



Ace Grad School, Decades After Your BA

Another degree can open doors to a new career, if you follow these groundrules

EXPLORE YOUR OPTIONS by Elaine Pofeldt on 3/6/14

For elementary-school teacher Leslie Bowman, earning a master's degree in education in her late 40s gave her the ticket to a dream—instructing college students. Earning a degree looked too expensive until she found an affordable program at California State. Now she teaches composition and writing at Walden University, and a course in cybercrime at Ozarks Technical Community College in Springfield, Missouri.

Plenty of midlifers are going after new degrees. The National Center for Education Statistics projects that the number of students ages 35 and up enrolled in U.S. degree-granting institutions, including two-year-colleges, will climb to 4.5 million by 2020. Motivated by a desire to get ahead in their careers or pivot into new ones, they bring tremendous drive to their studies, say professors who work with them. "People of typical college age might be going through the motions. Adult students are determined," says Bruce Bachenheimer, 53, who runs the Entrepreneurship Lab at Pace University in New York (and went back to school for an MBA just before he turned 40).

Nonetheless, it isn't always easy for adult learners to complete their studies because of demands in their outside lives—which younger students don't always face. Tailoring your approach to your stage of life—rather than burning yourself out by pulling all-nighters like you did when you were 18—can help, whether you study online or in a traditional program.

Embrace Being a Novice Work experience can be a powerful advantage, especially if you've road tested what you are studying, notes Bachenheimer. Nonetheless, you're there to learn—not prove your expertise as you would at work. Giving yourself permission to *not* know the course material before you walk in the door can help you relax and keep pace with younger students who, without feeling the need to prove their authority, just dive in. Striving to maintain a spirit of openness helped John Shufeldt, 53, an emergency room physician at St. Joseph's Hospital Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona, earn an MBA in 1995 and a law degree in 2005. "I have no problem being the dumbest person in the room," he says.

Listening—and being sparing with your war stories of related work or parenting experiences—will win you points with younger colleagues who want to make sure the professor gets through the material they will be tested on, based on a recent, snarky thread on Reddit about midcareer students who monopolize class

Project Manage Your Coursework While younger classmates may have the freedom for weekend-long study marathons and the physical energy to recover, it's smarter to manage studying the way you do projects at work, mapping out daily time for coursework, advises Bowman. The sense of accomplishment you gain from daily progress will build momentum and boost your confidence that you can complete the program. If you're juggling school with raising a family, getting up an hour earlier in the morning is often the best way to make sure your coursework doesn't get put off for another day.

If you're taking online classes, you may notice that assignments tend to be due on Sundays, the official start of the week at many schools. Bowman recommends resetting deadlines to Saturday. Given the other responsibilities you're balancing, trying to devote the entire Sunday to schoolwork is likely to leave you frantic and erode your desire to continue.

Socialize Your Own Way Joining study groups with fellow students or showing up for career networking activities can help you get more out of any academic program, but it can be tricky for midlife students to navigate other opportunities to socialize. Bachenheimer, who lived in a dorm with students young enough to be his children when he earned his MBA, recommends that midlifers say yes to events like a drink with the classmates who worked with them on a final presentation or to a sporting event at the school, but should feel free to avoid events where they will feel awkward. "They're not going to want to go to the frat party," he says. A good rule of thumb is to follow the same rules you might with much younger colleagues at work.