

Troops give new meaning to distance learning

April 5 2009, By Darryl E. Owens

The day starts before 8 a.m. for Jonathan Richman, a religious-program specialist 2nd class with the U.S. Navy, based at Joint Task Force-Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

After a day spent boosting troop morale and interacting with detainees, the petty officer 2nd class typically clocks out at 5 p.m. He plays some racquetball, tends to his room and laundry, then pulls up a seat and dives into deep discussions with his legal-studies classmates at the University of Central Florida.

The Orlando campus might be miles from the military base, but online-degree programs are growing in appeal for veterans who've suffered grievous injuries and service members such as Richman whose worldwide deployments underscore the term "distance" learning.

"The biggest advantage of online [education](#) is the ability to 'attend' class when it is convenient for me," said the 25-year-old from Orlando. "If I feel like it, I can sign on in the middle of the night and do some homework, take a quiz or ask a question via e-mail or the bulletin board."

Nearly half of Department of Defense tuition reimbursement to active-duty service members defrays online courses, said Jim Selbe, assistant vice president for lifelong learning at the American Council on Education.

For example, of the 9,500 students enrolled in 2008 at TUI University,

an accredited online university, 7,000 were service members or veterans. Online programs "have been designed for people that travel, need flexibility with assignments and have real-life applicability," said Tom Finally, vice president of administration for TUI.

For Army Sgt. Leeona Sanders, taking [classes](#) online through UCF just made sense when she decided to augment the bachelor's degree in biochemistry and zoology she earned four years ago at the University of Florida.

As a mechanic with the 1,133rd Transportation Company at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, her days begin at 5 a.m., and she fixes trucks until about 7 p.m. After a bit of chow, she hunkers down at the computer, pursuing her master's of science education through UCF, where she enrolled in the online courses in January.

This semester, 192 veterans and active-duty service members are taking classes online at UCF, including 90 on active duty and 90 reservists and members of the National Guard.

"The biggest advantage of online education is you are able to do it at your own pace, plus you do not have to be in the country to take classes," said Sanders, who is from Paisley, Fla. She hopes to finish the program by December 2010.

Convenience is powerfully seductive and an overriding reason that service members in the four primary military branches enrolled in more than 710,000 online and traditional classes in fiscal 2007, the most recent available data, Selbe said.

But there are advantages to online courses for active-duty service members apart from convenience. Stephanie Marine, an education major, found that her online studies with UCF provided a welcome

distraction to realities of war she faced serving with the Army in Iraq.

"When I was overseas, having something to distract you from the dangers, and having something else to concentrate on, specific goals was very helpful," the 28-year-old said.

Not that online education for active-duty service members is glitch-free.

The Internet connection Richman must use at Guantanamo Bay isn't the fastest or most reliable.

"There are times when there is no Internet for a day or two," he said. "If I don't keep a few days ahead of my schoolwork, then I will miss a deadline."

And for Sanders, Uncle Sam's to-do list often interrupts her school flow. Her wrecker team can spend up to three weeks on missions scouring Iraqi roads for trucks to recover and repair.

"You never really know how long you will be on the road," she said.

"This schedule is very sporadic, and you never know when you will get time to do schoolwork. So I have to make sure I am at least three weeks ahead of the due dates."

But for Richman, who first enrolled in online classes in 2003 and has taken a mix of online and face-to-face classes for most of his college career, it's darn the glitches, full speed ahead.

"I am taking online classes while deployed rather than waiting until I get back because I really want to graduate soon," said Richman, who is scheduled to complete his degree in December 2010. "When I return (home), I will only have two classes left, and that is because they must be taken face-to-face."

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