

1 Adults as Learners (and Workers, Parents, Children, Volunteers)

THE IMPACT OF BUSY LIVES ON COLLEGE SUCCESS



BY THE END OF THIS SECTION, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- Explain how the maturity gained from life experience supports success in school
- Explain how the demands of the many roles adults play pose an obstacle to success in school
- Identify key challenges to your college experience and general strategies for addressing them

A VIEW FROM THE STARTING LINE

There's good news and not-so-good news. The good news is that you have made the commitment to return to school and earn a credential to improve your life. Good for you! You have joined the growing number of adults who return to college each year—just over 9 million in 2011 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Like them, however, you are probably finding it difficult to add school to your other responsibilities. The not-so-good news is that this is a problem that won't go away.

But there's more good news. From your years working, raising children, helping parents, volunteering at your local church or school, and pursuing interests that have come your way, you have learned a lot that can help you succeed in college. The next few pages will help you think through the strengths you bring to your adult college experience and recognize the specific risks and challenges you are likely to experience as a result of having other responsibilities. The purpose of knowing your strengths and risks is to use that knowledge as the basis for later planning.

But first, let's take a good look at the nature of adulthood.

We have come to think of adulthood as defined by age: age requirements for driving, voting, drinking, serving in the armed forces, and signing a legal contract imply that we become "adult" on a given birthday. What is more accurate is that as the years pass, we mature and begin to think and act in ways that enable us to assume more responsibility in society. The rich and various life experiences of adulthood mean that we have had more opportunities to succeed or fail and to understand what led to those results. We've had more opportunity to encounter surprises, pleasant and unpleasant, and to adapt to them. The depth of experience that characterizes adulthood has left us with skills, attitudes, and knowledge that lead us to experience college somewhat differently from traditional college students. Think about how each of the following observations will affect your college experience:

- You've lived longer, have more experience, and are better able to put things, good and bad, in perspective.
- You have moved through more transitions and survived more changes.
- You have assumed more roles simultaneously and are constantly juggling them.
- You know yourself better.
- You know what matters to you.

Take a few minutes to create a timeline of your life since high school and then notice how your life experience has helped you gain these skills.

EXPERIENCE INVENTORY

Begin with your last year of high school and list your major life events by corresponding decade. Feel free to add more detail if you like, but keep your entries short enough so you can see your life at a glance. Here's an example:

Marcia

1983 Graduated from high school
College—2 years; dropped out due to mom's illness
Earned online certificate in real estate
Sold real estate
Got married

- 1990 Moved to New Orleans (husband's job)
 First child born
 Moved to Jackson, MS, when husband promoted
 Second child born
 Mother's death
 Became officer in homeowner's association
 Back to school at Jackson State—part-time
- 2000 Earned associate's degree in business
 Started business at home—children's parties
 Expanded business beyond home office
 Husband lost job
 Became active in campaigning for local school board election
- 2010 Divorce
 Filed bankruptcy—business failing
 First child graduated from high school
 Decision to earn bachelor's, then master's degree

As most people move into their twenties, they form more serious personal relationships, devote more time and attention to work, perhaps become advocates for social organizations and issues, and begin to face the challenge of competing demands. For most adults, life is a constant process of deciding what matters most right now so they can decide where to spend their time. We all have had a lot of practice in reviewing our values and evaluating activities against those values.

For example, Marcia says:

I've always been very active at my kids' school, volunteering in their classrooms and serving as an officer for the PTO. I even got involved in the school board election to help a friend get elected. But I had to cut back on this once I started college. I didn't completely quit, because it's too important to me. But I did limit my volunteering to occasional events rather than assuming a leadership position. That way I can decide how my "mom" work can complement rather than compete with my school work.

These attributes are strengths that put you in a good position to manage the challenges, overcome the obstacles, and enjoy the discoveries of college. Nevertheless, our experiences as adults can pose challenges to college success as well. Consider:

- You have had longer to become attached to old, outdated notions about yourself and about college.
- You are held accountable in more places for more things.
- You have more to lose: self-esteem, money, time, quality of life.
- You have more to gain: self-esteem, money, quality of life.

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

Many adults who return to college say that they never thought they would go to college. Maybe they didn't do very well in high school and were told by teachers they weren't "college material." Or maybe they are the first in their family to go to college. In these circumstances, it is a source of pride to get into college, but it can also be a source of confusion and self-doubt: *Can I do it? What if I'm not "cut out" for college? Will my family and friends think I'm being ridiculous to try to get a college degree?*

Sometimes it can become a source of tension within families when the college student is exposed to ideas that challenge the beliefs they have grown up with. At the very time that adult learners need the support and encouragement of family and friends to persist and succeed in college, they might find that those people resent the time college requires and are uncomfortable with the changes in the adult student as they grow and develop. Marcia experienced some of this:

I didn't go to college right after high school because my father said that it was more important for my brothers to get an education because they would be supporting families. He encouraged me to go to work and, hopefully, meet someone to marry. After I had my kids, it got clearer to me that I needed an education so I could encourage them to go to college and to be able to support myself in case something happened to my husband. As it turned out, something happened to my marriage! But once I started college, I felt like a foreigner and was self-conscious. I was afraid everyone around me knew that I didn't know what I was doing and wouldn't make it to graduation. And it just got worse when I started talking about my sociology class and my sisters laughed at me for pretending to sound "smart." I finally figured out that I needed to find other women at college who were in my situation and that's made a big difference. I don't feel so much like a phony anymore.

MORE TO GAIN AND MORE TO LOSE

There's irony in the fact that the incredible benefits of getting a college education become the biggest risks for adults as well. We know that college graduates earn significantly more money over their lifetime, but they also have to find a way to pay for education, often while they are paying for child care or putting other family members through college as well. We know that adults who graduate from college experience noticeable gains in self-confidence, but they also feel vulnerable at the outset, worried about appearing foolish in class if they don't know the right answers. We know that a college education enriches life by giving us a broader knowledge base to appreciate and explore the world around us more fully. However, to persist through college to graduation, many adults feel they have to sacrifice some quality of life—such as time devoted to family and favorite activities—to get there.

In the same way that you have gotten good at setting priorities and deciding where to put your time and money at any given time, you're capable of deciding how much you can afford to invest now in order to reap the rewards of a college education later. There is no one solution to this problem, but there is a very clear process to use to find a solution. Investing time in taking a hard look at your values and your current commitments can provide the basis for making choices that work.

Consider Marcia's situation:

When my kids were little and my mom was sick, I was constantly trying to figure out who needed me most. Sometimes it was just a matter of shifting from "mom" to "daughter/caretaker" and that made me dizzy. Sometimes everyone wanted or needed my attention at the same time and I had to know what the fallout would be if someone didn't get what they wanted. I knew my mom was dying and I wanted to give her everything I could, while I could. I also knew it was important for my kids to trust me to take care of them. No matter where I was or what I was doing, I almost always felt that I should be somewhere else doing something else. No matter how crazy things got, I still kept my "eye on the prize" and found ways to plug along, even if I had to adjust my plan a lot of times.

Think about your situation in Activity 1.