

E-NEWS ONLINE SEPTEMBER 2011

U.Va. Accelerated Master's Program in Systems Engineering Helps Veterans Transition to Civilian Life

By Zak Richards

Transitioning from military to civilian life can present challenges for U.S. military veterans. The University of Virginia's Accelerated Master's Program (AMP) in Systems Engineering is helping to ease that adjustment. The program provides veterans with an education that furthers technical and problem-solving skills they may have gained during their years of service. Especially when coupled with a security clearance, the analytical prowess a student gains from AMP can lead to a promising career in engineering or information technology.

AMP allows professionals from a variety of technical fields to earn a master's degree in systems engineering in just 11 months while continuing their careers. For veterans who qualify for Post-9/11 G.I. Bill education benefits, the costs are minimal. One third of the students in this year's cohort are veterans.

Mike Smith, who worked in the defense industry for 20-plus years before becoming the program's executive director in 2004, appreciates both the challenges of completing a graduate education while working full time and making the transition from military to civilian life. "For most of my professional life, I've worked with outstanding individuals whose military service provided key skills and abilities and shaped who they are as people," Smith said, "If we help these young men and women who have served the nation transition into our technical workforce, we are helping them and we are also helping ourselves. We need the talent and discipline that these individuals have to offer. AMP can give them technical skills that are valued in the marketplace."

Classes, taught by U.Va. Engineering School and Darden School of Business faculty, are held every other weekend (Friday and Saturday) throughout the year, and students meet on Grounds for a full week at the beginning and end of the program. For the final course, the program's 40 students are split into teams and assigned projects that require them to complete a systems analysis and design project involving large-scale, complex systems.

Amir Jenkins, an active duty officer recruiter for the Navy in central Virginia, was contemplating his next career move in winter of 2011 when he found out about AMP. He was working out at the gym and Tom Brett, who had just started as AMP's veteran coordinator, approached him. Jenkins' Navy T-shirt was the icebreaker.



Photo by Zak Richards
Amir Jenkins is a recruiter for Navy officers in Virginia and AMP student.

"Everything happens for a reason," Jenkins says of their chance meeting. Brett invited Jenkins to an AMP cookout and then an AMP Open House. Jenkins brushed up on calculus over the winter and began the program this summer.

Jenkins saw AMP as way to progress to the next stage in his career. He saw his peers pursuing MBAs and thought the systems master's degree would help him stand out from the pack. The degree would also extend his information technology degree from the Naval Academy and the risk analysis skills he developed during his service. He could earn the degree while continuing his work as a recruiter.

"No matter what direction I choose, I know that AMP will allow me to apply technical skills to the lessons I learned in Navy-leadership, integrity and discipline," Jenkins said. "Systems analysis can be applied whether I stay in the military or pursue another field."

Brett knows first-hand about the challenges of transitioning to civilian life and is eager to share his perspective with prospective students like Jenkins. During the war in Vietnam, Brett served there as a captain in the Army Artillery. An ammunition explosion brought him back to the United States in 1969. After he recuperated in Walter Reed Hospital, he began law school at the University of Buffalo on the GI Bill. He worked as a lawyer, principally in Syracuse, N.Y., for more than 38 years.

"When I was at Walter Reed, I knew that I wasn't going back to Vietnam and that I would need to do something else," Brett said. "For me, that was making the transition to civilian life with law school. For these younger veterans, AMP is an excellent pathway."

Inspired by the Jimmy Buffett lyrics "changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes," Brett uses his own experience to convey the benefits of the program.

"It's very constructive to talk with veterans about pursuing a program that can help them get a civilian job with substance and potential," Brett said.

Albert Perez served in the Air Force from 2003 to 2007. Then, after working for Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) in Korea, he began calling systems engineering programs around the United States. He sensed that they were indifferent to his veteran status. Then he found that the AMP website had a special call for veterans to apply.

"They showed us love," Perez says of the program leaders he spoke with when he was applying. "You could tell they valued you as a student."

Karl Wingenbach served in the Army for 22 years and now works for a defense contractor in Newport News, Va. He earned an aerospace degree from West Point and then worked in field artillery for the Army.

"AMP offers you a chance to gain some agility in the market," he said. "Combat experience doesn't necessarily translate in the business world."

Invitation to AMP information events:

The Accelerated Master's Program in Systems Engineering hosts open houses in Charlottesville, webinars, and regional information sessions around the state. Prospective students may also request an individual class visit. To find out more, set up a class visit, or register for information events, visit <http://amp.sys.virginia.edu/>, or email accmp@virginia.edu.