for Mershon to lead in this area. Moreover, Mershon is fortunate to have

numerous scholars working on how societies recover and rebuild in the wake of war and violence. These scholars and their work represent an opportunity for excellence at Mershon.

While these three research clusters will form the foundation of Mershon's activities during 2019-2023, we also recognize that new issues may emerge, or new faculty interests and energy may arise as our strategic plan unfolds. Consequently, Mershon will create a process for the possibility of a fourth research cluster based on faculty and graduate student interest, energy, and resources. Decisions on the establishment of a fourth cluster will be made by a committee of Mershon faculty and staff through an open and competitive application process.



## Strategy 2 – Intentionally interdisciplinary programming

Mershon's programming activities have generally been focused on traditional academic disciplinary talks. While our focus groups and survey data indicated a high level of satisfaction with our events, we also found a consensus view that the events were largely separated by discipline and supplemented the programming of existing departments rather than bringing scholars together across disciplinary lines.

As part of our strategic plan, Mershon will strongly emphasize programming that brings people together across disciplines and perspectives. Doing so will require some changes in format. For example, conferences lend themselves to interdisciplinary

exchange more readily than individual talks because they can include outside experts from different disciplines. In doing so, they are also likely to bring Mershon affiliates in attendance across disciplinary boundaries as well. Inviting a panel of speakers to a single afternoon talk or including Mershon affiliates as discussants across disciplines are also promising avenues for increasing interdisciplinary dialogue. The precise mixture and format of these events will inevitably evolve as we learn and grow, but all of Mershon's research clusters will be placing increased emphasis on interdisciplinary exchange and interaction in their research and programming decisions.

Participants in the 2018 Conflict Resolution Education conference gather at the Ohio Statehouse.

Photo provided by Jennifer Batton

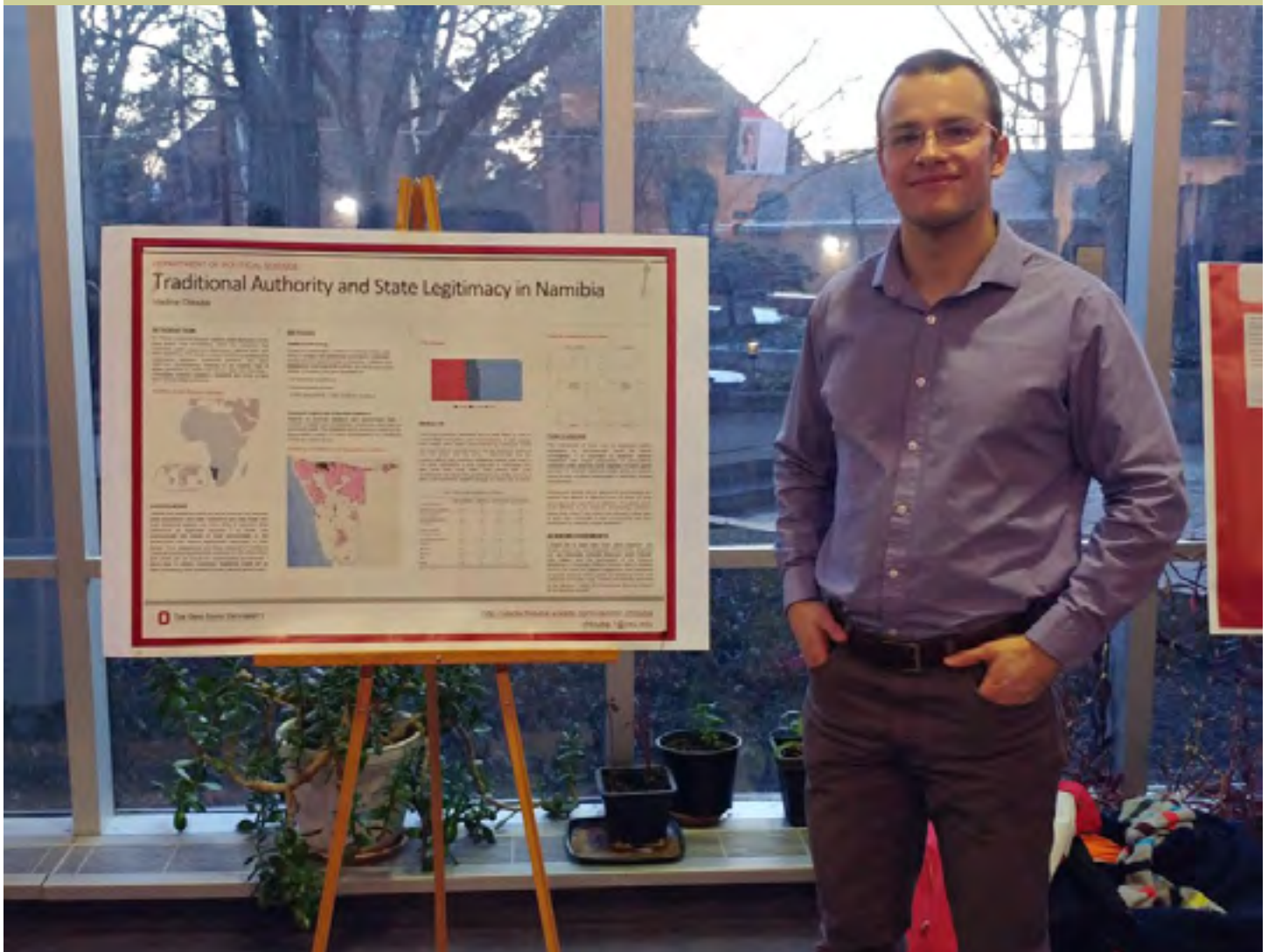


### Strategy 3 – An interdisciplinary community of postdoctoral scholars and graduate students

One of the most prominently mentioned regrets of the past decade across our focus groups was the elimination of Mershon's postdoctoral scholarship program in the wake of the Great Recession. The revival of this program is a central element in promoting interdisciplinarity and fostering intellectual community. Postdoctoral scholars will bring a constant flow of new ideas and approaches to the center. Moreover, as scholars who rely on Mershon as their primary intellectual home, they provide us with energy and initiative to move the center forward. We have already begun to revive this program in 2019-2020 with the invitation of two postdoctoral scholars, one in History and one in Political Science.

As Mershon leadership works to create more flexibility in the annual budget and to collaborate with other programs, we plan to increase the size of our postdoc program over the next several years. As we do so, the postdoctoral program will be structured around our research clusters, and we will develop a program of professional engagement that will connect them with one another and other colleagues at Mershon across various disciplines and substantive interests. As the program continues to develop, we will supplement the postdoctoral scholars with graduate student scholars from Ohio State as well.

Vladimir Chlouba, doctoral student in political science, displays his research poster at the Mershon Center Research Symposium on January 25, 2019.







Mershon Center affiliates gathered for the fall kickoff on September 6, 2019.

## Strategy 4 – Innovative use of collaborative space

Much of the actual space occupied by the Mershon Center has been used as secondary individual offices for selected Mershon affiliates. In the past, this system provided scholars with a workspace away from their disciplinary home that was effective in building a collaborative research center. Over the past two decades, however, work patterns have changed dramatically. Internet accessibility now provides the opportunity to work, write, and collaborate from nearly any location. As a result, despite the productivity of many Mershon affiliates, the physical space of the Mershon Center has been under-utilized for some time.

We plan to become better stewards of our space and promote interaction and collaboration by changing our use of the space in at least three ways. First, we will create reservable work spaces that will open up access to the building to the entire Mershon community. While many individual faculty members may not use secondary offices frequently, Mershon has a very large number of affiliates who do not have access to our space. Many of them might find it productive and beneficial to have the opportunity to reserve space for specific activities or research time. This space could

be used by for individual or group activities such as regular meetings or writing groups.

Second, we will develop space that explicitly supports Mershon's interdisciplinary collaborations. Our research clusters will have the opportunity to identify ways to use Mershon space to support their collaborative research projects. The renovation of these spaces will likely include the installation of new technology and furniture to facilitate collaboration with colleagues at Ohio State or anywhere across the globe. Our survey results indicated a strong interest in the availability of reservable and collaborative work space.

Finally, since some of Mershon's space will continue to be used as individual offices, the center will place a stronger priority on those who will use the space as their primary work area. Given the episodic nature of faculty and graduate student research schedules and projects, this priority might point us toward new models for using some space – such as time-sharing of offices. Moreover, the research clusters will play a key role in identifying postdoctoral scholars, visitors, and graduate students who will use Mershon as their primary work space.

## Goal 2 – Building an inclusive and engaged intellectual community

While Mershon has supported scholarship from a variety of academic disciplines and from both normative and empirical approaches, our focus groups and survey responses indicated a strong sense that certain perspectives are privileged at Mershon. We found very little sense of shared community and belonging, but also encountered a strong desire for more informal engagement with other Mershon

affiliates. In addition to its intrinsic value, building an inclusive sense of community and belonging is also important in reaching our first goal of interdisciplinary interaction and collaboration. A sense of community is key for developing the initiative that promotes sharing ideas, and makes Mershon a place where our affiliates want to invest their creative energy.

Alexander Thompson (left), associate professor of political science, talks with Kelly Yotebieng, doctoral student in anthropology, at the Mershon Research Forum on January 25, 2019.







Photo by Jay LaPrete

Mershon affiliate Allan Silverman, professor of philosophy, listens intently during a 2017 conference on War, Media, and the Public.

## Strategy 1 – Research cluster governance

Since our research clusters will become the central focus of the center’s activity, it is important that we institutionalize inclusiveness and interdisciplinarity in the structure of the clusters. Each cluster will be led by a group of three Mershon affiliates who will be given the opportunity to identify collaborative projects and programming in their area of interest. Each cluster leadership team will include scholars from at least two different disciplines. And Mershon leadership will make a strong and intentional effort to ensure that each team is inclusive across other potential differences in perspective, such as distinctions between the humanities and social

sciences, normative and empirical orientations, qualitative and quantitative research strategies, and gender differences.

Cluster leaders will collaborate with one another across these potential boundaries to produce an annual plan for research and programming as well as a budget for these activities. Cluster leaders will meet with Mershon leadership on a regular basis to approve cluster planning and budgets, to set goals for productivity, to assess progress in achieving those goals, and to agree upon revisions, updates, and new directions as appropriate.

## Strategy 2 – Internally focused programming

Mershon has traditionally focused its programming almost entirely on invitations to external scholars who attend a single event and then return to their home university. We plan to complement these events with functions that are focused solely on Mershon affiliates sharing their ideas and research with one another. We have already begun to move forward with this strategy during the past academic year with our new Friday lunch series that introduced our Mershon affiliates to visitors and new scholars at the center as well as the re-establishment of our Mershon dinners, which give existing Mershon affiliates a chance to update their colleagues on a current research project. These events were very well received, and our focus groups indicated an appetite for more. We will build and expand on our Friday lunch series to incorporate our new post-doctoral scholars and graduate students, and

will expand our Mershon dinners, including reaching out to potential new Mershon graduate student and faculty affiliates around Ohio State.

In addition to internally focused academic events with a concrete agenda, both our focus groups and our survey results indicated a strong interest in informal events that would allow Mershon affiliates to build connections and catch up with one another without imposing a strict agenda or presentation on the participants. Once again, we have already begun to move in this direction with our end of year dinner for Mershon affiliates in May. This event was also well received, and we plan to develop new ways to promote informal and unstructured engagement among Mershon faculty, staff, postdocs, visitors, and graduate students.

Peace Studies Coordinator Teri Murphy (front center) speaks on “A Conflict-Sensitive Framework for Peacebuilding: Lessons from the Field” on February 15, 2019.







Photo provided by Amy Shuman

Mershon affiliates Wendy Hesford (center left) and Amy Shuman (center right), both professors of English, took students to the Columbia University Human Rights Archives in New York in Summer 2016 to conduct research on migration, political asylum and human trafficking.

### Strategy 3 – New models of professional interaction

Mershon events have generally been structured 45-minute presentations by an external visitor followed by another 45 minutes of question and answer interactions between Ohio State faculty and the speaker. This model is useful for certain purposes, but it places strong limits on interaction among Mershon affiliates as nearly all engagement is with the visitor. One could attend most Mershon events and

not speak to another Mershon affiliate or even with the visitor. We plan to explore new models of interaction for sharing knowledge and research both from our visitors and among our local affiliates. These strategies will include encouraging dialogue, perspective taking, exploring implications for current issues, and small group interactions.

## Goal 3 - Connecting Mershon's research to current problems in international, national, and human security

Mershon is an academic center, and we cannot place our energy and focus too narrowly on the events and questions that dominate news headlines. We cannot and should not compete with Washington, D.C., policy think tanks in their effort to comment on every seemingly pressing issue of the day. As an academic center, Mershon's comparative advantage and our best opportunity for excellence is to bring sustained attention to deeper and broader normative and empirical questions that shape international, national, and human security.

At the same time, Mershon's activities can and should be explicitly connected to issues and problems facing

the national and global communities. Ralph Mershon himself was a military officer who cared deeply about civilian engagement with issues of national security. Moreover, as a land-grant institution, Ohio State is committed to developing research that addresses problems and questions facing our broader society. Finally, changes in the fiscal climate for research in higher education necessitate building relationships outside of Ohio State and outside of academia in order to continue our work at the highest level. Making sure that the knowledge we create is relevant to the world outside of academia is both a practical necessity and a moral obligation.

Craig Jenkins (center front), Academy Professor Emeritus of Sociology, met with villagers in 2015 for his project "Climate Change Challenges and Community Adaption in Coastal Bangladesh."

Photo provided by Belmont Forum.







Photo provided by Lindsey Ibanez

Lindsey Ibanez, then a doctoral student in sociology, conducted interviews for her project “Food insecurity in Nicaragua: The role of community and political organizations” in Summer 2013.

## Strategy 1 – Focus on substantive problems

We have intentionally structured our research clusters around substantive global security issues rather than theoretical or conceptual orientations in part because this focus facilitates real world relevance. The conduct of American foreign and military policy, strengthening national and international governance, and helping societies recover from violence are widely viewed as

critical issues outside academia as well as within. Our emphasis on these themes will allow us to engage with policy practitioners, nongovernmental organizations, foundations, civilian and military governmental actors, and many other stakeholders who care deeply about these issues and with whom Mershon and Ohio State share a commitment to addressing them.

## Strategy 2 – Policy-oriented initiatives

The research clusters identified in this strategic plan are already supported by policy-oriented initiatives that have developed organically from Mershon affiliates over the past several years. Each of these initiatives has begun to build a network outside of academia through their funders and/or collaborators based on their interest in current policy problems. For example, the Program for the Realist Study of Foreign Policy is critically concerned with the conduct of American foreign policy and the assumptions that have guided American engagement with the world over the past several decades. The Eurasian Security and Governance Program addresses governance and public diplomacy across Eurasia, and has a grant from the Department of Defense to engage in policy

relevant research on Western European vulnerabilities to Russian disinformation. And finally, the Conflict to Peace Lab brings together scholars, policy makers, local development partners, and interested donors to develop and test the effectiveness of direct interventions that seek to alleviate violence, stabilize fragile societies, and develop positive peace. Mershon will continue to support each of these initiatives as anchors of their respective research clusters, and the initiatives will continue to develop their connections outside the university and academia. Moreover, we will encourage these initiatives to develop knowledge and research products that are useful both inside and outside academia.

Gen. James Mattis, then U.S. Marine Corps commanding general, met with officers at a conference on Hybrid Warfare: The Struggle of Military Forces to Adapt to Complex Opponents on May 14, 2010.







Photo provided by Young Rae Choi

Young Rae Choi, then a doctoral student in geography, conducted interviews for her dissertation on “Capitalism, Conservation, and Coastal Reclamation in 21st Century China” in Summer 2013.

### Strategy 3 – New kinds of professional programming

While Mershon will continue to host and support traditional academic presentations, we will begin to supplement these activities with new kinds of events that intentionally focus on convening academics with policy practitioners in a process of mutual learning and engagement. The Mershon Center has a strong history in this area with regard to engagement with representatives of the U.S. military. We will build upon

this tradition by extending our interactions to include civilian as well as military leadership, and participants from civil society as well as government. The center will develop events that engage academics and practitioners working on various levels of international, national, and human security in a spirit of curiosity and engagement.

## Strategy 4 – Increased grant writing support and outreach

The fiscal environment for academic research these days requires that we partner with outside institutions in order to support our work and increase the scale at which we can operate. Fortunately, our increased focus on policy-related research will place us in a stronger position to compete successfully for that support. Over the past several years the Mershon Center has gradually increased our success in securing external support for our research. All three of our policy initiatives are partnering with external organizations to support their work, and Mershon affiliates are collaborating with external partners in other areas

such as climate change and security as well. We will continue to build on this success by supporting our research clusters and other Mershon affiliates in providing grant seeking and grant writing support. Much can be done to strengthen the relationships between Mershon and the Office of Advancement as well as the Office of Special Projects. Additionally, we will explore the possibility of hiring additional staff resources – possibly in collaboration with other research centers or departments – to assist cluster leadership and other faculty in seeking and securing external support for their research.

Steve Fuller, Auguste Comte Professor of Social Epistemology at University of Warwick, spoke on “The Post-Truth Condition” on April 10, 2018, at the invitation of Alexander Wendt, Ralph D. Mershon Professor of International Security.







Mershon Center affiliates gather in the atrium to kick off the 2019-20 academic year.

## Conclusion

The Mershon Center for International Security Studies at The Ohio State University is ideally situated to address the complex challenges of global security. Our presence at a world-class public research university in the land-grant tradition gives us everything we need to serve as a catalyst to create knowledge for a more secure world. The key to this catalytic role lies in our ability to produce truly interdisciplinary and collaborative scholarship that reflects both excellence in academic research and relevance to the complex and emergent challenges of international, national, and human security in the world around us. It is time for the Mershon Center to take a step in a new direction that will reinvigorate our research and push us back toward a position of leadership in the study of international security.

Once again, our goals for the next four years are:

- producing interdisciplinary and collaborative research
- building an inclusive and engaged intellectual community
- connecting our research to current challenges in international, national, and human security

Pursuing these goals through the strategies we have identified will build on our proud tradition and make Mershon even stronger as we move toward the future. Moreover, achieving these goals will help us to focus our resources and energy on what makes us strongest. Our efforts in this regard represent our best opportunity to support the College of Arts and Sciences and The Ohio State University in their pursuit of research excellence in higher education.


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