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In Real Life : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Thursday December 13, 2018

In Real Life

By Eric F. Spina

When our online MBA@Dayton students from around the country traveled to the University of Dayton for a servant-leadership immersion weekend this fall, they hugged each other and chatted as though they were long-lost friends, even though many had never met before.

In real life, they bonded instantly outside the digital classroom, showing me how technology can be a terrific tool for creating deep human connections when it is used creatively.

When I shake the hands of the first graduates of MBA@Dayton at the December graduation and welcome them into the University of Dayton alumni community, I'll do so with the realization they're *already* a community, one that stretches across time zones from Fairbanks, Alaska, to New Haven, Connecticut.

The relationships these students have formed transcends anything we expected (and we had high expectations!) when we partnered with 2U Inc. to reimagine our MBA program. 2U works with fewer than 30 of the nation's top universities to market and deliver digital education with a human touch.

Unlike other online programs, the students meet in person for two three-day immersions, either on campus for non-profit accounting and the required servant-leadership track or once in cities like San Jose, Portland, and Chicago for technology and innovation or creativity tracks.

Although Amber Johnston lives 3,756 miles away from campus, she calls herself “a Flyer for life” after making lasting friendships and valuable long-term contacts for her career.

“The servant-leadership immersion was eye opening. The University of Dayton is so strongly embedded in the community, and the work that is being accomplished is downright incredible,” says Amber, a 32-year-old financial counselor for the U.S. Army in Fairbanks with a husband and two sons involved in competitive rock climbing and swimming. “Life is busy and hectic but the flexibility of the program has made it possible for me to balance everything.”

These students reflect the growing diversity of the workplace — and the classroom. Of the more than 400 students in the MBA@Dayton program, 38 percent are women and 29 percent are students of color. With an average age of 35, they bring invaluable work experience to classroom discussions. More than 12 percent are active or retired military, already trained to be resilient, adaptable leaders.

Praveen Savalgi, 30, who will travel to Dayton from New Haven to walk in the commencement ceremony, says he was surprised how comfortable he felt with the other students. In the weekly small-group webcam classes, the students' faces appear in rows on their screens “Hollywood Squares-style,” allowing for spontaneous conversation with each other and their professor.

“You really do spend a lot of time talking and learning about each other in class, and the “no back-row” principle really drives interaction,” says Praveen, a former IT operations manager who's part of a family-owned nonprofit that provides malnutrition prevention and adult business education in West Africa. “When you finally get the chance to interact socially at an immersion, it feels like you're meeting a friend you've known for a while.”

It's gratifying to me that so many of these students feel part of the UD community and resonate with our mission of preparing leaders who serve others — evidenced by the outpouring of positive reaction to the servant-leadership immersion weekend on the LinkedIn account of Scott MacDonald, MBA program director.

“The University has a reputation for a strong commitment to ethics and social leadership. I thought this was an especially important characteristic for an MBA program,” Praveen says. “We sometimes think we’re alone on our quest to make the world a better place.”

No one is alone in this program — even a student 3,756 miles away.