

# Online Advantage

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## **VIRTUAL DEGREE PROGRAMS FOSTER REAL EDUCATIONAL SUCCESSES FOR MILITARY STUDENTS.**

Online education has come a long way since Internet-based institutions were first introduced to students on the Web. Although some disreputable diploma mills gave online education a bad rap, many colleges and universities have successfully overcome this negative perception and legitimized online learning. Now, many students are able to conveniently earn their degrees in a number of fields while enjoying the same benefits online as their counterparts do on campus.

Online learning is particularly attractive to servicemembers who are juggling their course loads with military responsibilities and pressures, while in some cases trying to keep their families intact. The flexibility of an online degree program can alleviate some of the military students' education concerns so that they can more easily balance all of their duties inside and outside of the classroom.

And while students earning their degrees online do not experience college in the exact same way as they would if they were on campus, institutions that offer online degree programs have worked to ensure that the value of the education is the same. Although the popular misconception is that online education only entails exchanging e-mails back and forth with a second-rate instructor, colleges and universities actually design these programs carefully to make them a robust experience that will prepare students for their chosen fields.

"We have strategically taken our best face-to-face programs and have transformed them into an online program. Students have the same instructors, the same curriculum and the same degree—but customized for an adult online student," said Dr. Kenneth Hartman, the academic director of Drexel University Online, an institution that enrolls hundreds of students including servicemembers in the United States and overseas.

And there is no shortage of programs that are available to students pursuing a degree online. Schools with Internet education programs offer associate and bachelor's degrees—as well as graduate degree programs—and military students can pursue areas like business, information technology, nursing, education and criminal justice, among many others. In order to make online degree programs work for military students, institutions offer a wide range of services—many of which are tailored specifically for a servicemembers' needs.

### **ASYNCHRONICITY AND FLEXIBILITY**

Because of the demands of a military student's lifestyle—and the possibility of being deployed overseas—colleges and universities give their online students the option of attending their courses in an asynchronous manner. This way, if military responsibilities preclude students from attending a class during its scheduled day and time, they can log on to the lectures later and review all of the class material when it's more convenient for them. According to Dr. Elaine Friedrich, Strayer University's vice president of regional academic operations, this helps to make the playing field level for military students when they get deployed.

"Students should not have to miss out on any of their educational opportunities just because they get moved to a different location," she said.

Schools have also created other benefits for military students to give them the flexibility they need. For example, Kaplan University recently created universal degree plans, which are designed to increase the amount of transfer credits and experiential learning that can be applied to the school's degree programs. This gives students the opportunity to use coursework from other institutions toward their Kaplan degrees, and it also affords enough flexibility for students to change their majors—assuming the decision is made as an underclassman—with little impact on their degree plans, allowing them to still graduate on time.

"Military students come with all sorts of training credits that they've earned through the military starting with basic training. They also often have coursework they've accumulated from classes taken on bases or at community colleges," said director of marketing Brian Saylor. "What Kaplan University has done is gone back through all of our programs, and we've really built an incredible amount of discipline around how all those programs are structured. If you don't have that discipline built in, what can happen is you find that there are all sorts of prerequisites for courses—not necessarily because you actually need to have a prerequisite for that course, it's just that no one ever really evaluated the fact that you may or may not need that. You start to get some creep where the degree programs aren't very accommodative of changes."

### **SUPPORTING STUDENTS, SUPPORTING TROOPS**

In addition to flexibility, Kaplan University also gives its students the support they need to make decisions that will keep them on track throughout their academic careers. In order to do this the school created Kaplan MyPath, a program that combines diagnostic assessment with career planning in order for students to choose a program that fits both their career goals and their academic strengths. MyPath also identifies students' weaknesses and helps them create a plan to strengthen those areas, thus further helping students reach their goals. While this program is available to all new students at Kaplan, this helps guide military students so they are best prepared for their future careers when they return to the civilian work force.

"Military personnel are in a situation where many of them are serving and the majority of them—probably around 70 to 80 percent—will re-enter their civilian lives after one tour. A lot of them haven't thought about what they're going to do, so this dialogue is very important for military students," said Saylor.

Likewise, schools like American Inter- Continental University offer support that is specifically tailored to the unique needs of its military student body.

"We actually have policies and procedures in place for the military students to make sure that they're taken care of and that we keep them on equal ground with our general student population," said Military Relations Manager Tamika Bass. "Our mission statement is 'we support your success'—and we truly do. As soon as our students enroll in school, they have an admission adviser, a financial aid counselor and a student adviser that works with them during the duration of their time in the classroom. We also have 24/7 technical support, and the faculty plays a huge role with our students' success as well."

One unique service that American InterContinental University offers—which is particularly useful for its deployed military students—is a mobile campus that students can access through their personal digital assistants and iPhones. This technology has taken distance learning to a new level beyond the laptop and has allowed students to access a scaled down version of the virtual campus, where they can conveniently get their assignments and contact the school's staff members.

"We've got our students set up for success in regards to the technology," Bass said. "We strongly feel that as the world grows more and more wireless, and everything is getting smaller, that definitely we want to make sure that we stay one step ahead."

### **BUILDING CAMARADERIE**

Just as American Inter- Continental University has leveraged technology in a unique way to bring the classroom to the student, American Military University is using technology to give its online students access to the whole campus

experience.

"Because students are away from the campus, we try to bring the whole campus online," said Dr. Frank McCluskey, the school's provost. "For the first 10 years of our university, we tried to bring the classroom online. We now try to make sure that we have an online library, online advising and online orientation to bring the whole campus experience online."

In order to give its students the whole campus experience, the school has added a host of social activities that can be accessed online including a student lounge, a Facebook page, and an island on Second Life. Also, American Military University's clubs, honor societies and student government can all be accessed by students remotely. McCluskey said that this is a feature that military students appreciate— especially the large student population that is stationed overseas, including 1,000 students in Iraq alone.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE MILITARY STUDENT**

Part of what makes colleges and universities that offer online degrees attractive to military students is their understanding of the military lifestyle. With specialized staffs that cater only to servicemembers and veterans—as well as their spouses and dependents—these institutions are keenly aware of what challenges military students face as they earn their degrees.

"Because we are all military ourselves, we realize the situation that students are in," said McCluskey.

And this understanding of military students' lives has affected the degree programs that are available to students, McCluskey added. To best prepare students for careers in and out of the military, American Military University has created online degree programs in areas such as homeland security, international relations, emergency and disaster management, and transportation and logistics. Their courses are taught by those who know the military culture better than anyone else — servicemembers and veterans themselves.

"Many of our instructors are fire chiefs, generals, and sergeants. We're all in the business and our students are in the business," McCluskey added. "At a regular school, the professors and the students are doing two different things— the professors may want high standards and the students may want a grade. But here, because we all come from the same world, there's more of a camaraderie and an understanding of our lives and our experiences together."

Although online education had a rocky beginning, more and more students are benefiting from this experience, and with the downward spiral that the economy has suffered, educators believe that online education will grow in popularity as servicemembers extend their commitments rather than risk unemployment.

"There's an interesting new dynamic that's going on right now as a result of where the economy is," said Hartman. "Institutions like Drexel will be looking at a lot more students that are interested in going to college because the time is not right to get out of the military." ♦

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