



Seven Earn Virtual Master's in Disability Policy

By Maya Aguilar and Lauren Burke
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The graduates traveled from the Philippines and Cambodia to Bangkok, Thailand, for convocation. Photo Courtesy IDPP

Getting an advanced degree is never easy. Now imagine doing it while being miles apart from your peers and professors, who are dispersed around the world.

Seven students recently completed a year-long master's in Comparative and International Disability Policy (CIDP) program, the world's first virtual master's program in disability policy, offered by American University and its [Institute on Disability and Public Policy](#). The graduating cohort, all of whom earned their degrees virtually, traveled from the Philippines and Cambodia to Bangkok, Thailand, for the August 14 event to participate in a convocation ceremony officiated by School of International Service associate professor Derrick L. Cogburn.

These students are not ordinary students. They are extraordinary in that three are blind or visually impaired, two are deaf or hard of hearing, and two have mobility impairments. Each pursued a CIDP degree despite potential barriers. Their shared goal is to make a direct impact on the public policies that affect their daily lives.

Vice provost for academic administration Violeta Etle, who offered welcome remarks at the ceremony, said, “These students are trailblazers. They are pushing the envelope on a number of fronts, particularly because of their physical disabilities. They have been able to overcome that, and that’s a very exciting thing.

The CIDP program is offered by SIS and facilitated by the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP) – a network of universities and outreach partners focused on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region.

“The IDPP and the CIDP program is a testament to our mission of bringing the world to AU and AU to the world,” Etle said.

According to Professor Cogburn, who is also executive director of the IDPP and [COTELCO](#), the CIDP program helps to create an inclusive society that transcends geographic and other barriers.

“What’s unique about the CIDP program is the innovative way in which we tackle geographically-distributed, accessible teaching and learning. The program allows faculty and students with and without disabilities to teach and learn through accessible online courses from anywhere in the world,” Cogburn said.

The convocation ceremony was hosted by IDPP partner Mahidol University and featured speakers Surin Pitsuwan, ASEAN Secretary General; Ambassador Luis Gallegos, Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the UN and Chairman of the UN committee that negotiated the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Derrick L. Cogburn; Vice Provost Violeta Etle; Shuichi Ohno, Executive Director of The Nippon Foundation (TNF), which supports the IDPP; and graduating student John Paul “Pong” Cruz, who spoke on behalf of his graduating class.

Cruz offered a moving testimony of his journey through life living with a disability and his triumph in the CIDP program. “This day is the first step to achieving the goals that I have set for my life. Everything I have learned through this program has given me an opportunity to be more engaged, providing me with a framework to conduct research within the public policy field,” Cruz said.

The convocation ceremony overlapped with the IDPP’s second annual residency program, which orients incoming students to the pedagogy and cyberinfrastructure tools used in the CIDP program. The second CIDP cohort consists of students with and without disabilities from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Ghana, Nigeria, and the United States.

[Source:](http://www.american.edu/media/news/20120928_IDPP_Convocation.cfm) http://www.american.edu/media/news/20120928_IDPP_Convocation.cfm