CISSP-holders Save Time and Money in MSIA

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
CTO, School of Graduate Studies
Norwich University, Northfield VT

Readers are aware that I’ve been involved with the creation and direction of the Master of Science in Information Assurance program at Norwich University since its inception in 2002. I am delighted to report that the Norwich MSIA is now ready to offer holders of (ISC)^2’s CISSP certification significant savings in time and money in earning our graduate degree.

We are prepared to admit qualified applicants who hold the CISSP at the time of their application with waiver of the first seminar, “Foundations,” in the MSIA. CISSP holders can complete their master’s degree in 15 months with five online courses (four required seminars and an elective) and thus save three months and one sixth of the tuition fees. In all other respects, the 15-month, 30-credit degree is identical to the 18-month, 36-credit degree. Students study in groups of about 15; these “cohorts” mostly stay together for all but their elective course. The fifth seminar is an elective drawn from a menu of available courses. After completion of the sixth seminar, all students come to the campus of Norwich University for a one-week Residency during which the MSIA faculty organize valuable workshops.

Each 11-week seminar involves assigned commentary from faculty (often in the form of narrated PowerPoint lectures), weekly readings (required and optional), three discussion topics per week, and nine 1,000 word research papers usually involving a specific case study (normally the student’s own workplace). The research papers can involve interviews and analysis of specific security issues; I like to say that “reality trumps theory” in the MSIA – we want our students to challenge the theoretical information they are reading by looking at real-world situations. Instructors will provide thoughtful, constructive feedback on each essay.

There are two short exams, each consisting of queries from imaginary executives or colleagues asking for explanations about security-management issues (or complaining about them) and requiring 500-word responses.

The final requirement is an analytical report (much like a professional consultant’s report) summarizing the findings of the seminar-long research, providing an integration of the student’s thinking and external sources of information, making recommendations for improvement and providing some sense of the priorities and resource requirements for the proposals. These reports are typically in the 8,000-10,000 word range.

Grading in the seminars is consistent with graduate-school standards; instructors use grading rubrics and anything that falls below an 80% (a B grade) in a weekly essay or an individual exam answer is given a zero. Our Assistant Directors monitor student performance closely to help students cope with unexpected difficulties such as sudden travel demands or family emergencies.

I’ve put our _MSIA Program Guidelines_ on my Web site for anyone to
Finally, our admissions process involves writing an essay that answers some straightforward questions:

1. Why do you want a Master’s Degree in Information Assurance? What are your learning goals? Professional development goals?
2. Why have you chosen Norwich University? Have you researched other programs?
3. Why does a Master’s Degree in management of information assurance provide a more appropriate learning path for you than a degree based heavily upon technical content? Where will a management focus lead you?
4. Describe personal (and professional) strengths and weaknesses that will affect your success in the program. Provide examples of each.
5. Describe circumstances that demonstrate your ability to spend 15-20 hours each week on MSIA studies. What would your approach to academic studies look like?
6. Describe workplace issues that will affect your success. Present any opportunities and/or obstacles that may impact your learning and professional development goals.

The Admissions Committee (I’m a member) looks carefully at how the candidate responds to these questions and evaluates résumés, letters of recommendation, and transcripts. As a result of careful screening and dedicated work by our instructors and staff, we have an extraordinarily high retention rate despite the demanding curriculum and grading standards. On average, 90% of the students entering a seminar complete that seminar (some drop out and re-enroll) and 85% of our students overall complete their degrees successfully.

For more information about the special arrangements for CISSP holders in the MSIA program, please visit our special Web page. <http://msia.norwich.edu/cissp/> Perhaps I’ll see your application as it goes through the Admissions Committee!

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M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the Master of Science in Information Assurance <http://www.graduate.norwich.edu/infoassurance/> and CTO of the School of Graduate Studies at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

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