

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TIMES

Delivering education to troops overseas

BY CARISA CHAPPELL, *Published March 2, 2009*

For years, U.S. troops have enrolled and participated in courses offered at U.S. community colleges thanks to the Internet. But now, like civilians, more troops are enrolling at two-year colleges online to update their job skills, learn new ones or to pursue a degree to make themselves more marketable when they are discharged.

Some community colleges even specialize in serving students in the military.

At Florida Community College at Jacksonville, one of the largest providers of education to the military, about 3,000 military students are currently enrolled in courses, according to Jim Stevenson, executive director of the college's Military Education Institute.

Industrial management and technology associate degrees are popular among military students because they make learners marketable and the credits easily transfer to four-year institutions, he said.

Last month, Coastline Community College (CCC) in California received top honors from the Council of College and Military Educators for educational programs for the armed services.

Thousands of troops stationed around world take classes through CCC, either online or through other distance learning modes, including independent study, PDA courses and courses on CDs. Many military students complete their degree without setting foot on the college campus.

CCC recently launched a program for spouses of military personnel to take online courses at a reduced tuition rate, with free textbooks and no application or registration fees. Other community colleges in the U.S. offer similar discounts for spouses and dependent children.

Victor Kersey, senior chief petty officer in the Navy Reserves, puts a different spin on online learning. Instead of being a student, this semester he is teaching students at Black Hawk College in Illinois from his assignment in the Middle East.

Kersey, a psychology instructor at the college, was called to work as an intermittent faculty member for Iraqi detainees and will return in May, just in time to grade final exams from his home.

He decided to facilitate the online course while he was deployed in Iraq to sharpen his skills as an instructor and to fill a void.

"Although I work 12 to 14 hours each day, I also have a great deal of down time, and what better an opportunity to fill that time than to teach and share my experiences with my students as related to the profession of psychology," Kersey wrote in an e-mail.

Kersey said that initially there were a few snags delivering the course online. He was in transit to Iraq and then living in a tent for a few weeks, and in Kuwait Internet connectivity was

limited. Since then, he said that the Internet connection has been sound and reliable.

Students can read Kersey's lectures and assignments online at any time through an internal college site. He also requires his students to add comments to his discussion boards and write a research paper at the course's conclusion. The nine-hour time difference has made communication with students and staff difficult, but Kersey said that he has managed to respond to e-mails within 24 hours.

Distance learning is already an integral part of higher education, Kersey said. It will continue to evolve and grow in importance as educators look for ways to reduce cost while preserving quality education and as students look for convenience, he added.

"As colleges expand and develop online programs, prospective students become more interested in returning because online education affords them the flexibility needed to pursue lifelong goals of securing a college degree," Kersey said.

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