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continuing education

Head of the Class

Adult students rise to the top, right alongside their GPAs

When Kirsty Montgomery started classes in 1987 in England, all she could do was watch the clock in anticipation of hitting the pub after class. Now, 18 years later, as a student in Northwestern's School of Continuing Studies, her focus has shifted from the numbers on the clock to the letters on her transcript.

“I’m definitely more grade conscious now,” says the mother of three children. “My GPA has gone up probably 1.5 to two points since I was 18. I have a great interest in learning the material and doing all the reading because it’s interesting.”

Kirsty, who will be graduating in June with a degree in history and political science, is one among many adult students who are more invested than ever in their continuing studies and heavily concentrated on achieving top grades.

“Nothing but an A will be good enough,” says Sue Kirkman, the vice president of academics of the Harrington College of Design. “These people are accomplished, well-educated, well-traveled and they expect an A, so they understand what it takes to get the A.”

But why are these adult students so concentrated on achieving high marks? Mary Lou Nugent, the interim dean of the college of professional students at the University of St. Francis says one reason may be attributed to the students’ employers who encourage them to return to school for a promotion or job opportunity. Many of these employers, Nugent says, reimburse tuition for students based on their grade.

“We have run into situations for anxiety about grades because they know they won’t get reimbursed,” Mary Lou says.

Other school administrators point to a more common reason for this trend: adults are simply more focused in getting the most out of their education, naturally yielding a higher grade.

“They’ve made a conscious decision to place a priority in their lives,” says Timothy Gordon, the Northwestern’s School of Continuing Studies’ dean for student services and registration. “In terms of academic participation, they tend to focus a bit more [than the traditional student].”

Gordon says the adult students at Northwestern perform so strongly, their GPAs are separated only by a fraction of a point. At Harrington, Sue says that to reduce grade inflation, the school had to create a grading policy on every syllabus that encourages the students to go above and beyond.

University administrators say these grades reflect the wealth of experience that adult students bring into the classroom, giving them a great advantage over typical students for success in their schooling.

“They’re very dedicated to their studies, so they’re the ones that are going to follow through with assignments and talk to the teacher,” says Mary Lou. “Because of their experience, their response to the assignments is richer. There’s a lot of dedication of energy and commitment to the classes.”

Adult students are also adept at maintaining a schedule, a skill they’re forced to develop while balancing work and family even before enrolling in continuing studies programs.

“They’ve learned time management, while a person outside of high school is still figuring out who they are and what they want to be,” Sue says. “[Adult students] know how they’re going to accomplish it and in what time.”

The students’ success also benefits faculty members, who are forced to alter their curriculum in order to make their classes even more difficult. Dr. March Bankirer, Ph.D., president of Argosy University in Chicago, says that because of the necessity to juggle school, work and family, adult students demand a worthwhile syllabus.

“They’re very focused in their use of time, but

also what may challenge the faculty,” she says. “They don’t want assignments that they see as time wasters. It continues to encourage the faculty to stay sharp.”

Along with challenging the faculty comes a stronger rapport between the students and university professors and administrators. This could be attributed to the smaller age difference or the common experiences shared among students and teachers.

“It may be age or just maturity, but there’s much more of an adult mature approach [to education], and hopefully confidence, so there’s more of a balance of power between the professor and student,” says Mary Lou Nugent of St. Francis. “Adult students have been through so much more, so they’re willing to meet the faculty member one on one and more at the same level.”

Some schools are even trying to build more of a community among adult students, encouraging those with time constraints to schedule in social interaction among their peers. Kirsty Montgomery, the president of Northwestern’s School of Continuing Education’s student advisory board, says one of her main focuses as president is fostering more of a community among students.

“Because of the love of learning, there’s a rapport that you get with your fellow students,” she says. “We’re very fortunate that the administration are so keen to hear feedback and [encourage] our development of some sort of social activity and social rapport.”

Though she’s pushing to develop the social interaction that typical students see, Kirsty says there’s yet another glaring difference in her return for the student who greatly anticipated her graduation the first time around.

“Come next June, there will be sadness when I finish,” says Kirsty, who will be applying for graduate school after graduation. “I feel like I’ve barely touched the surface of what I’d like to learn.” ■ **By Kate Ward**

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