



World Scholars

For students in Penn State's World Campus—and for their instructors—coping with the logistics of online learning is part of the challenge. *By MAUREEN HARMON '00 Behrend*

STACY BRYAN CAN'T EXACTLY SHOW UP IN A CLASS-room at University Park ready to take notes, because, frankly, things happen. Kids get sick (she's got two toddlers). Business heats up (she owns a deli with her husband). The slopes of the West call (she's addicted to skiing). Plus, she lives in Idaho.

So Bryan takes her laptop everywhere. She breaks it open at home, at her deli, on vacation. It's her link to Penn State's World Campus, where she's working on a bachelor's degree in Law and Society. Every day, when her son is off at school, when the restaurant is slow enough for her husband to handle by himself, when her daughter is playing quietly, Bryan tucks herself into a back booth, cracks open the laptop, and signs on to ANGEL, a Web site used by faculty and students to post

assignments, course notes, lectures, test reminders. To ask a question, she e-mails the professor, or visits during "office hours," a designated time when the prof is available via instant messaging. To take an exam, she walks down to the Sandpoint, Idaho, library, where a librarian proctors the test for her.

Bryan is one of more than 7,000 students taking classes through the World Campus, which opened its virtual doors 10 years ago. It's the youngest campus in the Penn State family, but it produces graduates like any other Penn State location: Thousands of students—many of them returning adults—have earned certificates, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and even advanced degrees through the World Campus. Last November, the World Campus launched two new psychol- ▶▶

ogy degrees, and there are plans to add programs this year in business, psychology, and human resources. By the end of the year, online students will be able to choose from 65 certificate and degree programs, 14 of them at the master's level.

Nationwide, online programs have grown like mad in the past 10 years. Penn State's World Campus is seeing enrollment grow by 25 percent per year, and has become the second-largest campus in the University system. That growth presents challenges, according to World Campus executive director Ken Udas: "We don't want to end up burdening the resources we have," he says. Growing too quickly would mean sacrificing quality, at a time when online programs are combating the stereotypes of "diploma mills"—unaccredited programs that offer easy degrees to anyone willing to

pay the tuition. At Penn State, Udas explains, students are held to the same admission criteria—and instructors go through the same vetting process—as in the University's traditional degree programs. "We're not motivated to simply enroll a lot of students and generate income," he says.

Still, it's been a struggle to convince employers that a degree earned at the kitchen table is the same as one earned in a classroom. But online programs are overcoming those misconceptions, at least in baby steps—one of which came last year when the federal government began awarding the same financial aid to online students as traditional ones.

According to a 2007 Sloan Consortium report, *Online Nation*, one in five students today is taking at least one course online. In Penn State's World Campus there are military personnel serv-

ing in Iraq, overzealous high school kids looking to get a jump start on their college credits, international students hoping to earn a degree without leaving their home country, and students like Brian White, a New York City fire chief whose job—he works two 24-hour shifts a week—would never allow him to pursue a traditional degree.

As a fire chief, White thought it might be beneficial to earn a certificate in disaster preparedness. He studied from his home and from the fire house. He, like Stacy Bryan, hauled his laptop everywhere he went—including, he admits, on several golf trips.

"It was a lot more work than I actually thought it would be," says White, who earned his certificate in May. And online interactions between faculty and classmates can take a little virtual coordination. When iMBA professor **Janet Duck '02 PhD Edu**, who works from her home in Hershey, recently logged on to view a real-time student group presentation, it was 11:00 p.m. When your students are in Florida, Texas, New York, and Illinois, and a fifth team member is in China, 11:00 p.m. is a perfectly reasonable time to have class.

It's a 24/7 job, Duck says, but not all of her colleagues see it that way. "When people don't see you working," she says, "they assume you're not working." But even though classes don't meet three times a week the way regular classes do, "I spend 50 percent more time on my online courses than my tra-

ditional courses," she says. Duck writes out every lecture and posts lessons online. She supplements the textbook assignments by posting current journal articles, and answers student questions by e-mail, phone, or as they are posted to her "Ask the Instructor" discussion board. Other discussion boards house class debates, with Duck often serving as moderator. And when the students need further instruction, Duck schedules "class"—an appointed day and time when she and her students meet up in a virtual conference room to "chat" in real time, or where Duck can use a Web conferencing system to speak directly to her students.

Ken Udas predicts that enrollments in online courses will eventually surpass those of traditional ones but will never completely replace the real-life campus experience. Students online are getting a comparable education, he says, but there are some things you just can't replicate in cyberspace: dorm life, fraternity parties, football games. Still, maybe it's a fair trade, if it lets students be home with the kids, work at the fire house, ski out West, or see firsthand the very spot where Sir Francis Drake sank his ship off the coast of Panama. Stacy Bryan had that chance when she was studying Spanish civilization while on a family vacation. She snapped a few photos and presented an online slide show to her class—earning a little extra credit in the process.

▶ Back Atcha

▶▶ THE STRATEGY OF ANDY Porter's dodgeball team was simple: gang up and pummel the player on the opposing side who dressed the most obnoxiously. Horde all the balls that are tossed back, then attack again. The plan served them well: Porter's team took first place in a dodgeball tournament, held in October and hosted by the Penn State men's basketball team to benefit THON. The winners walked away with season basketball tickets, T-shirts, DVDs, and other prizes, and THON—which will take place in February—got a \$6,700 jump-start. —MH

