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Worlds Apart: Classmates Achieve Common Goals through the Internet

Published on 31-Jan-05



Nai Kong Leung (Wiley)



Photos courtesy of OCEE
Christopher (C.J.) Galfano

Like many University of Maryland online master of life sciences students, Christopher (C.J.) Galfano often stared at the glaring screen of his laptop in the late night hours, finishing assignments and e-mailing teachers. But unlike his classmates, Marine Corps Maj. Galfano closed his laptop, climbed into an F15 and flew combat missions six hours away in war-ravaged Iraq and nine hours away in Afghanistan, completing coursework in his "free time."

Nai Kong Leung-Wiley for short-would sometimes log on at 5 a.m. to participate in chat rooms and complete assignments for the same program before starting his day as a secondary school biology teacher in Hong Kong.

Each holds a bachelor's degree in biology and was committed to improving himself through education while balancing the demands of a family and full-time career. They were also among five online students who graduated from the university last semester without ever setting foot on campus, a trend that's reshaping the future of higher education across the globe.

Maryland's program is the university's first completely Web-based graduate degree and the only one of its kind geared for high school science teachers when it was introduced five years ago. Students enroll in the program from all over the country and represent nine foreign countries.

Galfano was in southern California when the university literature touting the online studies master's degree arrived in the mail three years ago. The program, he discovered, was designed more for his teacher wife than for him. But that didn't stop the ambitious flyboy from e-mailing Program Director Paul Mazzocchi and explaining his situation.

Mazzocchi considered Galfano's active military service and knew he deserved special attention. "We could do no better service than to provide him with an education," Mazzocchi says. Galfano jumped into the coursework one sentence of permission and an aced refresher course later. When first deployed to Qatar, Galfano obtained authorization to take his laptop for educational purposes and quickly hooked into the Internet. "Computer access was awesome," he was surprised to learn. "It was finding the time..."

While most online students take only one course per term, Galfano took two of his hardest classes-emerging infectious diseases and modern genetics-while working 24-hour missions and assuming responsibility for scheduling the work of his entire squadron. "I would fly night missions to Iraq and Afghanistan three to four times a week and come back to my tent and get online to do my course work. It nearly killed me," Galfano recalls.

Galfano interacted with faculty and fellow students via e-mail and chat rooms. He was even required to complete a project with his classmates-"forcing me to interact with other people in the program"-a positive factor for a soldier so far from home.

From his home in Hong Kong, Leung was looking for a graduate degree that wasn't research based when he found Maryland's program through an Internet search. "I wanted to get a master's for myself," he explained. "But it's also good for my students to know that I am studying, too."

Because of the time difference, Leung would rise early and stay up past midnight to participate in online assignments. He especially liked the weekly chats. "All the instructors are great...they spent lots of time with us and gave us lots of feedback," he says.

Mazzocchi points to a cap of 20 students per class that allows faculty to respond to student questions quickly,

within 24 hours or less. That, along with the independent scholarly paper component, has helped the program grow to more than 300 students from the initial class of four in 2000.

A first-time online student, Leung said the program helped him discover his own ability to adapt to a different style of learning. "You really have to do it by yourself, but it suits me," he confesses. Also acknowledging the challenges of the program, Galfano says, "They were tough classes...[but] it's been really rewarding academically.

Galfano and Leung concluded their two-and-a-half-year experience last month. Galfano, from the comfort of his home in Boise, Idaho with his four-month-old daughter in his arms, e-mailed his final paper, fittingly on anthrax.

Leung's work culminated in a promise he made to his wife..."If I get all As, I'm going to attend the graduation ceremony." He did just that. Traveling more than 8,000 miles, Leung took his place among the 2,600 graduates at the university's Dec. 18 ceremony to receive his final reward—a master's degree in life sciences from the University of Maryland.

Information provided by University Publications
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