



Adult students take many paths to continuing their education

Story by **Scott Girard**

Photos submitted

Kayla Behrendt wasn't used to putting herself first, especially after having her first child six years ago.

But last year, the 28-year-old Madison resident decided to sacrifice some family time to re-enroll in school. Now, pursuing her dental assisting degree from Madison College, Behrendt said it will be worth the trade-off in the long run.

"I put my goals and my dreams on the back burner when I started a family," Behrendt said. "It eats you up inside when you start to put yourself first, because then you feel selfish."

"But ... when I'm done with school and in my field, I'm going to be at a job that I can have good time with my family, I can plan things because now I can financially take them to go do something fun."

Behrendt is among the more than 8,000 students 24 and older who return to school every year at Madison College. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has about 1,000 such students every year, too.

They're part of a nationwide trend of growth in students 25 or older pursuing postsecondary education, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The group grew by 13 percent from 2005 to 2015.

They enroll for myriad reasons, like seeking a better life for their families, pursuing a different occupation or finding financial security.

While the latter is commonly considered an outcome of higher education, pursuing it can create some risk in the short term, said Madison College adviser Jamesetta Fousek.



Kayla Behrendt says one of the biggest challenges about going back to school is spending less time with her family, but she's hopeful that when she graduates and starts in her new field, she'll be in a better place to support them. "I'm going to be at a job that I can have good time with my family, I can plan things because now I can financially take them to go do something fun," Behrendt says.

Odyssey program helps people get back on their feet

"They do need to sacrifice quite a deal to be in these seats," Fousek said.

These "nontraditional students" often find other challenges, too, not the least of which is standing out on campus, especially at a place like UW-Madison, where most of its 31,710 undergraduates follow the more "traditional" timeline of attending college right after high school.

"In most of their classes, they almost never see anyone that is

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remotely close to their age," said Moira Kelley, a senior counselor in UW-Madison's division of continuing studies. "I don't know how they do it on a campus like this."

That's how Josephine Lorya, a Sudanese refugee who has lived most of her life in the U.S., felt as a 27-year-old sitting at the end of a table for her last final of her undergraduate career – eight months pregnant and just two days before giving birth to her second child.

"I kind of felt out of place," Lorya recalled, "but I just knew what my mission was. I didn't really care what other people thought."

Lorya, a graduate of the UW-Madison Odyssey Project for adults facing economic challenges, went on to receive her master's degree in social work while pregnant with her fourth child a year ago. She's hoping her hard work and the support of her children and husband will pay off as her kids grow up and make decisions about their own futures – especially her 12-year-old daughter, who has seen her work from the first day of undergrad.

"You just never give up in life," Lorya said. "Education is something that nobody can ever take away from you."



Emily Auerbach, center, leads the Odyssey Project at UW-Madison, which helps adults facing financial challenges begin getting back to school.

For the last 15 years, a UW-Madison program has helped more than 400 low-income adults "get a jumpstart at earning college degrees they never thought possible," according to its website.

The Odyssey Project, led by project director and founder Emily Auerbach, helps create an opportunity for people who had given up on or been forced to avoid pursuing higher education.

"In all the things I've done in the 30 years I've been on the UW-Madison campus, the Odyssey Project is the thing I'm most passionate about," Auerbach said. "When we open the door, it's just amazing to watch the transformation that can happen."

The program allows 30 students each year to earn six credits in English literature, helping them begin or restart their pursuit of higher education – for free.

"They can't believe it (is free)," Auerbach said. "They usually are looking for the catch. What I say is the catch is hard work."

That was certainly true for Josephine Lorya, who went through the program and eventually graduated from UW-Madison with a master's degree in social work.

"I'm like, 'What? They don't do that in America, there's nothing free,'" she recalled. "There's always a catch."

Lorya had her first child at 19, and found school "just so hard to reach." But while braiding hair at a salon years later, she talked to a woman about going back to school, and the woman recommended the Odyssey Project.

Since its inception, the program has expanded to help its students with other barriers to their education, especially finding childcare. The adult group meets weekly on Wednesday nights, and the project added "Odyssey Junior" in 2015, which provides enrichment for kids up to age 18, Auerbach said.

"We are trying early on to (get students to) think of themselves as college-bound," she said.

They also continue to provide support to program graduates through "Onward Odyssey," which offers help with planning classes, navigating funding resources and ongoing child care.

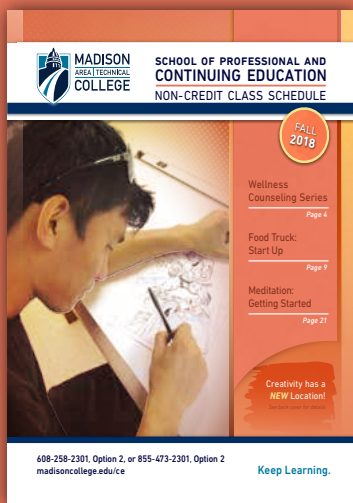
"It's not as if once they get through our program everything is fixed," Auerbach said.

She also continues to provide moral support, attending eventual graduation ceremonies for former students and sometimes even helping them find work – like she did for Lorya when the student had to quit her full-time job, but still had a family to support.

She said the time is worth it when she sees the students "seize hold of an opportunity and make something of it."

"For a lot of students, they say that it's the first time that they feel smart, that they feel a sense of belonging to a whole community of people that are trying to go forward to their dreams," Auerbach said.

Continuing education for its own sake



Some programs offer no degree, but provide an opportunity for returning students to develop skills within their field or for a hobby.

Madison College offers more than 400 noncredit courses as part of its Continuing Education program.

The courses cover topics like web design skills, languages, accounting, woodworking and guitar.

Gwen Jones, the director of

marketing for the Division of Continuing Education, said the courses each year are developed based on feedback from the people they hope will take them.

"One of the things that we do, we listen," Jones said.

The school sends an outreach survey with the fall class schedule, asking questions about when the person's employment status, what type of learning they're interested in and which class times would be convenient.

"With noncredit, we have to meet them where they are," Jones said. "We cannot say, 'OK, we're putting this class on at 10 o'clock in the morning and we expect you to be there.'"

Jones said the school generally has two types of students: those "still in the workforce" seeking professional development in their field, and those looking for enrichment – often retirees.

"This is an opportunity for some of our older folks in the community to take advantage of our classes," she said. "Stuff that they may have never had time for when they were in the workforce."

Once classes are set, Jones explained the instructor search can vary from just asking someone they know who has experience in the area to doctoral students at UW-Madison in that subject, the latter especially for languages.

"When our classes are more, I guess, academic, we're looking for instructors definitely with the credentials to teach the class," she said. "Some of our classes, we are looking for maybe a skilled hobbyist."

The school mailed more than 326,000 copies of its fall course guide out earlier this month to every household in the area. Classes start at varying times throughout the semester, and more information can be found at madisoncollege.edu/continuing-education.

Jones hopes to see people sign up for whatever classes they might be interested in – especially a few of the new offerings like meditation, food-truck management or genealogy – and find a way to take time out to build on an old interest or establish a new one.

"That's really what it's all about: What can I do for me?" she said.

BACK TO SCHOOL

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Finding resources

Each of the public postsecondary institutions in Madison has set up systems to specifically help returning students find their way through the different challenges they face.

At UW-Madison, the support starts for some before they're even enrolled. That's how both Lorya and Keena Atkinson – who graduated at age 28 – began their work toward a degree in the Odyssey Project.

That program, aimed at adults facing "economic barriers," began in 2003 and offers 30 adults per year a chance to get a "foot in the door" with six English credits from UW-Madison, explained program director Emily Auerbach.

And the program continues to provide support even after students graduate and move on to their own education – whether it's childcare, motivation, funding for books or helping to navigate the challenges of enrolling in college.

"Odyssey project really helped me navigate all the barriers," Lorya said.

By the time they enroll, there are also other resources to help students.

For Behrendt at Madison College, those systems – including the student center she was initially hesitant to use because of her age and the assistance of advisers – helped her overcome early doubts that had her thinking "maybe this is just not meant to be."

That was especially true in chemistry class, a subject she hadn't needed for her earlier associate's degree in legal studies. But after a semester of struggling and thinking "all the time" about dropping out and eventually not passing the class, Behrendt returned to retake the class with a different professor, found a tutor in the student center and passed the class.

Fousek said that while tutoring like that can be a major help for many students, there's other work necessary to help students even get onto campus and into a field they're interested in.

"It's really hard to navigate the system," she said. "It sometimes is kind of overwhelming."

Standing out

As she planned for her first day back in school, Behrendt was anticipating a challenge.

"I'm like, 'I'm gonna be the oldest person in this classroom,'" she recalled thinking.

While she found that not to be true at Madison College, which has 39.7 percent of its more than 21,000 degree-pursuing students 24 and older, that assumption is more accurate among undergraduates at UW-Madison.

Atkinson, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology, knew she'd be in "huge classes" when she started.

"In most of my classes I was the only black person in my classes, I was the oldest person in my classes," she recalled.

Lorya turned to her professors for support, especially in the sociology department.

"Just because I don't look like the other students and I'm not a traditional student ... it doesn't make them any better than I am," she said she eventually realized.

The now-parent-of-four also found a community within one of her language classes.

"I felt like, 'Oh wow,' the students who took Swahili I felt like I had something in common with them," she said.

Finding commonalities helped Hanna Hubiankova adjust

to being one of the only students over 24-years-old in her classes in both the art and music departments at UW-Madison. After being initially “surprised that anybody asked” how old she was, she eventually accepted it, joked with those who asked and brushed the stress of the question aside.

“Who cares how old I am?” she said she now thinks. “I don’t have to care because I’m pursuing my dream and I’m on the right path.”

School with kids

It can be all too easy to put that dream on hold, though, when children are involved.

That’s what Atkinson found after having her first child at age 16 while in foster care, living with the abusive father of her child and eventually ending up homeless after losing her job.

When an alumna of the Odyssey Project “really encouraged me to apply for the program,” she was skeptical – mostly of herself.

“I was homeless, I had a 3-year-old, I didn’t have a job,” she recalled. “I didn’t think I really had much to offer the world at that point.”

After eventually giving in and applying to Odyssey, a year later she was approaching graduation from the program and realized, “I don’t want to not go to school.”

That led her to cosmetology college, which she graduated from in 2011. She then went back to Madison College for initial credits and transferred to UW-Madison in 2013 as a 25-year-old to pursue her degree in psychology.

Simply navigating online homework became a new barrier for her, as she didn’t have internet. That meant biking to the Truax campus to use the computer lab with her son until she received a scholarship that helped pay for her internet and a printer.

When she was pregnant with her second child, she noticed the differences in priorities and responsibilities with her peers around her, but it didn’t slow her motivation.

“I’m pregnant, walking up Bascom, riding my bike to school still,” she recalled. “I was never like ‘I’m not gonna finish.’”

And she said it’s been worth all the effort.

“I would do it 10 times again,” she said. “I don’t have any regrets about the experience. I’m so thankful that I had the opportunity to go to school again. It’s had such an effect on my children and my parenting.”



Keena Atkinson, center, poses with her two sons at her graduation from UW-Madison with a degree in psychology after initially making it through UW’s Odyssey Project, which helps adults facing financial challenges.



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Getting the call

The first step in going back to school is being admitted.

For students who haven't attended in years, that can be a challenge, from navigating available majors and finding old transcripts to making sure any old credits transfer to their new school.

That can make the good news especially exciting.

"UW-Madison called me and told me on the phone, 'We're excited to offer you admission,'" Keena Atkinson recalled. "I was so excited, I was crying when they told me that. I wasn't confident that I was gonna get accepted, but I did."

Atkinson, now 30, transferred to UW-Madison at age 25 after one-and-a-half years at Madison College and was first rejected. That made her question the idea of transferring, but a counselor at Madison College encouraged her, she said, and she decided to give it a second go.

Lorya also began her late college journey at Madison College, where she fulfilled her liberal arts credits at a much lower cost than it would have been at UW-Madison. She knocked those credits out in three semesters before becoming pregnant with her second son – and continued with her transfer anyway.

Once accepted, though, the work is far from over, as it can get complicated with how credits transfer and what that means for how many credits they need to take.

"There are not very many of them coming in as new freshman," UW-Madison's Moira Kelley said. "What transfers and what doesn't? Sometimes that can be a little bit of a struggle."

FAMILY LIFE

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Behrendt said it can be hard when she gets home late – she works full-time as a parking attendant – and still has schoolwork to do instead of spending time with her two children.

"My oldest would sit up and try to wait his longest to see me," she said, smiling. "I hope when (my six-year-old) sees me so joyful about school ... I think it helps him (care about learning)."

Lorya, who now has four children – three of whom were born while she attended UW-Madison – also thinks there's a message her hard work sends to her children, especially her 12-year-old daughter who already gets straight A's.

"School is like her thing," Lorya said. "I've always told her you can't give up in life. When they see me staying up late doing my homework, they just try to make me smile." ●

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