

# Distance Education: My Graduate Education Experience

by *Phuongkhanh (Khanh) Nguyen*

**I**n the fall of 2005, I enrolled in a master's degree program in library and information Science (MLIS) at a university in northern California. I chose this particular school because of its reputation as the largest and most technologically advanced online university offering the MLIS program and also because only three courses of the school's 14-course degree program were mandatory. I liked the program's flexibility and the ease that distance learning afforded me.

As a sun-loving southern Californian, I did not want to move north. Distance learning offered me the best of both worlds – no commute and freedom to study on my own time. As an independent and motivated learner, the decision to get my MLIS degree through an online program was easy. Still, it took longer than I anticipated. Completing the degree took me two-and-a-half years.

I learned a few hard lessons along the way, and I include some of them here in hopes that both professors and students in distance learning programs might benefit from my story.

I was a proficient computer user when I enrolled. I had taken classes in DOS (the old Disc Operating System), Microsoft® Word, Excel, Access, BASIC, Pascal, C, Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Web page design, so I was not afraid of the technologies involved in the MLIS program. That is, until, the first day of class and nothing went right! It was a nightmare. There were human and technical problems. At times I couldn't login or receive passwords to access my classes. Some professors listed their phone numbers, while others did not. Thus, e-mails became the main form of communication, which slowed problem solving and led to much frustration and stress.

The school used Blackboard as its course management software; however, I am not blaming the software because access improved tremendously in the second semester. I don't know if it was software failure or human error or, most likely, a combination of both, that prevented me from logging in or accessing the different

course utilities (no passwords were given to access the reserved readings, instructions were unclear and/or links were not explicitly given or embedded to help students navigate to the pertinent sites for study materials, etc.). However, I do feel that many frustrations stemmed from professors' failure to communicate, organize and present materials online, and their lack of skills with using Blackboard.

I wish professors would consider the following factors more carefully when teaching online:

- Effective use of technology
- Role as an instructor
- Course preparation
- Creating a good social climate and sense of community
- Encouraging true collaboration

In an online learning environment, there is no set time and place to prompt students to "get to class" or study. Thus, students must create their own schedules and stick to them. This requires overt cooperation between student and instructor. Overt cooperation implies overt communication.

In the interest of brevity, I will not recount the details of the various trials and tribulations I experienced throughout the program. Instead, I want to point out the characteristics shared by my favorite professors in the program. These professors made online learning enjoyable because they understand what is required to teach effectively in an online environment. They:

- Used the course management software effectively [effective use of technology]
- Followed a class syllabus containing clear goals, objectives and learning outcomes; they had a weekly timeline with assignment deadlines; and they provided instructions on how and where to submit those assignments, with desired filename conventions, etc. [role of an instructor]
- Were articulate and communicative; detail-oriented in communication and presentation; and excellent

at anticipating questions students might have [the importance of course preparation]

- Provided an online space where students could vent and communicate with one another [a sense of community – an online community]
- Provided an online space for group work (ie. group pages) and collaboration (ie. discussion forums) [encouraging collaboration].

I am thankful that today's technologies enabled me to obtain an MLIS degree online. The old adage, "What does not kill you, will make you stronger," is so true! Even though there were some incredibly rough times throughout the program, I survived; and through it all, I have gained an equally incredible sense of confidence in my ability to adapt. This is a good thing.

## About the Author



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