

A Degree of Courage

Non-traditional students are returning to school during these tough times to enhance their skills or retrain, in preparation for a better economy.

By Ashleigh Eisbrener

When times are tough, the tough get degrees. Local community colleges are seeing a swelling number of adults returning to school to retrain or re-career. "Some [adult students] are interested in upgrading their skills to become more marketable, and others are looking for a totally new career, especially if their current career field is suffering a decline because of the economy," says Evelyn Schiele, Special Assistant to the President for Outreach and Communications at the College of Lake County. Since just last year, there has been a 25 percent increase in the number of adult students attending Harper College, says Nancy Wajler, Special Assistant to the Vice President of Academic Affairs for Adult Learning at the school. A year and a half ago, the Professional Advancement and Learning Center, an adult learning facility, was added to Harper to better serve the adult population returning to school.

Elmer Tau, 60, is among Harper's growing population of nontraditional students who have returned to school to upgrade their skills. Elmer made a career as a design engineer, specializing in industrial plant design. He started off with a paper and pencil but advanced with technology when computer drafting software became available. After being promoted to supervisor, Elmer no longer worked on the computer, allowing the ever-evolving program to slip past him. "My employer didn't want me doing drawings and learning this program," he says. "My time was better spent designing and running projects."

But when the economy took a downward turn, Elmer's job at the United States Gypsum Company (USG), a leader in the material building industry, was in jeopardy. "USG suffered three mass layoffs," he says. "I survived the first two, but I didn't make the last one." Elmer was laid off in December of 2008. He has tried to return to work as a designer, but says most companies are looking for somebody familiar with the computer drafting program AutoCAD. In order to be more marketable, he signed up for two four-week courses at Harper to learn the software. Elmer is part of the group of students advancing their knowledge for their current career, but many other adults are returning to school to completely change direction.

New career choices may be the result of a failing industry, job burnout, stress or need of a change. Carolyn Recker, 61, just graduated from CLC with an Associate's Degree to teach English abroad. She started college in the 1960s but left early to start a family. "I raised two daughters, and both of them graduated from college," Carolyn says. "I just never got around to doing it for myself."

She may have never had the chance had she not suffered the loss of her business as a result of a dishonest partner. "After the business failed, I was thinking 'what do I do now?'" she says. With the nudge of her



daughters she enrolled at CLC to study medical coding. While attending the school she learned of a program that allowed students to study abroad in China for a semester. Always interested in Chinese culture, she thought this was a great opportunity but didn't consider it for herself. Her daughters did. "My daughter crossed her arms and said 'What about you?'" Carolyn says. With the award of scholarships and financial aid, she enrolled in the program and started learning Mandarin.

Just a few years ago Carolyn never thought she'd be back in school. She constantly made excuses, terrified of failure. "I didn't want to have the 'coulda, woulda, shoulda' thoughts," she says. "I didn't want to be at the end of my life and think, 'Gee, I wish I could have done that.'" So, she gathered her strength and returned to school. Just two weeks into the program, she remembers thinking "I don't know why I didn't do this sooner." Even with the current tough economic times, Carolyn says now is always a good time to go back to school.

"I think it's a great time as long as people have the means and support system within their family," says Angela Nackovic, Adult Recruitment Project Manager at the College of DuPage. Although some are worried about accruing the debt, there are always options. Scholarship opportunities, grants and loans are always available. Unemployment offices are also chipping in for those who qualify. Contact your local college to better understand your opportunities. Let your fears motivate you.

"You can choose to listen to your excuses, or you can choose to take a deep breath and dive in," Carolyn says. "I'm so glad I dove in; the water is great."