Pfc. Michael V. May

BPAS-W 100-06

Feature 4

CERTIFICATION

They don’t get a raise. They don’t receive a promotion, and it’s not a requirement. The process can take months. Extra studying and preparation are necessary, on top of their already full workloads -- and they do it all just to gain even more responsibility.

To some this might sound crazy, but for a select few instructors at the Defense Information School here, it’s all worth it to become a DINFOS master instructor.

The Master Instructor Program here is a self-paced, four-step program that allows instructors to take a more active role in the material they teach and challenge themselves personally, said Air Force Tech. Sgt. Lori L. Mills. Mills is a master instructor herself, as well as the noncommissioned officer in charge of the Staff and Faculty Development office at DINFOS, which handles master instructor certifications.

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All of the instructors are encouraged to participate in the program once they have become certified instructors here, she said.

Before instructors can wear the master instructor badge, however, they must complete a rigorous certification process, Mills said. They first need to have an enrollment request form signed by their department head and their NCOIC that recommends them for the program. After enrollment, the candidates are given six modules, each containing different DINFOS-specific questions that pertain to DINFOS policy or to basic knowledge master instructors should know, including information that is outside an instructor's department, she said.

The questions can be very challenging, especially ones that give scenarios and require the instructors to think through them to answer, she said. Candidates need to study hard and know their material.

Once they are ready, it's up to the instructors to orally respond to the questions and have a master instructor sign off on the module. Candidates are encouraged not to give simple answers to the questions, but to really know and be able to explain the material.

Studying is the easy part, Mills said.

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“I encourage people to set aside time each day or each week, and just work on their modules. The hard part is actually knowing them; then we can sign them off,” said Mills.

Next, candidates need to have a master instructor evaluate three of their teaching sessions, she said. Master instructors sit in and watch class proceedings, taking notes on what an instructor does well in the class and what could have been done better. Different master instructors evaluate them every time. This gives the candidate a wider scope of feedback, said Mills.

The next step of the process is an open book test. It covers 75 questions in two hours and is designed to test the candidate’s ability to look up answers, a basic skill necessary for master instructors, Mills said.

“It’s more of a measurement of, ‘Do you know where this is?’ than ‘Do you know the answer?’” said Mills.

The final step of the process is the board interview. The board is made up of three or four master instructors. Usually, they like to ask questions that require the candidates to think, she said.

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Because the master instructors on the board can often be a candidate's very close friends, emotions can sometimes run high for the candidates, especially at the end, when the board instructors ask what getting the master instructor badge means to them, Mills said.

"That's when I lost it. I'll be honest; I cried," she said.

Air Force Capt. Jeremy L. Eggers, a master instructor in the Public Affairs Leadership Department at DINFOS, said getting his badge was very emotional for him as well.

"I was just glad it was over," said Eggers. "I was in the program for six months. It felt great."

He said he decided to enroll in the program because he desired to be part of the process of how the Public Affairs Leadership Department worked and because there were no master instructors in his department at the time. He views the program as a means to gain more credibility, especially as the junior officer in his department, he said.

"I wanted to have a seat at the table advising the boss," said Eggers. "The Master Instructor Program is a way for me to get greater responsibility. That's the secret to advancement of your career and happiness in your life."

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For Mills, becoming a master instructor was more a personal goal than a professional one. She wanted to challenge herself and knew that she would regret not pushing herself forward later if she didn't, Mills said.

"I need to do it for myself," she said. "I don't get a parking spot or anything. That's the beauty of the program."

One reason for enrolling in the Master Instructor Program that was the same for both Mills and Eggers was that they both sought to make a difference here. Some instructors serve two or three years at DINFOS and then move on. But for others, it's important for them to have an even bigger impact.

"It's for the people who want to go a step beyond for themselves, to make a difference," Mills said.