

Sabbatical Offers Employee Educational Journey

By Julia Wyant, Staff Writer

Most people know talented and accomplished folks who never went to college or, for some reason, were not able to obtain their degrees. For many, earning that piece of paper can make a significant difference in their professional or personal lives. Returning to school after a long absence, however, can present quite a challenge. But a friend and colleague of mine, Patsy Oburn, decided to take the challenge of returning to school after getting the opportunity to do so under the Defense

Contract Management Agency's first sabbatical program.

Oburn did her sabbatical at the University of Mary Washington College of Graduate and Professional Studies in Stafford, Va. She graduated with highest distinction after completing 80 credit hours leading to a bachelor's degree in professional studies, leadership and management. The following is a conversation I had with her shortly after her achievement.

Julia Wyant: Patsy, I know most of the story, but ... I got the feeling you didn't like school.

Patsy Oburn: [Laughter] I loved being a student! I believe I loved being a student because I made a conscious decision to enjoy the entire full-time experience of my student journey. This decision helped me to not solely focus on completing classes just to get the

degree. I had taken a lot of adult classes over the years, especially while pursuing my project management certification, but I never attended full-time campus classes.

JW: So what difference did taking a student journey make in your program?

PO: I wanted to experience as much of student life as I could. I felt that I would learn things about myself and others by doing this. For [example], I had to buy school clothes, I went on spring break and I was the first adult student to purchase a class ring and participate in UMW's Junior Ring Ceremony. UMW is really into tradition, and they make a big deal of reaching junior status. I culminated my experience by walking in my formal graduation on May 12, with my 1,200-plus classmates. The experience has been awesome.

JW: OK, so you had a great time doing all those fun things, but what about the academic part? Isn't that the purpose of the program?

PO: I'll reply with a Defense Acquisition University answer: it depends. If the goal is only to get a piece of paper, then I expended a lot of extra effort. I hope that DCMA wouldn't make this type of investment for us to just get a piece of paper but rather to decide to take a growth journey. The growth should be faceted with academics, wellness, psychological and sociological exercises and a lot of reflection to improve our emotional intelligence (EQ) concurrently with new knowledge.

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— Patsy Oburn

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JW: EQ. Why would this be a desired DCMA outcome for a program designed to complete a degree?

PO: Consider for a moment the look of the workplace from past, present and to the future. Regardless of how we do our jobs or where we do them, I suggest that the biggest challenge to successful organizations always has been and always will be dealing with people. We have struggled over many years to figure out how to get folks to communicate and collaborate. Now, with our inevitable virtual world of commerce, we are even more challenged. This is why EQ is so important. If I lack self-awareness and social awareness, then I probably won't make any effort to seek to understand before being understood, as Confucius advised.

By taking the journey and ... invest[ing] in self-reflection and social growth, we are really bringing back a better employee or improved potential future leader. As a taxpayer, I see this as a much better investment than just getting a piece of paper that says you managed to complete coursework.



JW: Is this the totality of your academic experience?

PO: No. Since my degree is in leadership and management, I learned a lot of cutting-edge concepts on human resources, employment law and global business strategy. I also learned to really work in a virtual world. In order to complete 80 credits within 18 months, I had to take virtual classes from other colleges to complete my general education requirements. When I completed a 100 percent virtual



biology course, including labs, I fully realized what can be done via a computer. It's amazing. We just have to shift our thinking. You know, our paradigm, to use an old-school term.

JW: Describe one of your typical days for me ... or were there any typical days?

PO: A typical day for me began around 9 a.m. and ran until 11 p.m. In a day, I would have gym class for about an hour. This was great — I lost weight and really felt good about my health. The days were full of homework and my virtual courses and two to three nights were on-campus classes. I took Bob Schmitt's advice and began with a smaller class load and added classes each semester as I improved my time management and class execution [skills]. When you take this many classes, you really have to stay focused and on schedule. I tried to not work on the weekends, which worked until finals week and in my last semester when I was carrying 28 credits. That was very painful.

JW: How does a program like this affect your personal life?

(Top) Patsy Oburn, former DCMA Sabbatical Program participant (right), alongside her classmate Erin Quinn (left) at the University of Mary Washington's College of Graduate and Professional Studies, Stafford, Va.

(Above) Patsy Oburn, official graduation picture. (Photos courtesy of Patsy Oburn, DCMA Headquarters)

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PO: During my sabbatical I didn’t have separate lives, such as school and personal. I was simply a student, and school came first. I am very fortunate that I have a supportive spouse, family and friends. Folks tried very hard to work around my commitments without putting guilt on me. This type of commitment must be agreed to by all the affected family members.

JW: What is your biggest take-away from this experience?

PO: I actually have two: virtual global commerce and generational diversity. I never considered myself a dinosaur regarding work and training methods; however, my academic efforts across one university and two community colleges let me know quickly that I was framing work and training environments from an eight-track tape brain. Thank goodness I quickly figured out that I had to evolve and adapt to the cutting-edge technology of portals and communities. I had five classes that were 100 percent virtual with amazing interactive and collaborative capabilities. This really prepared me to look at virtual global commerce in a totally new light. The best part about this epiphany is that I am fortunate to work for an agency that has a cutting-edge [information technology] department that can support all of the things that I learned in school.

I learned that generational issues, such as age and old-school paradigms — there are those words again — don’t exist unless we create them. If we could all put our judgments on hold when dealing with younger or older folks, we would see that we can be so much more together. Age doesn’t always create wisdom, and youth isn’t always unknowing. I met some truly remarkable young folks and gained a couple of friendships

that I hope will last a lifetime. When we shared in the classroom, I learned as much from the young folks as I did from the sage on the stage. After all, the young folks help keep us alive and challenged to learn the next new thing. We must not become lazy and apathetic because we are fooled by our own perceived wisdom and value. My goal is to keep up with each new young generation and be willing to listen and learn. I want to be sharing tunes on my MP3 player with my grandchildren and looking to the future with excitement of what can be shared, not with dread of getting lost. In addition to being baby-boomer fluent, I want to speak veteran and Gen X and Y with ease. I believe this makes me a more valued DCMA employee and a greater asset to humankind.

JW: Any advice to fellow DCMA sabbatical candidates?

PO: Yes: just apply and take the entire journey. Really stretch yourself psychologically, sociologically, emotionally and, yes, academically. Do it for you, and we will all benefit. 



(Above) Patsy Oburn and her husband Bob on the day of her graduation from the University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Va., May 12, 2007. (Photo courtesy of Patsy Oburn, DCMA Headquarters)