

E-learning tips to give you an edge

By Laura S. Jeffrey - Decision Times

Navy Lt. Ken Froberg is taking classes to further his education and advance his career, but he has not sat in a classroom since he earned a bachelor's degree in marine engineering from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy eight years ago.

Froberg, a Hawkeye weapons and tactics instructor at Naval Station Norfolk, Va., is completing coursework online. He is taking two master's-level courses through Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Worldwide Campus, and two classes to complete the Joint Professional Military Education Phase 1 through the U.S. Naval War College's School of Distance Education.

"Finding time to study is sometimes a challenge," said Froberg, who is a husband and father. "But it all comes down to relying on self-discipline and not excuses."

Froberg is engaged in distance learning, a field of education in which students do not attend classes in buildings or meet with instructors face to face. Instead, they log on to computers — usually at a time and location of their choosing — and complete coursework online or on CD-ROMs. Distance-learning students communicate with instructors and other students via e-mail exchanges, discussion boards and chat rooms.

Some universities, such as Kaplan and Grantham, offer online programs exclusively. Students can earn certificates as well as associate, bachelor's or advanced degrees. Both Kaplan and Grantham are accredited institutions.

In addition, many brick-and-mortar colleges and universities are exploring or already have incorporated distance education with traditional ways of obtaining an education. For example, about 30 percent of Anne Arundel (Md.) Community College's two-year associate degree program in information systems security can be completed online, said Fred Klappenberger, chair of the school's computer information systems department. According to a study commissioned by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, a nonprofit organization that focuses on educational issues, among others, almost 3.2 million students took at least one online college course during fall 2005, compared with 2.3 million during that term the previous year. The study also found that the number of distance-education students has grown much more rapidly than the number of students in traditional higher-education environments.

For service members, in particular, distance learning is appealing.

"You don't have to worry about going back and forth [to a building]," said Trent Stanfield, an Army retiree and guidance counselor at Fort Bragg, N.C. "You can fit the school work around your schedule."

And with distance education, he added, “You can stay with the same college to complete your curriculum, instead of needing to transfer from college to college with every duty station.”

“Opportunities for intellectual growth ... and an education provided by nationally known instructors and scholars exist in the online environment, and that environment recognizes the need for flexibility and accommodation,” said William Weston, an Army veteran who is dean of Kaplan’s School of Legal Studies. “Military personnel should give online learning serious consideration.”

Distance learning has obvious appeal for students who serve in the military. But is it right for everyone? Following are some tips for success as a distance learner:

- Do your homework — before enrolling. Air Force civil service retiree Greg Garcia is Grantham’s academic dean. He said students who are successful at online learning have a clear idea about the demands and expectations of the program they are interested in and have talked with people who have taken courses online.

They also “talk with their families, supervisors and others about the support they are going to need from them,” Garcia said.

Carol Berry is southeast regional director of the Navy College Program, which provides opportunities for sailors to earn college degrees by providing academic credit for Navy training, work experience and off-duty education. NCP’s mission is to enable sailors to obtain a college degree while on active duty.

“We want sailors to contact their Navy college counselor before signing up for any courses or with any school,” Berry said. “The counselors have no vested interest in any one school. We are the third-party advocate, there to help [sailors] make the best choice that meets their academic requirement, their financial requirement and their delivery platform.”

Jeffrey Wilkinson, a retired Marine colonel and Kaplan’s director of military education strategic planning, agrees. “Take advantage of your installation’s education specialist or base education officer,” he said. “They are trained to answer most questions and will work closely with you to develop an academic plan at the right school.”

- Get the right stuff. Distance learners need a reliable computer with high-speed Internet access, NCP’s Berry said, and it is ideal if they don’t have to share that computer with other family members. A designated study area is also helpful for better concentration, Berry said.

Service members facing deployments onboard ships or to remote areas, Berry said, may want to consider courses that can be completed on CD-ROMS instead of relying on Internet connections, which may be dicey.

- Plan ahead — and make Plan B. Navy Command Master Chief Steven Hunnicutt earned an associate degree in electrical systems from Thomas Edison State College through distance learning. Now, he is working on an online bachelor's degree in work-force education and development from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. "Know when things are due, and plan for the unexpected," Hunnicutt said. "If you wait until the last minute to send an assignment, your Internet connection may not be working, and trying to find a place to e-mail your assignment may be a problem."

"Save files to flash drives and on computer hard drives," he said. "If one fails, you still have the other one."

- Stay motivated and focused. "Students sometimes go into distance learning thinking it will somehow be easier," Berry said. "The truth is, distance learning is harder. It requires a lot of discipline and persistence."

"It is easy to put work off and say you'll come to it later, but taking classes is a contract with yourself," Hunnicutt said. "If you are unwilling to keep your contract with yourself, you probably will not succeed."

"Nobody will tell you, 'You need to do this and that.' You have to remember on your own. And you have to remember to do it by a certain time," Standfield said.

Kaplan's Weston has this to offer: "What I have often seen with service personnel is that they let themselves get a little bit behind and then they get a TDY ... and their education falls apart," he said. "My advice would be to [not only] keep up with the work [but] try to get a little ahead, if possible."

- Participate in class discussions. It's true that distance learners are not in the same physical location as the instructor and other students. However, they can and should get involved by joining chat sessions and other discussion groups. Weston said this involvement enhances the learning experience.

- Raise your virtual hand. "Do not be afraid to tell the professor you need help," Berry said, noting that distance-education students can't stay after class for face-to-face time. "You have to be able to put in writing the question or concern, sometimes on a discussion board, so you can't be shy. ... I have found that where one student had a question, others had the same question. It just took a brave individual to post it."