

Why ADULTS are Returning to School!

Adults are 47% of the New and Returning Students on Today's Campuses

By Ashleigh Eisbrener

Adults are the fastest growing educational demographic in the nation, according to recent statistics from the United States Department of Education. "Our counseling and career advising staff say that adults return to college for two reasons – some are interested in upgrading their skills to become more marketable, and others are looking for a totally new career," says Evelyn Schiele, Special Assistant to the President for Outreach and Communications at the College of Lake County, "Especially if their current career field is suffering a decline because of the economy."

Largely recognized as being "non-traditional," this group is defined as heterogeneous students over the age of 25 who may not have attended college directly following high school, may have taken time away from formal education, may have dependents and/or may have a full-time job. With the large number of adult students returning to school, it's becoming inaccurate to call them non-traditional. Adult students make up 47 percent of the new and returning student population on today's campuses, reports the Association for Nontraditional Students in Higher Education.

Adult students differ from most traditional students, because of the fact that many are balancing family, work and school. This group represents a variety of experiences and needs. "About a year-and-a-half ago when I was hired, I started seeing the writing on the wall that this was an important avenue," says Nancy Wajler, Special Assistant to the Vice President of Academic Affairs for Adult Learning at Harper College. "I felt it was very important to have this population well-served." Harper as well as many other community colleges cater to this group of students by offering a wealth of services to smooth their transition to the classroom, including:

- Free academic and career counseling
- Registration by mail, phone, fax and online
- Credit card and deferred tuition payments
- Flexible class schedules
- Evening and weekend courses
- Online degree programs and courses
- Long office, bookstore and library hours
- Daytime child care
- Transition or re-entry programs
- Adult student scholarships

Aside from requiring certain services, adult students are also more demanding than their younger counterparts when it comes to time. They often know exactly what they are looking for and want their education fast. Since a quick turnaround is so important, many community schools offer adult-oriented programs that can be completed in a short amount of time. They call it the Fast Track Program, and it's available for students age 24 and over.

This accelerated program can be completed in approximately a two to two-and-a-half year period by attending only one class per week.



There is a class time for everyone with day, evening, weekend and online courses. "These offer flexibility to allow college to fit into the busy schedule of adult learners," says Evelyn. With only one class meeting per week, more emphasis is put on work outside the classroom than in traditional courses. Students need to plan on spending at least 10 to 15 hours a week on homework, depending on your skill level and comfort with assignments.

If you are not interested in an Associate's Degree but want to better your education to boost your career, certificate programs are also offered. These classes result in a certificate of completion rather than a degree. Their purpose is to educate students in one particular aspect of a field. For example, a massage therapist may complete a certificate program in order to be certified in reflexology, in addition to massage. Since certificate programs can be completed in as little as two classes, they are affordable for many.

Depending on the length of the certificate program, the cost varies, but each course is often less than \$100 per credit hour if you attend an in-district community college. The Fast Track Program can cost around \$8,000, including tuition, fees and books. Grants, loans, payment plans and scholarships are offered to help students better manage the cost of returning to school. A financial aid staff is also available to speak to prospective students about how to afford tuition.

The first step for returning to school is figuring out which direction you want to go. For those students who are not yet sure which path to pursue, there are people who can help. "Counselors and career advisers will meet with them free of charge to help them explore options and what education is required," says Evelyn. You must then create a plan for covering the cost of school. Although we are going through tough economic times, advisers say not to let that hold you back. "It's a great time for adults to come back, and the money is out there," says Angela Nackovic, Adult Recruitment Project Manager at the College of DuPage. "People may shy away from it because of the expense, but there are options."