Occupying four corners of a room, teams of analysts convened to deliberate and ultimately resolve the dilemma at hand – “Iraq maintains a small missile force and several developmental programs, including one involving an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) possibly intended to deliver biological warfare agents. United States Air Force intelligence believes the UAV’s primary role is reconnaissance.”

Time swiftly ticked away as each unit assigned probabilities to the likelihood Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or a WMD program, based on available intelligence. With tight deadlines and incomplete information, the groups struggled to achieve consensus and make the appropriate assessments and recommendations to protect the United States.

This simulation placed participants in the role of intelligence analysts in the months leading up to the Iraq War, and served as a sobering lesson for the 18 student “analysts” participating in the Rutgers University–Newark (RU-N) Homeland Security Fellowship.

Created three years ago, the fellowship has developed into a collaborative effort among the Graduate School at RU-N, the Rutgers University Institute for Emergency Preparedness and Homeland Security (IEPHS), and the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice (RSCJ) to prepare a new group of individuals interested in current and future issues involving homeland security and intelligence.

“There is clearly a pressing need to get more people involved in the field of homeland security,” said Kyle Farmbry, dean of the Graduate School. “It’s a growing field, it’s a multifaceted field, and it cuts across everything from security from a national intelligence perspective to dealing with disasters, terrorism, and issues of general safety and security.”

For the first time, the 2015-2016 fellowship spans two semesters and includes a "National Security and Intelligence" course in the spring, taught by Ava Majlesi, associate director of the Institute for Emergency Preparedness and Homeland Security, and Dr. Andres Rengifo, associate professor and director of the MA Program at RSCJ. The fellowship is coordinated by Farmbry; John Cohen, an RSCJ professor and senior advisor at the Institute for Emergency Preparedness and Homeland Security; Phil Palin, former senior advisor to the Department of Homeland Security Office of Strategy, Policy, and Risk; and Tom O’Reilly, director of the Rutgers Police Institute. Fellows receive a $1,000 stipend and paid expenses for a workshop in Washington, D.C., where they have the opportunity to learn from top professionals in the field of homeland security. “The fellowship was definitely the networking opportunity that I was looking for,” said Danielle Stovall, a second-year graduate student at RSCJ.

Stovall said that during the two-day workshop in Washington, D.C., the fellows met with senior government officials, including AMTRAK Police Deputy Chief Neil Trugman, and agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. These officials taught the students about international and domestic threats, including supply chain disruption and the exploitation of infrastructure. “[The workshop] really gave us the opportunity to hone in on what areas we would like to do research in, or where to transition our career field,” Stovall said.

Cohen, a former counterterrorism coordinator with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, lends his expertise as the primary coordinator for the workshop. A frequently sought-after media commentator on homeland security, Cohen’s insights have given the fellows heightened awareness as recent horrors like the mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, and the November 2015 Paris attacks become informative case studies.

Cohen emphasized the fellowship’s role as a critical educational supplement to traditional classroom experiences. “It’s one thing to learn about the current terrorist threat environment by reading newspapers and books,” he stated. “It’s another thing to be able to sit down with a senior FBI official who’s responsible for helping to implement our nation’s strategy in those areas and get his or her perspective regarding that same issue.”
Although the fellowship is still young, it is constantly evolving in response to the changing landscape of terrorism and emerging threats to national security.

“We weren’t talking about lone wolf attacks (terrorism committed by a single individual in support of a group) two, three years ago, so that’s been a growing area,” Farmbry noted. “Cybercrime has become more and more of a complex issue, so we’ve also been talking a lot more and a lot differently about that.”

The fellowship also educated the students about the growing threat of the Islamic State (commonly referred to as ISIS or ISIL), which has motivated fellows like Kiermoni Allison to become more alert and engaged citizens. “I think now more than ever, the government needs our help,” said Allison, a second-year graduate student at the School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA).

Allison explained that many of the individuals recruited domestically by ISIS are vulnerable teenagers who lack solid social structures and support systems, and are searching for a sense of belonging. United States citizens have a social responsibility to help repair these broken systems, in addition to being mindful of suspicious activity and responding appropriately, he said.

For his research, Allison is examining public-private partnerships to determine how the government works with private companies like Twitter to shut down ISIS accounts. He is also determining how many people use anonymous tips to report perceived threats like an abandoned bag on a train, which could contain explosives or dangerous chemicals.

In addition to delving deeper into research and participating in the spring 2016 course, many of the fellows will begin internships related to homeland security, crediting the fellowship with giving them the experience and connections needed to increase their marketability in the current workforce.

Stovall is one such fellow, who recently accepted an appointment with the State of New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness in the Analysis Bureau of the Intelligence Division. The internship is an exciting reward for her longstanding commitment to public service and protection, she said.

“Students have really appreciated the opportunity,” Farmbry said. “The fellowship has created great bonds among students who have similar interests who work across different disciplines, so that a student in [public administration] gets to meet a student in law, who gets to meet a student in global affairs, etc., and they all have this common interest around issues of homeland security, disaster preparedness and prevention, and the intelligence security world.”

"The WMD simulation highlighted many of the issues associated with producing intelligence products for policymakers," Majlesi said. "The student ‘analysts’ had to make tough choices with limited information, and they experienced firsthand how the work product of intelligence analysts can impact the quality of national security and foreign policy decisions."

- Jade McClain