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Student Perspectives - Rick Armstrong [1]

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As we seek to provide top-notch courses and programs in the online environment, we must remember that the experience of designing and implementing is only half of the equation. On the other side are the students – our partners in education. But we don't always know much about what online looks like from the student perspective.

So how do we learn more about what happens on the other side of the screen?

We ask!

This month we're talking with Richard Armstrong, Rick for short, who lives and works in Hawaii, and who is also a University of Colorado Denver student in the MSIS program.

Hi Rick! It's great to meet you. Thank you for taking the time to talk with us and share your perspective.

First things first. Tell us a bit about you, your background, and what brought you to an online program at CU Denver.



Rick Armstrong

I was born and raised in Phoenix, AZ. I completed high school in 1996 and later married my beautiful wife Katrina in 1999, just before enlisting the in US Navy. I have always had an affinity for technology, so I joined the ranks as an Electronics Technician, where I learned how to administrate and perform maintenance on the Navy's advanced computer networks, RADARs, and communication equipment.

After serving in the enlisted ranks for more than 11 years, I was promoted to the Officer ranks. With that promotion, I perform duties in a more managerial capacity for the sailors in my charge. Today I am nearing 20 years in the Navy and have my sights set on government service once I retire.

Having served along civilian contractors and government employees for most of my career, I realize that not all of my military experiences translate to a better position in the civilization workforce. By pursuing an advanced degree, I hope to gain the necessary skills and education to justify a better position when applying to a new job.

My family and I are living in Hawaii, and I am still employed full-time with the Navy, so an online program was really my only option to fulfill my goals. The research I had done online suggested that CU Denver was exactly what I was looking for in a degree program: a reputable online program, affordable, and a comfortable learning experience. Once I had the degree program, and specialty picked - Master of Science in Information Systems with a focus in Enterprise Technology Management - I was excited to begin courses in the Fall 2018 semester.

And how has your experience as an online student been? Anything that's surprised you along the way?

I am closing in on completing the first two classes with CU Denver, and so far, things couldn't be better. I graduated with my BS in 2007, so it's been a while since I completed any major formal learning programs, aside from Navy instruction. After the first couple weeks in the program I was at ease with the routine: check the announcement, check the syllabus, knock out a few discussion posts (as necessary), and develop a plan to complete the work.

One of the classes I am enrolled in is a hybrid-style class, which enables fully online students to join a class for instruction through a video teleconferencing application called Zoom. I really enjoy this because it allows me to feel a bit more like a college student, being part of the in-class instruction once a week. If I am unable to attend during the assigned time, the instructor posts the recording of the class online so I can view it when the time is right for me. I hope there are more hybrid-style courses in the future!

Do you have some examples of experiences with CU Denver that have been particularly rewarding for you?

Another aspect of attending CU Denver that was particularly rewarding was being waived from the GMAT requirement. It had been so long since I last attended school that I was not confident in attaining a competitive score, despite extensive study. After working with the admissions staff, and Mr. John Butt in particular (a keystone in this process), I decided to

submit a waiver request.

CU Denver allowed me the opportunity to substitute the GMAT as long as I could provide a summary of professional experience, as a full-time working adult, with previous online experience. I also needed to detail my career progression in a technically demanding field to illustrate that I would be able to keep up with the demands of higher education.

I submitted my waiver request, which included all of my Navy experience and information about my online undergraduate degree. In very short order, I received word that it was accepted, and I couldn't have been more excited.

What about challenges you encounter in being both online and remote? What types of things do you encounter that in-person students might not?

Many of the challenges I've faced are similar to the challenges faced by most online students: time zone differences and group projects. CU Denver has made up a lot of ground in these areas as compared to my previous online undergraduate program. I live in Hawaii, which is 4 hours behind the Denver time zone, so if I need more time at the end of a week to complete a project or quiz, I can communicate with the instructors ahead of time so they can provide the additional 4 hours as needed.

As for group projects, the hybrid-style course only requires the Denver-based campus students to participate in the group projects. This framework has been much easier for me since coordinating with groups is a real challenge, especially for online students. If there are future group projects that I will be required to participate in, I would hope the assignment provides enough lead time to coordinate the efforts of all students.

If you were to write up a list of tips for people who are teaching online, what would your top three be?

A few suggestions for the teachers working with online students:

Move to a hybrid-style classroom environment. In the two classes I am currently enrolled, I find that the hybrid-style course is much more fulfilling because of the interactions with the students and instructor. Even though the class only meets once a week, I find that I feel more a part of the college atmosphere when 'attending' class via Zoom.
Incorporate something personal about yourself into the course. The instructor in one of my courses posts a picture of a comic book he owns, with a brief description and its value, at the beginning of each week. I find this personal touch a lot of fun, partly because I am a comic buff myself, but also because it adds a little personality to the course, vice just papers, reading, and testing.
Minimize extraneous learning tools that cost money. A degree is already expensive, so adding unplanned (surprise) costs to the process is never any fun. I realize instructors have a routine like the rest of us, which may include additional materials, but advertising additional costs up front, or developing CU Denver materials of a similar type for free, would certainly help to advance the learning experience versus focusing on how much it's going to cost.

Any additional thoughts you'd like to share?

So far, I am very excited about the MSIS curriculum at CU Denver. I know I am earning a marketable education that will serve me well in furthering my IT career. CU Denver has

provided a custom approach to a professional online graduate program with the hybrid-style courses and I am excited to continue my education in this environment.

Thank you again, Rick. Wishing you all the best as you continue pursuing your goals!

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