



Never Too Late To Learn

More and more, colleges and universities are acknowledging the demanding schedules, harried lives and educational needs of adult students.

By Elaina Loveland

RISING TRENDS AND THE ONLINE OPTION

Argosy University, a national university with an Arlington campus, has attracted adult students to its graduate programs for several years but has recently witnessed a growing interest among adults for undergraduate degrees. This fall it began offering four-year undergraduate programs, including a Bachelor of Science in Business and



“Going back to college was something I always wanted to do,” said Wendall Dayley, who used to commute 55 miles each way from Winchester to attend classes at George Mason University. “It was one of my lifelong goals that I wanted to accomplish, and finally—I did.”

At 34 years old, Dayley is one of many Northern Virginia residents who returned to college later in life to finish his undergraduate degree.


In 2005, American adults pursuing undergraduate degrees made up 18.8 percent of the total undergraduate population of approximately 17.5 million, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. From 2005 to 2015, it is projected that the number of students over 25 years old pursuing degrees will increase by 18 percent.

In 2007, Sen. Hillary Clinton reintroduced the Non-Traditional Student Success Act, a bill that helps non-traditional students get into and succeed in college. It aims to increase Pell Grants for adults, allow less than half-time students to receive federal aid, increase the income protection allowance to allow working students to keep more of their income without losing student aid, and expand the Lifetime Learning Credit to allow students to receive more money in advance for tuition costs. Some success has been attained; two provisions have been made law: expanding access to Pell Grants for part-time students and reducing the work penalty for independent students.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR WORKING ADULTS

According to Andrew Flagel, dean of admissions, George Mason University has 4,500 undergraduates over the age of 24.

“What makes George Mason distinctive is that it always worked closely with the economic drivers within the region to meet the needs of the local workforce,” Flagel noted. “The degree programs students, including adults, enroll in reflect the high demand of employers in the region. Some of the hot fields are IT, conflict resolution and health sciences.”



With 570 students, George Mason has the largest individualized program for adult students in Virginia.

With 570 students, George Mason has the largest individualized program for adult students in Virginia, according to Mark Sistek, advising director of the Bachelor of Individualized Studies (BIS) program.

The BIS program, started in 1975, houses students from 35 to 68 years of age in its classrooms. Participants can enroll in any traditional degree program in the university, but the opportunity to create their own degree program by designing their majors is attractive to many adults. “For a number of adult students, they are looking (for) a way to focus their last years of study on coursework that is meaningful to them,” Sistek said.

Dayley chose the BIS program. “I learned that I could set up my own

degree program that fit better with my personal goals,” he said, adding that he was able to combine his interests in history and creative writing into a “historical and creative writing” degree.

South of the Beltway, the University of Mary Washington started a bachelor of professional studies program for adults in 1999. The college serves students in the City of Fredericksburg and Prince William, Caroline and Fauquier Counties, as well as Westmoreland Beach.

With students ranging from late 20s to early 50s, the program offers “concentrations,” rather than majors, in such fields as leadership and management, computer information systems, accounting, network security and interdisciplinary studies. Undergrad liberal studies’ degrees are also offered.

“Adult students contribute very differently in class discussions because of their work experience,” said Jeanie Kline, UMW’s associate vice president for academic affairs and administrative services. “Students in the program work in government, insurance companies, hospitals and other local employers.”

For Stafford resident Heather Knight, going to college right out of high school wasn’t the best option. “I changed my major too many times,” she said.

An opportunity came her way to gain training in information technology, and she started her career at Geico, where she has been for 11 years. “I always wanted to go back to finish my degree,” she explained. Now 38, Knight is enrolled in the University of Mary Washington’s Bachelor of Professional Studies program in Computer Technology.

Recently promoted to information technology manager at Geico, Knight’s plan to enter this program was well timed: Her new job requires her to either have a degree or be

a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology.

Additionally, Argosy recognizes that offering courses online is attractive to adult learners, and has been providing online and blended courses since 2002. “Northern Virginia’s workforce is highly educated and highly motivated to further their education. In this way, the flexibility of online course formats lends itself well to the lifestyle of our



pursuing one, and before enrolling at the University of Mary Washington, Knight had taken a couple courses in the traditional college classroom during the day, with little success. "It was difficult," she explained. "The atmosphere wasn't very comfortable because the students didn't have the same level of life experience."

DEVELOPING PROGRAMS

Developing quality adult undergraduate education options is no easy task.

"Institutions need to be able to offer a clear pathway to a degree," said Robert Otten, associate vice president for academic affairs at Marymount University in Arlington. "Traditional college students have leisure and flexibility in what they want to major in. With adults who don't have the extra time to experiment with what courses to take and when to take them, they need a clear path; they need to know exactly what they need to take and when those courses will be available."

Mike Canfield, director of the school's undergraduate admissions, said 33 percent of undergraduate students who transfer to Marymount are 25 years or older.

The Marymount program is constructed differently than a typical undergraduate degree, as the students' unique needs were considered in developing the curriculum. Rather than a major, this program requires two concentrations.

"Adults returning to school aren't often able to complete courses in the same way as a typical undergraduate plan because the curriculum is often highly structured and demands students complete certain courses in a particular order, which is why adults can benefit from a flexible major that has more options," Otten said.

Aside from offering adult students a special program, Marymount strives to meet the need it saw for

more options beyond its main campus, and opened a new site in Reston in May. Of the programs they are offering, two are specifically geared toward adults finishing their degrees in nursing and business.

"Demand is one reason," Otten explained. "There is a nursing shortage. The Northern Virginia community college system is doing a good job at offering entry-level nursing programs pipeline at the other end. And the BBA is a good option to either enter or advance the field of business."

THE BALANCING ACT

Adult students have challenges that a



"You can learn so much from the experiences from other adults in the classroom and can relate to them better than younger students."

typical college student doesn't face.

"It's a balancing act for them," Kline said. "Adults have a lot of balls in the air between family, work and school."

"It can be very taxing," Knight admitted. "I work eight to 12 hours a day depending on projects at work, and I have a 4-year-old son."

Fortunately, many college programs are designed with adults' time in mind. At the University of Mary Washington, students meet only one night a week and complete the rest of the coursework outside of class. Participants of programs at George Mason and Marymount also meet in the evenings.

"Balancing my family and the academic work was the hardest challenge," explained Dayley, who is married and has two children. "Three hours of commute time put a strain on spending time with family and studying."

Morrya Jone, 38, a recent graduate of Marymount, emphasized that time management is vital to success. "You can get frazzled if you aren't organizing, especially if you are working and going to school. So students must prioritize what they have to do," she suggested.

ADVICE FOR ADULT STUDENTS

Many options exist for the many adults returning to college.

"Look for a program that is flexible and geared toward adult professionals," Knight advised. "You can learn so much from the experiences from other adults in the classroom and can relate to them better than younger students. Also, the professors typically teach in addition to their full-time jobs, so you can learn a great deal from their life experiences, too."

When a student finds a program that appeals to him or her, Otten said, the next step should be meeting with an advisor who is a representative of the program to ensure it is a good fit before making an investment by enrolling. "Prospective students really have to know the people who will administer the program. It makes a crucial difference, making the right decision about which program to attend."

Perseverance is perhaps the most important piece of advice for adults contemplating going back to school.

"Stick with it," Jone recommended. "It's easy to want to give up at times. But surrounding yourself with people who want to help you succeed, like your friends and family—and sometimes, even your boss—can make a huge difference."

area," said William Brown, president of Argosy University's campus in Washington, D.C.

And recently, the university began offering complete degree programs online. "We do have a large portion of students who are interested in this, but also in the opportunity to combine classroom and online learning to get the best of both worlds: face-to-face interaction and flexibility of schedule."

