



Adult Learners

It takes engaged faculty to support this group of students that is growing nationwide

By KAREN CAVALIERE ZITOMER

When Daniel McKee set foot on Penn State's University Park campus to start his bachelor's degree, it wasn't as one of the thousands of 18-year-olds that embark upon their freshman journey each year. McKee was 38. He had been married and divorced and had spent years in the corporate workforce.

Earning a college degree was something he had always wanted to do for himself. When he was younger, he felt unprepared. But as he got older and assumed more life responsibilities, the goal grew increasingly daunting. "I had always wanted to complete my college degree, but with two children and a full-time job it appeared impossible," said McKee.

What's more, a divorce, a job switch and

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Certain life events have been tagged as "triggers for learning" by adult education researchers. Career change, divorce and loss of employment act as catalysts for adults wanting to return to school.

Daniel McKee began his bachelor's degree at age 38.

Dick Ackley—Campus Photography

adjusting to sharing custody of his two children made getting a degree seem even more unlikely. It wasn't until years later, when McKee was laid off from his job, that the idea of going to college resurfaced.

Now a second-year major in secondary education with a minor in history, McKee finds the process both challenging and rewarding.



Charlene Harrison is director of the Center for Adult Learner Services, which offers resources and guidance for the adult learner.

“There are times when I have to do schoolwork, and my children want Dad to help them with something,” said McKee. “I feel guilty and torn when this happens. But I just keep telling my children—and more so myself—that this has to be done to attain my goal. My children are getting to understand this and have been wonderful.”

Adult Learner Defined

McKee is part of a growing group of adult learners. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, adult learners in the United States will number 6.8 million by 2013. Between 2001 and 2003, the number of adult learners in Pennsylvania increased by 7 percent, compared to 2 percent nationwide. At Penn State last year, the adult learner population comprised 23 percent of total campus enrollments.

Penn State defines the adult learner as “a student who has been away from formal education for four or more years, a veteran of the United States Armed Services,

someone 24 years of age and older, or a person of any age who assumes multiple adult roles, such as parent, employee, spouse/partner and student.”

“Adult learners at Penn State run the gamut from those who are taking a course or two for personal improvement to those who are seeking a degree,” explained Charlene Harrison, director of Penn State’s Center for Adult Learner Services, which offers resources and guidance for the adult learner. More than half of undergraduate adult learners at the University are enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs, and 22 percent are pursuing an associate degree. Eighteen percent are nondegree learners.

A Day in the Life

LaCosta Aumiller decided to go back to school to become a genetic counselor after interacting with the counselor assigned to her 3-year-old son who has Down syndrome.

“I decided I wanted to go back to college to help other children and families in situations similar to mine. Persevering through the challenges of having a disabled child made me realize who I am and what I want out of life,” said Aumiller, who also has a 6-year-old and a toddler.

Just listening to a description of Aumiller’s average day—attending to family members, including her husband, who is mentally disabled; seeing her children off to school; making the meals—is overwhelming.

Information for Adult Learners

- The Center for Adult Learner Services offers resources and guidance for the adult learner, at <http://www.sa.psu.edu/cals/> or 814-863-3887.
- Penn State Continuing Education provides programs and services designed with the adult learner in mind, at <http://www.outreach.psu.edu/CE/>, 814-865-3443 or 800-228-1627.
- Penn State’s online education program, the World Campus, delivers more than 50 distance education programs to learners around the world, at <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu>.

Adult Learners Recognized

Five Penn State adult learners were among the 10 students who received the Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education's Outstanding Adult Students in Higher Education awards this year. The award recognizes adult students who have shown success in coping with numerous roles, have overcome difficult circumstances to pursue higher education needs and have taken innovative approaches to reach their goals.

Penn State University Park honorees were John Baumgardner, a human development and family studies graduate; Angela Childers-Conner, a labor and industrial relations major; and Nina Cohen, a wildlife and fisheries science major. Joseph Royer, a Penn State York staff member pursuing a bachelor's degree in information sciences and technology, and Anne Alderman Stokes, enrolled in the occupational therapy program at Penn State Mont Alto, also garnered the honor.

"I've learned to focus on the needs of my family when I'm at home; when I'm on campus, I focus only on my needs as a student," said Aumiller.

Aumiller's strong focus is characteristic of many adult learners. Penn State faculty who have worked closely with adult learners say the maturity and drive that these students bring to the classroom is infectious.

"What adult learners have to give up to get to college is phenomenal," said Dr. Gary San Julian, a professor of wildlife resources who has advised many adult students. "Adult learners—especially those with a family to support—recognize what a privilege it is to go to school. Because of that, they become very active participants in their college experience."

That enthusiasm also rubs off on children at home. McKee noted that his middle-school-age daughter has been inspired to start investigating which college she might want to attend. And his son has taken his studies much more seriously since seeing his father's commitment to school.

"He watches me study, and when I check my grades

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PROFESSOR OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES

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online and do well, he gets excited," said McKee. "Now, his work has improved 100 percent. His grades have been awesome, and he takes his time doing work. The feeling is just hard to explain—when you can have such a positive influence on someone you love so much." ♥

Dick Ackley—Campus Photography



Danielle Sagan (left), an undergraduate Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) major and treasurer of Adult Learners at Penn State, discusses classwork in the Center for Adult Learner Services' lounge with Lisa Lachman, a fellow HDFS major and mother of three.