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Distance Learning: Serving Those Who Serve

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Distance Learning: Serving Those Who Serve

HIGHER EDUCATION USED TO LOOK JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER LEVEL OF EDUCATION: STUDENTS IN A CLASSROOM, LISTENING TO A PROFESSOR LECTURE. TODAY, THANKS TO ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY AND IMPROVED MASS TRANSPORTATION, HIGHER EDUCATION CAN HAPPEN IN A VARIETY OF WAYS—OR IN MULTIPLE WAYS SIMULTANEOUSLY.

Such was the case for Floribert Kubwayezu when he signed up for the Master of International Development Administration (MIDA) program through Andrews University.

“MIDA is based on a blended learning model,” explains Glynis Bradfield, director of adult and online student services for the School of Distance Education at Andrews University. “There are three distinct parts to this method: reading ahead; meeting in person; working independently and submitting projects online.”

While living in Burundi and working for World Vision, Floribert traveled periodically to meet with his cohort onsite at affiliated campuses in South Africa, Kenya and Togo. The ten-day in-person sessions were intense but meaningful. In this way, Floribert and his cohort studied cultural and development anthropology, ethics in development, public policy, organizational behavior and leadership, applied statistical methods, risk management and resilience, and much more.

“I’ve been working as a humanitarian in Burundi for more than ten years,” Floribert says. “The MIDA program was related to what I was already doing and was exactly what I needed in my career. Being able to meet and have discussions with others in related fields of work was incredibly rewarding for me personally and professionally.”

MIDA, which has now been restructured into the Community & International Development Program (MSCID), is a graduate-level program focused on enhancing the skill sets of those working in or

interested in working in community and/or international development relief. The recent restructure of the program incorporates a local component, preparing students to serve in their own communities as well as abroad.

For Floribert, the challenge came when, due to circumstances beyond anyone’s control, his cohort had to shift to being fully online.

“He had not signed up for a fully online program,” Glynis points out, “so he wasn’t equipped to be successful.”

With less than 6 percent of the population of Burundi having access to the internet¹, and those who do experiencing slow, weak connections, Floribert, along with most of his cohort, was stuck.

“Typically students who enroll in online courses do so with the necessary tools,” Glynis says. “Then we provide proactive online communication to move students forward as though we were connected face-to-face. Floribert was not set up to make online courses work, so we had to be creative in how we got him to the finish line.”

Their approach worked, and Floribert was able to travel to the U.S. to receive his degree at graduation on the Michigan campus in May 2023. Despite the challenges he faced, Floribert says his Andrews education has already proven invaluable.

“My work is centered around humanitarian development and peace-building,” Floribert says. “The Andrews International Development program not only further strengthened the skills I was already using—such as writing proposals, project

cycles and needs assessments—but also gave me additional skills to further my contribution to humanitarian efforts in my country.”

Floribert also points out that the American approach to education differed greatly from what he was used to and feels the collaborative cohort model significantly advanced the depth and breadth of his graduate learning experience. Glynis, who completed undergraduate study in Africa and a master’s at Andrews, concurs.

“There are many good qualities about the African approach to education,” she explains. “You’re pushed to perform and there’s much more structure and rigor. There is not, however, much thought to inclusion. The system favors those who excel and does not always cater to the margins.”

This, Glynis says, is where Andrews University’s focus on whole person development comes into play.

“Our graduate programs reflect the Adventist model of mentoring relationships, expecting each person to bring to the learning environment knowledge that’s worthy of sharing and learning together,” she expounds. “The MIDA program was designed for students who are leaders in their fields and looking for training to be more effective and efficient at what they already do well.”

This was something Floribert specifically noted about his Andrews experience.

“The instructors focus on our success,” he says. “Even as we communicate mostly at a distance, they notice when something is amiss and ask us how they can help. You don’t just receive an education, you also participate in the education of others, including your instructors. I appreciated that a lot.”

Though the interactive, applied learning approach is very common in American graduate programs, what sets Andrews apart is its integration of faith and learning.

“Everything always came back around to faith,” recalls Floribert. “Every course introduction applied biblical perspectives and Christian ethics, and every class period began with prayer. It was everything important in life combined into one program.”

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a global mission—some would call it a mandate—to serve. Andrews University’s distance learning program makes it possible for more people in more places to train to better change their world.

“The church needs people serving where they are,” Glynis says. “They can’t leave their jobs for school; they need to study and apply their learning at a slower rate of completion but a greater rate of application. That’s what Andrews’ online programs provide.”

Though Floribert’s contract with World Vision has now ended, he is optimistic that his new MIDA degree from Andrews University will garner him an even better job through which he can do even more work toward building peace in his country.

“Andrews has expanded my potential,” he says. Based on the skills he learned at Andrews University, Floribert is now open to different sectors of work he could not consider before, such as administration, finance, programming and child protection. “It’s not hard to see why we in Burundi—and many other parts of the world—need access to programs like this. I am very lucky to have had this experience, and I want many others to have it, too.”

Distance learning may have its challenges, but its value far surpasses them. And regardless of where students are learning, they are all part of the Andrews family.

“Our goal is to help students learn at a distance without feeling distanced,” Glynis says. “We try very hard to create community even online, and we mean what our website says: ‘Because life keeps going, we go where you go.’ This is how we serve those who are serving the world.”

¹ Central Intelligence Agency. (2023, May 16). Burundi. Central Intelligence Agency. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burundi/#communications>

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