

Education to Go by Jennifer G. Williams



With frequent moving a way of military life, and today's deployment rate showing no signs of slacking, service members have had to give up certain consistencies in their lives.

At the same time, today's technologies allow one aspect of life to remain pretty constant, no matter where in the world a service member is—education.

"Distance education is the name of the game today," says Bob Van Hoose, manager of the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) Distance Learning Program. "It's a lot easier than taking the old correspondence courses through the mail, and it can take a lot less time to finish a course or a degree."

With the proliferation of the Internet, taking online classes in Kandahar can be as simple as taking them just a few miles from the home college—almost. And even when Internet access is irregular, the military still finds ways to further the education of its service members, with deployable learning resource centers and coursework on CD-Roms.

It's even to the point that schools are following the troops. University of Maryland recently renewed a \$35 million contract with the military to offer courses and programs to troops at 87 sites in the United States, Europe, Asia and Middle East. The most recent centers opened in Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina. There are already three locations in Kuwait, but officials are not sure when one may open in Iraq.

With more schools signing up to offer courses and degrees to military service members, officials say military students have access to an even greater variety of coursework and degree programs.

Sharon Davis, interim director of distance education at Central Texas College of Killeen, Texas, one of the major education providers in the military's online systems, says collegiate partnerships with the military also mean institutions can reach more students.

When institutions participate in the military's various distance learning programs, most agree to offer academic credits for military experience and to accept transferred credits from other participating institutions. "Students can take courses through any member college or university, and everything goes on one transcript," says Davis, which makes it easier for service members to complete their degrees.

And different branches are now designing their own distance education programs with their particular service members in mind, offering military training classes as well as traditional college courses.

Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges and DANTES

The Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) network was created in 1972 to provide educational opportunities to service members, who, because they frequently moved from place to place, had trouble completing college degrees. Today, more than 1,800 colleges and universities offer service members and their family members the chance to complete associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees through SOC, which is funded by the Department of Defense (DoD) and managed by DANTES. Each student has a "home college," where all their credits are transferred and from where they will ultimately receive their degree.

SOC coordinates associate and bachelor's degrees in a variety of curriculum areas for the Army (SOCAD), Navy (SOCNAV), Marine Corps (SOCMAR), and Coast Guard (SOCCOAST). These degree programs are offered on or near Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard installations worldwide. Service members and their family members in isolated locations can take courses through distance learning.

DANTES' primary mission is to support the DoD's voluntary education programs. The DANTES distance learning program provides undergraduate and graduate academic courses and is divided into three categories: external degree programs, independent study programs and nationally accredited distance learning programs.

"We provide information tailored to military students' needs here at DANTES," says Jim Rumpler. "The military is our main audience, but our programs are open to anyone, including family members."

For more information on DANTES or the SOC network, visit www.dantes.doded.mil or www.soc.aascu.org

eArmyU

The Army expanded its distance learning pilot program, eArmyU, systemwide in 2004, with more than 55,000 soldier-students currently enrolled. The program was developed to provide eligible enlisted soldiers with the needed tools and the opportunity to work towards a degree or certificate through online education. Once enrolled, soldiers receive up to 100 percent funding for tuition, books and course fees, as well as a personal laptop computer, e-mail account and free online access through an Army Web portal at the eArmyU website.

"We have eArmyU because we are better able to monitor the quality and delivery of education programs by the participating colleges and universities as well as the support services they provide for soldiers—ensuring high quality virtual learning," says eArmyU Program Coordinator Betty Nass, who adds that "eArmyU is portable (more than 19,000 eArmyU Soldiers have PCSd), flexible (one of the key program attractions cited by soldiers), and accessible."

In addition to 24-hour technical support, eArmyU provides soldiers with assistance in determining a program of study, registering for courses and transferring credits. eArmyU participating institutions belong to the SOC network, guaranteeing transferability of credit among schools and maximum credit for prior learning and military experience.

eArmyU also provides education specialists at Army posts and bases throughout the world to assist soldiers in the program, which currently offers 148 certificate and degree programs from 29 accredited colleges and universities.

Officials say so far, those enrolled in the program are averaging a nearly 80-percent course-completion rate, which is comparable to the completion rate of four-year academic institutions that provide distance-learning courses.

eArmyU was originally conceived as a recruiting tool to attract young people to the military, but officials maintain that its success also shows it to be a strong retention tool for soldiers who can see the advantages to completing coursework while still in the Army. In fact, Nass says, "22% of Soldiers have reenlisted or extended to participate in eArmyU."

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For more information, visit www.earmy.com

MarineNet

The Marine Corps College of Continuing Education (CCE) provides a variety of military and civilian distance learning and training opportunities for Marines through a network of satellite campuses, learning resource centers, video teletraining and its online learning management system, MarineNet.

MarineNet currently offers more than 500 online courses, including custom Marine Corps training courses and business and information technology courses. MarineNet also offers Web-based Marine Corps Institute (MCI) courses and allows you to enroll in MCI paper-based courses through the web site.

LTC John Dupras, deputy director for USMC College of Continuing Education, says online courses are the way to go for many service members. "Everybody's so busy these days—being able to go a Wednesday night class for 12 or 14 weeks is tough for anybody—particularly for Marines who belong to certain units," he says.

While taking college courses while deployed can be problematic, especially when deployed to certain areas, Dupras says there are definite advantages, too—particularly with tuition assistance. "Now that the military pays up to 100 percent of costs, why not?" he says.

Dupras says that while MarineNet is still

primarily a system that offers Marine training-oriented courses, they recently piloted a program with Central Texas College in which about 50 members of the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit out of Camp Lejeune, NC, took along some regular college courses on a Deployed Learning Resource Center (DLRC) while deployed to Afghanistan. The DLRC is a self-contained unit with a main server and 20 laptops for service members' use while deployed. "With the DLRC," says Dupras, "a Marine can complete coursework on his own time, then tech experts take the distance content delivery engine and download the coursework and catch-it-up, so to speak, when they get back."

Dupras says that while the 22nd MEU members did not get to do much coursework "while in theater, they were able to get back to it on the ship on the way home."

The Marines' DLRCs are essentially "boxed-up versions of MarineNet," says Major Larry Anderson, infrastructure branch officer with the USMC College of Continuing Education. "The problem now is that units are rotating out so fast, all our DLRCs are deployed right now," he says. There are currently 27 DLRCs spread around the Marine Corps, with plans to expand that number to 54 in the near future. A DLRC is composed of a

server that has all of the available coursework loaded onto it and a total of 20 laptops to use while deployed, says Anderson.

MarineNet classes also include Professional Military Education courses needed for continued promotions and a driver improvement course required for all Marines 27 years old and younger. "Now, all the classroom instruction is available digitally," says Anderson. "We can now tell Marines, 'go complete this course,' instead of having to schedule them for a block of classroom time," he says. "And most people complete the courses online faster than they would by attending an eight-hour class, so it saves them time, too."

Anderson says the online learning environment stimulates more of the senses with its multimedia format, and consequently, students retain more of the information they've learned.

MarineNet courses are available to all Marines, active duty, reservists, and civilian Marines. Selected courses are also available to military family members. Its online courses are accessible from any PC on base or through the Internet with high-speed access. MarineNet offers courses 24 hours a day, seven days a week and allows students to take tests online.

For more information, visit www.marinenet.usmc.mil/portal/

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Navy College Program and PACE



The Navy College Program (NCP) provides opportunities to sailors to earn college degrees by providing academic credit for Navy training, work experience, and off-duty education. The NCP mission is to enable sailors to obtain a college degree while on active duty.

The NCP integrates all components of the military's Voluntary Education programs, including distance education—a must for sailors who spend much of their time at sea. While the NCP is primarily geared toward enlisted sailors, some NCP components are also available to officers.

The Navy College Program for Afloat College Education (NCPACE) is a part of the Navy College Program. Both academic skills and college (undergraduate and graduate) courses are available through regionally accredited colleges and universities. NCPACE is a tuition-free program funded by the Navy, and is designed to expand sailors' educational opportunities even while on sea duty.

The Navy has contracted with Central Texas College (CTC), to administer NCPACE. Through CTC, colleges and universities around the country offer courses in a variety of delivery methods. Courses are taught via technology and by traditional classroom instruction on ships and in port.

The USS Kitty Hawk provides its popular Japanese language classes to the 5,000-plus sailors stationed aboard the aircraft carrier, which is permanently forward deployed to Japan. Students in the beginning or intermediate Japanese classes receive college credits for their work, which basically compresses a year of Japanese instruction into six weeks, says Yuichi Akihiro, Kitty Hawk's civilian on-board Japanese instructor. Akihiro's Japanese classes, along with other NCPACE courses offered on board try to give sailors the opportunity to accrue college credits. "If you're staying in the Navy for only four years and you take almost every course that is offered on Kitty Hawk, you can accumulate as many as 30 to 40 credit hours," says Akihiro. "You can finish the first year of college while you're working."

All undergraduate courses are from SOC-affiliated institutions, ensuring sailors the opportunity to transfer credits and complete degrees. While NCPACE courses are provided to sailors tuition-free, students must pay for their own textbooks, but used copies are usually available from other Sailors.

For more information about the Navy College Program and NCPACE, visit www.navycollege.navy.mil

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Getting Started

The best place to get started on your education journey is your local education center, Navy College Office or Lifelong Learning Center. There, you'll have help in determining what programs you are eligible for; which program may be the best fit for your situation; and, if you need tuition assistance, you apply for it through this office.

While many of the service-specific programs offer their coursework for free, the military has made it easier—and cheaper—for service members to participate in other education programs with an increase in education benefits and reimbursements.

You can now be reimbursed for up to 100 percent of your tuition and fees, not to exceed \$250 per semester hour or \$166 per quarter hour, up to a maximum of \$4,500 per year. Graduate level courses are reimbursable up to 75 percent of tuition and fees, with a cap of \$187 per semester hour and \$3,500 per year. Certain fees, including lab, computer and even parking fees, are considered reimbursable at the discretion of the education center. Officials say these are the military's general guidelines, and that each branch of service may have additional requirements or restrictions.

For distance learning programs, obviously access to a computer and the Internet is needed, but some service-specific programs provide such equipment to eligible members—yet another reason to stop by your local education center. Each program may have its own hardware and software requirements, so be sure to check out their websites for more information.

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**-DANTES Distance Learning Program Manager
Bob Van Hoose**