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Be All You Can Be

Colleges that market to military students discover they present new challenges

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Registering for classes is often a hassle. But try doing it while fighting a war. Bridget I. Ruiz did. Working at a research hospital in Egypt as a petty officer in the U.S. Navy last year, she enrolled in an online degree program in clinical laboratory sciences from the University of Cincinnati. But just as she started registering, she was shipped out to Iraq to conduct research on pathogens that were affecting troops and civilians.

The desert base in Iraq had scant Internet availability. Ms. Ruiz had to wait in long lines for her turn to use a computer, and even then the connection speed was the equivalent of dial-up. She was limited to 20 minutes per session, which she divided between registering for classes and writing e-mail messages to loved ones.

But Ms. Ruiz never let anyone at the university know that her military duties were complicating her education. "Because I was so new to the program, I didn't want to appear to be a problem," she says. "I didn't want any favoritism because I was in the service."

Petty Officer Ruiz's persistence in seeking out an education helps to explain why military personnel have become a favorite market for colleges, and why providing education to members of the armed forces presents special challenges. More and more colleges are courting military students to help fill their online enrollments, as the military increasingly touts its educational benefits, including paying full tuition, and works closely with colleges to help service personnel complete their education.

Students in the military often find online programs to be the only way they can continue their education while serving their country. Even troops who aren't in combat in Iraq or Afghanistan may be sent overseas or from base to base throughout their careers, making it difficult for them to take traditional courses. Instead of worrying about transferring credits, they can study anywhere they can get Internet access.

Institutions such as American Military University, a for-profit

online institution based in West Virginia, and University of Maryland University College, the continuing-education branch of the state university, were among the early pursuers of military students. But in the past few years, the field of providers has become far more crowded.

Although colleges see military students as a market ripe for expansion, some observers believe that expansion may be limited in the long run because the armed forces' growth will most likely be capped by Congress. But in the meantime, the institutions with high military-student enrollments are enjoying the ride.

Tom Macon, chief executive officer of Grantham University, an online institution based in Missouri, says military students respond quickly when they find out that an institution has a flexible online program.

"They have a lot of unique needs," Mr. Macon says. "Sometimes they have bandwidth, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they have a place to study, sometimes they don't. And if they're going on a mission that's in the national-security interest, sometimes they can't say why."

'The Priority Is the Mission'
Colleges used to serving civilians say that working with military students can require some adjustments. As students fall in and out of contact, professors and administrators must remain flexible and allow them time to complete their work.

Petty Officer Ruiz was in Iraq for six weeks before being sent back to Egypt, where she was set to begin her University of Cincinnati online courses as she continued her hospital work. Then she was suddenly shipped to Qatar.

"I basically had to start school while I was in Qatar without a textbook," she says. Although she was in Qatar, her textbook was sent to Egypt. Still, she never told her instructor about her predicament and improvised through the beginning of the course, using a similar textbook she found in a library and scanning the Internet for information.

Her textbook finally caught up to her two weeks later, but the complications didn't end. She was working a demanding job building mobile biomedical labs and had little time for studying.

"It was real difficult to slip away," Ms. Ruiz says. "The priority is the mission there."

And there was a 10-hour time difference between her and her classmates. While much of the work could be done when she made the time to do it, she was required to participate in live chats once a week.

"I just stayed up as late as I could at night to do my homework," Ms. Ruiz says. "Sometimes I had to get up at 3 or 4 in the morning to do the chats."

Ms. Ruiz recently returned to the United States and is now working at a base in Fort Worth, Tex., while completing her studies. Overall, she says her experience with online learning was good.

Choosing For-Profit Colleges

For-profit colleges have often found it easier than nonprofit ones to make the adjustment to educating those serving in the armed forces. At Touro University International, an online institution based in California, about 4,000 of its 6,500 students serve in the military. And more than half of the nearly 11,000 students at Grantham University are in the armed forces.

Shenequa L. Johnson, a senior airman in the Air Force, is stationed in Turkey as a health-services manager at the base hospital. She recently enrolled at Grantham and is taking courses in criminal justice, English, business management, and computer information systems as part of the university's general-studies program. She switched to Grantham from another university because Grantham did not have any requirements for students to meet online at specific times, making it easier to complete the courses on her own schedule.

"It looked like it had a good program that was easy to figure out, and it seemed geared toward military students specifically," Ms. Johnson says. "Being here, it's hard to get faxes and stuff out. But I was able to e-mail all my information."

She says registering for classes and keeping up with her studies have gone pretty smoothly — for the most part: "I haven't gotten one of my books because there was a bomb at the Istanbul airport."

Following the success of for-profit institutions, more nonprofit colleges are now seeking out military students for their online programs. Pennsylvania State University's World Campus, an online division of the university system, has only been actively courting military students for the past two years, says Ginny Newman, assistant director for military education at Penn State.

The growth has been steep, she says. During the 2004-5 academic year, 132 military students enrolled in online courses at the university. That number grew to at least 245 this past academic year, and Ms. Newman says she expects that number to be even bigger when the official enrollment

count is finished in a few weeks.

"We've recognized that they're really motivated, mature students," Ms. Newman says.

Some colleges find themselves attracting military students without even trying. The University of Cincinnati has several students who are in the military, including Petty Officer Ruiz, even though the university has not pursued them aggressively.

But Cincinnati is about to change its approach. Linda J. Graeter, director of the university's clinical laboratory-science program, says the university is working with military liaisons to determine how to entice more students who are in the military.

"We're looking to put something together to meet their needs," Ms. Graeter says.

Partnership In Flux

More colleges might soon be serving military students through eArmyU, the most significant new partnership between the armed forces and higher education. The program, which celebrates its fifth anniversary this summer, allows soldiers to use tuition assistance money to take online courses through 28 colleges. It has proved popular among soldiers, allowing them to select courses from a wide variety of colleges and programs, instead of shopping around for different institutions.

Although eArmyU is controlled by the Army, it is managed by International Business Machines. But the contract with IBM recently expired, so eArmyU is putting the contract out to bid for a new manager. The results are not expected for several months.

L. Dian Stoskopf, director of education for the Department of the Army, says that because eArmyU is going through a rebid process she cannot comment about any potential changes in the program.

A. Frank Mayadas, director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's grant program for online education, is chairman of an eArmyU advisory group called the Council on Academic Management. He says he hopes that the next contractor will help the program add many more institutions. The sticking point, he says, is getting the institutions to recognize one another's courses in transferring credits. "It would be good for the Army to have a larger number of schools than it has right now," Mr. Mayadas says. "This is a new world. It's going to grow."

For some institutions, providing distance education to military students was a natural extension of what they were doing already.

Old Dominion University is located next to the Naval Station Norfolk, the largest Navy base in the world, so the institution is used to serving sailors. As the university has ventured into distance education, officials have made sure the sailors could take their courses along on submarines and aircraft carriers.

To meet the needs of students with limited Internet access, Old Dominion continues to teach many of its courses through

satellite feeds and CD-ROM's that provide lectures, video clips, and classroom demonstrations, as it has done since before online courses were popular, says David L. Chase, director of military distance learning at the university.

Navy ships are equipped to retrieve the satellite signal for the sailors taking the courses. And when test time rolls around, the exams are already stored on the ships' computers so they can be administered by the students' commanding officer.

Although those technologies seem to work well for many students, some are demanding online courses so they can complete the work on their own time — a term education officials call asynchronous education. Old Dominion is working to meet that demand, Mr. Chase says.

"We do not have a large menu of asynchronous programs at the moment, but we're pedaling furiously to make more and more of that available," Mr. Chase says.

The University of Phoenix Online has a separate division that handles military students. Mike Bibbee, the Phoenix vice president who oversees that division, says all its enrollment counselors are former members of the military, so they can relate to the students as well as understand all the confounding military jargon.

"They understand how difficult it is to get your education while you're in the service," Mr. Bibbee says. "And best of all, they speak the language."

The Military Division enrolls about 16,500 students of 99,500 total students at Phoenix Online. Many of the military students are younger than the average Phoenix enrollees, who are often in their 30s. So the university spends more time working with the students to help them adapt to online education, which can be more difficult than classroom-based education because the courses often involve more reading and interaction among students through chats and discussion boards.

Few Private Colleges

Not all institutions with distance-education programs are marketing to military students. Many large private universities are too expensive for a majority of members of the military.

And even with so many potential military students, growth will be limited over the years, says Wallace E. Boston Jr., president of the American Public University System, which oversees American Military University. After all, he says, the number of military personnel is kept pretty constant by the U.S. government.

"It doesn't grow much, even during times of war," Mr. Boston says. "That number is pretty tightly controlled by Congress."

For colleges that are seeking more military students, the best marketing tool seems to be satisfied customers. Yoram Neumann, chief executive and provost of Touro University International, says that most new students who are in the military usually find out about the university more through word of mouth than through the advertisements it places in Army Times and Stars & Stripes.

Petty Officer Ruiz, now that she is back in the United States, seems like a satisfied customer. She expects to have to

move again, though she is not sure where yet, to complete her clinical rotation for her degree at the University of Cincinnati. To do that, she plans to take leave from the Navy for about a month — time usually reserved for vacation.

The day she finally leaves the military, she says, she will be in a much better position to get the sort of job she wants working in a research hospital. "It's worked out well, really better than I expected," Ms. Ruiz says. "Thank God for the Internet."

About Grantham University:

Established in 1951, Grantham University is a private institution that specializes in educating the working adult student. Its mission is to 'level the playing field' by making a high quality college education available to adult learners based on the combined academic and economic principles of Accessibility, Affordability and Academic Accountability. Grantham University offers military scholarships for active duty, reserve, guard, veterans and military family members, as well as scholarships for law enforcement professionals. Grantham's courses are online and self-paced, allowing students to study at home, at work, on Temporary Duty (TDY) or from almost anywhere in the world. Grantham University is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC). For more information, visit www.grantham.edu or call 1-800-955-2527.

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