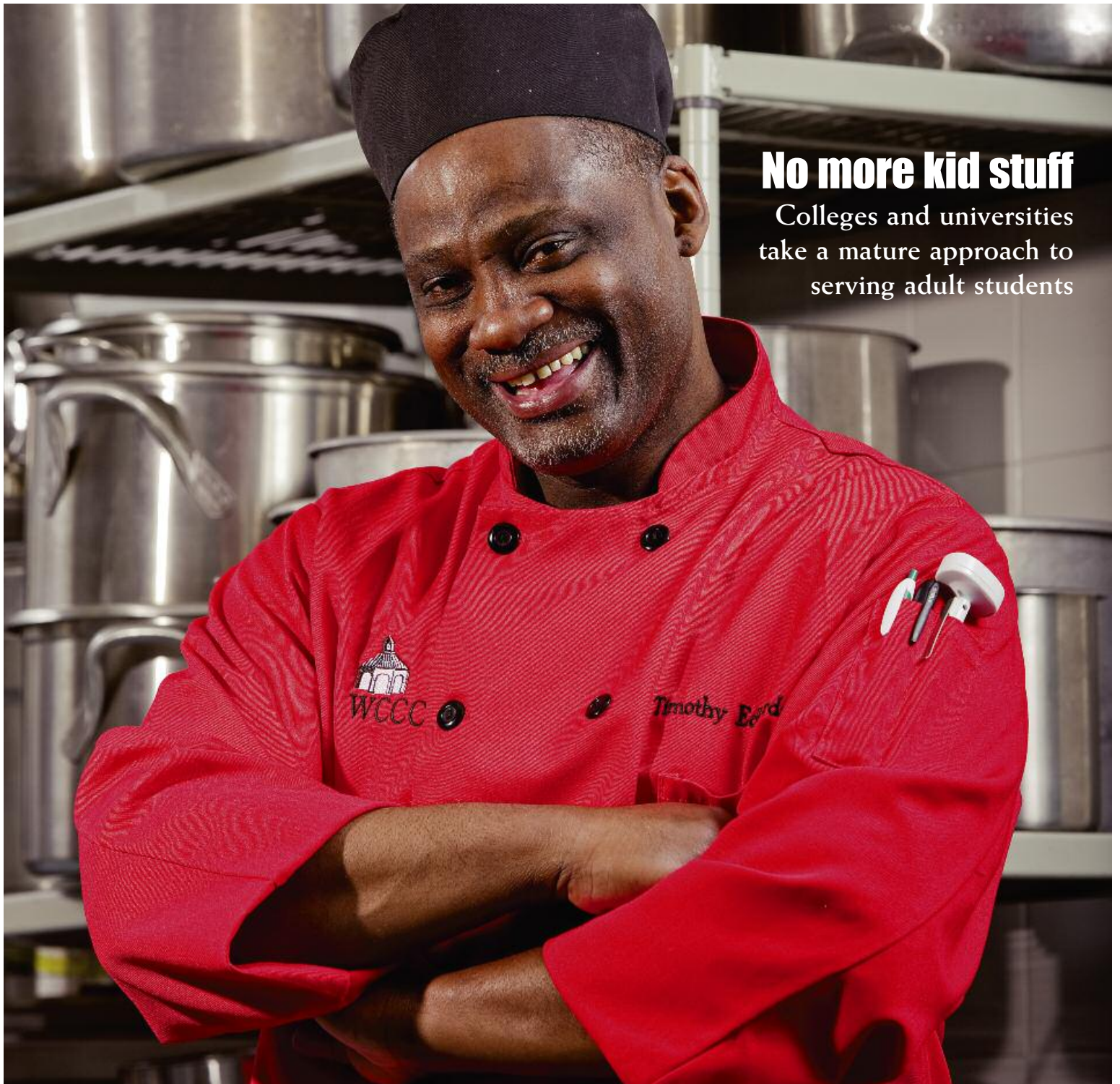


LUMINA FOUNDATION

FOCUS™

Fall 2009



No more kid stuff

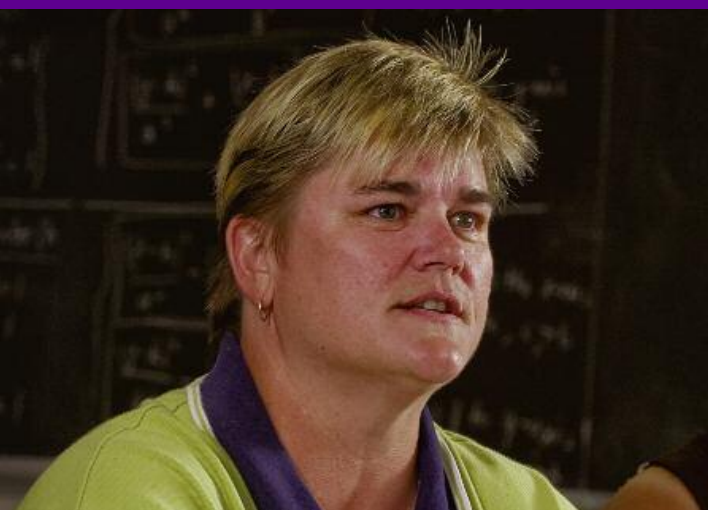
Colleges and universities
take a mature approach to
serving adult students



Seeking credit for life lessons: Page 10



Welder's life is on a new arc: Page 13



Ex-Army mechanic shifts gears: Page 17

On the cover: Timothy Edwards, 45, recently earned an associate degree with a culinary arts certificate from Westmoreland Community College in western Pennsylvania. A former corrections officer, he's now working as a sous chef.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The term “college kid” seems all but meaningless these days, given the rising numbers of adults on campus. The current economic downturn is funneling hundreds of thousands of over-25 Americans into postsecondary education — and that trend is sure to intensify as the global, knowledge-based economy demands workers with ever-higher levels of education and training.

Overall, the adult-learning boom is a positive trend, one that holds tremendous promise for individual Americans and for the nation as a whole. In fact, it is a trend we must fully embrace if we hope to return the United States to a position of global leadership in college degree attainment. To reach this “big goal” — which we at Lumina Foundation have articulated as increasing the nation's level of high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by 2025 — we absolutely *must* increase the number of degree-seeking adults, and we must do everything possible to ensure their success.

Certainly, today's adult students face challenges as they pursue their academic goals. They juggle the competing demands and obligations of family and career. They're incredibly pressed for time. Having been away from the classroom for years — sometimes decades — adult students often find that their academic skills have atrophied and their study habits have slipped. And for many, the cost of higher education is problematic, if not prohibitive.

Still, the payoff of postsecondary education is so significant — and the cost of *not* obtaining a college degree or credential so steep — that huge numbers of adult students are stepping up to face these challenges.

Fortunately, they're not alone in their quest. All over the nation, institutions and organizations are working to assist the nation's adult students. That's what this issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* is about: showcasing those efforts.

In this issue, you'll see the faces of today's adult-learning trend — real people confronting real-life problems as they work to carve out better lives for themselves and their families. For example:

- In western Pennsylvania, you'll meet Brad Barclay, a 57-year-old, laid-off welder who is taking advantage of a federal program to attend Westmoreland Community College.
- In Louisiana, you'll read about Paula Barker, a mother of four who is seeking a bachelor's degree at Northwestern Louisiana State University after working 35 years as a registered nurse.
- In Portland, Ore., you'll meet Nena Williams, 44, a former Army diesel mechanic and nurse's aide who recently earned an associate degree and two certificates from Portland Community College.

All of these examples, and countless others in classrooms on campuses all over the nation, demonstrate the incredible diversity of today's adult students. Their goals differ, as do the barriers they face. Yet all of us have much to gain from their success. In many ways, the prosperity and stability of our nation *depend* on their success.

In this issue of *Focus*, we shine a spotlight on these students, and on the dedicated educators who work every day to help them reach their goals. It is our hope that their stories can inspire an even stronger push — a truly grown-up effort, if you will — to better serve the nation's adult learners.



Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation for Education



Blayne Henson got off to a bad start as a “young, silly and undisciplined” college freshman. After a decade-long detour, he’s now a Northwestern Louisiana State University graduate and plans to pursue a master’s degree in education.

'Adult ed' grows

Higher
education
seeks to
better serve
increasing
numbers of
nontraditional
learners

up

By Susan M. Headden

When Blayne Henson first attended Northwestern Louisiana State University back in 1996, he approached his studies the way so many 18-year-olds do, and with predictable results. "I was young, silly and undisciplined ... and I flunked out," he says. A stint in the Army followed, teaching Henson a lot about discipline and even more about why he didn't want a career in the military. He made sporadic yet earnest attempts to get his college degree

over the next few years, but he was stymied time and again by the commitments of family and 12-hour overnight shifts at a local lumber mill. Still, the gap in his education nagged at him. “There were the employment opportunities,” he says, “but it was mostly personal. I felt it was important to finish what I started.”

So when a friend told him about a new state-sponsored program that makes it easier for working adults to return to college, the Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana (CALL), Henson was more than ready to sign up. Because he took most of his classes online, he could do it on his own schedule, and because some of the courses were compressed, he could earn credits more quickly. He was far more motivated than he had been the first time around, he says, so he learned and retained more information, and earned the grades to match. “You might say I was obsessed with getting a degree,” he says. He was even awarded course credit for work he had done at the mill. In May, at age 32, Henson crossed the stage at the college’s campus in Natchitoches to collect his bachelor of arts in general studies with a minor in industrial engineering. Now an e-learning support specialist at the university, he plans to pursue a master’s degree in education. So it is that the state of Louisiana can count a twofold return on its renewed investment in adult education: It produced not just another college graduate, but a future teacher as well.

More and more, Blayne Henson’s is the face of higher education in America. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the United States can count 6.8 million adult learners, students ages 25 and older. These students, who once represented a distinct minority on college campuses, now account for as much as 70 percent of enrollment. Those numbers are expected to climb rapidly as colleges look for pools of students — and tuition income — to replace the cohort of 18- to 22-year-olds that will start shrinking when the current baby boomlet trails off. At the same time, as the knowledge economy demands more sophisticated workers, higher education is increasingly seen as the engine of global economic growth — an engine that badly needs an overhaul.

According to figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), only 39 percent of Americans today have two- or four-year college degrees, a figure that puts the U.S. well behind other industrialized nations such as Canada, Japan and New Zealand. In Louisiana, the percentage of working adults with at least a two-year degree is a

mere 24 percent, the lowest in the nation. “If what we were doing were working,” says Bruce Chaloux of the Southern Regional Education Board, “we wouldn’t have those kinds of numbers.” Beyond these practical considerations is the universal recognition that learning, whether it takes place on campus or not, is a rewarding lifelong process and a desirable end in itself. And a goal that important, educators agree, must be made far simpler to achieve.

The bad old days

“Adult ed” — for too many years the term has suggested vocational-technical schools, limited course offerings, diploma mills, night classes taught by ill-equipped instructors, and commuter students who were treated as afterthoughts to the young, full-time residential students who provided most of an institution’s revenue and prestige. Some overhauls came in the 1980s, but even schools that focused on adults built hurdles — what the Center for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) calls barriers of “time, place and tradition.”

Blue-collar, low-income and minority students — hampered more than most by money problems, inflexible work hours and child-care responsibilities — have been particularly ill-served by adult programs, educators say.

Says Jacqueline E. King, director of the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education (ACE): “Higher education has done pretty well serving the middle-class adult learner — the real estate agent who is 12 credits shy of a bachelor’s degree or the professional who wants another bachelor’s or who needs more training or certifying. There are lots of adult learners like that, and they tend

to be highly successful. But that’s a very different profile from the single mother, the English language learner, or the displaced worker who thought he was going to have a whole career in the mill.”

Because the opportunity costs for these more challenged learners is high, King says, they need a much more structured approach than “here’s the catalogue — knock yourself out.” It is perhaps not surprising, then, that nontraditional students drop out of college at a much higher rate, 38.9 percent, than that of traditional, full-time students (18.2 percent). The retention rate for nontraditional students age 30 or older is 65.4 percent, and the graduation rate is an abysmal 10.8 percent.

In an attempt to reverse these trends, scores of colleges, both two- and four-year institutions, have committed to radical reforms in how they serve nontraditional adult

As the knowledge economy demands more sophisticated workers, higher education is increasingly seen as the engine of global economic growth.



Christie L. Duncan of Gresham, Ore., recently joined the growing ranks of adult learners in part because of her own life experience. She developed an interest in issues affecting senior citizens while caring for her aging parents, James and Irene Peterson, and decided to enter the gerontology program at Portland Community College.

students. In most cases that means improving outreach, loosening up schedules, accelerating courses, granting interim certificates, teaching more classes online, providing better advising, improving developmental education, and awarding credit for life and work experience. Community colleges, which have long catered to non-traditional students, not surprisingly make up the vanguard of the transformation, and a number of small urban private colleges have successfully repositioned themselves as educators of minority adults. Even traditional four-year institutions such as Penn State are making an aggressive play for adult students. And all are taking some cues from for-profit institutions such as the

University of Phoenix, which have long focused on making college more "adult-friendly."

Whatever the institution, all of the reformers start from the premise that the traditional format of five undergraduate courses, 15 credits per term doesn't work for people supporting families and maintaining full-time jobs. These students — who tend to define themselves as employees who learn rather than as students who work — need to take classes at night, on weekends, even during vacations. Most of these students also need to complete a course of study over an extended period of time, something that many traditional degree programs simply don't allow. For instance, about 78 percent

of first-time, full-time community college students don't complete a two-year course of study within even three years. What these students need, advocates say, are "open-entry, open-exit" policies that allow them to stop and pick up their studies where they left off without penalty. King points to the City College of San Francisco, a two-year institution where students can drop out of a course and return in a later term without having to retake the entire course.

A different perspective holds true for other adult students. Given the depressed economy, more and more students want to earn their degrees quickly. More than most, adult students are motivated to spend the least amount of time possible to get the credits they need for a job or for training. For these students — at least those who can handle the pace — cutting a 15-week course down to seven can make sense. In Indiana, the Purdue College of Technology at Kokomo is now offering an accelerated bachelor's degree that can be earned in just two years. Aimed at workers laid off from the auto industry and other manufacturing sectors, the program awards a degree in organizational leadership with a concentration in industrial management. "It's not for everyone," admits Chaloux. "Some who have started with an accelerated program have backed off." But, he says, "most high-quality 15-week courses can be done in seven."

What makes such schedules possible is the ability to offer courses online, a delivery method that is quickly becoming the norm for nontraditional students. Instead of listening to a lecture in a classroom, students tune in to a video or read a lesson on-screen. They participate by e-mail and electronic chat rooms instead of raising their hands in class. The advantages are many: students can live far from campus, work at their own pace, and fully absorb one lesson before moving on to the next. Online education does present a steeper learning curve to so-called "digital immigrants," adults who came later to computers than younger "digital natives," but students of all ages eventually tend to embrace it. In fact, those who are reluctant to speak up in class often participate more online, and teachers don't have to wait for the next class to answer students' questions. Says Catherine R. Zimmerman, a gerontology instructor at Portland (Oregon) Community College: "You can tailor it to the course and learn what works and what doesn't and adapt. You can be in touch with your students 24-7, and the depth of discussion on so many levels is amazing."

A long-term commitment

Even with the convenience of online delivery, however, learning still takes time. And for adult learners — who often must juggle kids, a job and sometimes aging parents — the road to a degree really *can* be long. That's why many experts endorse the idea of awarding a certificate plus a degree or an interim certificate — a mid-course affirmation that the student is on the right track and making good progress. Interim credentialing is part of the program at Westmoreland Community College in Youngwood, Pa., a working-class town in the coal mining region of southwestern Pennsylvania. At Westmoreland, a participant in Achieving the Dream

— a national initiative to improve student success at community colleges — administrators all but threw out their old educational model and started anew.

The college is now "student-focused instead of faculty-focused," says Mary Snaden, Westmoreland's director of developmental education. That means, for instance, that faculty members now must teach some night classes, and that advising and tutoring are available at off-hours. In a further break with tradition, Westmoreland students seeking associate degrees can also earn certificates in certain fields of study, including in the college's acclaimed culinary arts program. As soon as they accumulate enough credits, they can

serve an apprenticeship at the nearby Nemocolin Woodlands Resort, a luxury hotel and conference center.

That opportunity was important to Westmoreland student Timothy Edwards, 45, of Charleroi, Pa., who says he got hooked on the Food Network while recovering from a hip-replacement operation that kept him from returning to his physically demanding job as a corrections officer. A career in the kitchen seemed an unlikely choice for this brawny, part-time youth football coach who admits he knew next to nothing about food preparation when his program began. "When I told my wife I wanted to learn cooking, she thought I was kidding. She said: 'Well, you can just go in there and make dinner right now.'"

Although Edwards had done well enough in high school, his first experience with college, at California University of Pennsylvania, lasted a semester and a half. "I went there because all my buddies went there," Edwards says. "We partied and all, and my mom said: 'OK that's enough.'" A stint in the military came next,

"I hated math. They would give us these word problems like: 'If a train is going this fast and the other is at this speed...' And all I could say was: 'I hope they don't run into each other.'"

Timothy Edwards



"When I told my wife I wanted to learn cooking, she thought I was kidding," recalls newly minted sous chef Timothy Edwards. "She said: 'Well, you can just go in there and make dinner right now.'"

with Edwards serving as a financial accounting specialist, and the prison job followed. Because he had been away from academics for so long, Edwards at first worried that he wouldn't cut it academically at Westmoreland. "It was overwhelming," he recalls. "All these kids straight out of (high) school. I thought: 'What am I thinking?'" The first semesters, which included some review courses, were especially tough, he says. "I hated math. They would give us these word problems like: 'If a train is going this fast and the other is at this speed...!' And all I could say was: 'I hope they don't run into each other.'"

But Edwards' fears faded, thanks to the help of tutors and counselors, and the encouragement he got from his interim certificate. "Being in the certificate program boosted my confidence and made me feel that I was capable of anything," Edwards says. "And whatever I do I put my all into it." Edwards was

awarded his full culinary certificate last year and his associate degree in general studies in May, along with the distinction of being named the college's ACT 101 Outstanding Student of the Year. He is now a sous chef at a local casino and spends much of his free time reading cookbooks.

For Timothy Edwards, earning credits toward a credential was a key to degree completion. For many other adult students, the first step toward that degree is to award as much credit as possible for what a student has already achieved, whether in college or on the job. More than 60 percent of American students attend two or more colleges on their way to a degree, and transfer students, on average, take an additional full semester to finish. Worse, many find the transfer process so fraught with obstacles that they never go back to college at all. Nationwide, according to 2000 U.S. Census figures, there are 54 million people in the American workforce

As vice president for technology, research and economic development at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, La., Darlene Williams has led the university's participation in a state-sponsored program called the Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana (CALL).



with some college but no degree. Many experts see this group, not as dropouts, but as a vast grove of "low-hanging fruit." With a relatively modest effort, experts say, these people could become degree holders and thus significantly boost the nation's economic and social outlook.

"We keep hearing stories about students with great GPAs who had to leave college because of an illness or because a parent passed away, or just because they didn't pay a library fine or a parking ticket," says David Longanecker, president of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE). "And now they live far away, they have kids, jobs."

Longanecker is not alone in wondering why more colleges don't try harder to get those students back. But many are trying. Among the first to make a big push was New Mexico State University, which determined that, from 1990 to 2000, 3,153 students had left school with 98 credit hours or more and an average GPA of 2.93. The college tracked them down, facilitated their studies in a number of ways and saw 69 percent of them graduate. Louisiana recently determined that 500,000 of its residents had some college but no degree — a figure that Darlene Williams, vice president for technology, research and economic development at Northwestern State, calls "staggering." So the six colleges that joined in the CALL effort bought billboard space, took out television and newspaper ads, and stuffed flyers into utility bills and grocery bags to encourage former students to give higher education another shot. Oklahoma has made a similar push with its Reach Higher Oklahoma program since state records revealed that about 70,000 Oklahomans had at least 77 credit hours but no degrees. Eight public institutions in the state take part, granting degrees in organizational management, ethics, finance, communication and management.

Colleges and universities, especially elite ones, have long been reluctant to honor courses taken outside their walls, arguing that such courses are not as rigorous as their own or don't produce the same learning outcomes. Any loosening of their policies, they say, would diminish the value of their degree — not to mention deprive them of tuition income. But groups such as WICHE are urging institutions to rethink their positions, essentially to shift their focus from the institution to the student. One way is to establish or broaden articulation agreements, which essentially allow credits from certain colleges to be accepted at others. In Louisiana, the institutions participating in the CALL program have carefully studied each other's curricula and have agreed on a matrix that lets students quickly see, for instance, that

they can move seamlessly from the two-year business program at Bossier Parish Community College to the bachelor's degree program in business administration at Northwestern State.

It's not just college credit, though, that demonstrates learning. For older students, higher education is just as likely to come from the lessons of life — running a household, creating things, treating the sick — from any number of jobs that can demonstrate abilities in leadership, conflict resolution, management, mediation, budgeting and sheer technical skill. But if colleges have been loath to recognize outside academic work, they have been even more reluctant to recognize work in the real world. CAEL has long pushed for colleges to value this knowledge and devised methods to help them assess it. But that does not mean they want colleges to make it easy for students to earn experiential credits. "The assumption is that you write a paper and get a free credit," says Blayne Henson. "That is absolutely *not* how it works."

Following the rigorous CAEL standards, Henson applied for and received credit for a safety course he needed for his industrial education minor at Northwestern State. First, he had to take a three-credit-hour independent study course that followed the model of experiential learning developed by noted educational theorist David Kolb. Kolb's model requires students to follow a number of prescribed steps to prove that they have achieved specific outcomes from their non-academic experiences.

"They ask: Did you recognize the learning? Did you apply it?" Henson says. An advocate-adviser helped Henson as he wrote a carefully structured 30-page narrative, accompanied by 40 pages of documentation, including written proof that he had been certified in an OSHA training course. Henson concedes his writing skills "weren't the best" when he started the project, but with the help of a technical writing course built into the curriculum, he says "the writing skills developed right along as the paper took form."

Even if he hadn't won college credit for his experience, Henson says the exercise was a valuable undertaking in itself. "It was a means to an end, but it was also the best course I ever took," he says. "It forces you to sit down and evaluate what you have accomplished. It makes you refocus on where you have been and where you want to go." Indeed, it was in preparing the paper, Henson said, that he realized that so much of what he had done at the lumber plant involved training other workers, and that a career in education was the logical next step.

Nationwide, according to 2000 U.S. Census figures, there are 54 million people in the American workforce with some college but no degree.

A reopened mind

Paula Barker, 56, is another Northwestern State student waiting to hear whether her life experience will earn her credit for an upper-level course in leadership. Barker, the mother of four grown children, has returned to college after 35 years as a registered nurse, having decided that a career as a nursing home administrator would be preferable to one that has for too long required her to work 12-hour shifts, holidays and weekends. The administrator's job doesn't actually require a degree beyond her R.N., but she says: "Getting a bachelor's has been a personal goal of mine for a long time."

Barker says that developing her portfolio toward her degree in general science with a minor in behavioral science helped her to analyze what she had learned as a shift supervisor — dealing with patients and their families, settling conflicts among colleagues and so forth. She had already received six credit hours for her nursing experience based on her autobiography, resume and a review by an instructor. Whether or not she gets credit for the leadership course, she says: "The experience has been absolutely wonderful. It has renewed my interest in learning. I feel like my mind is wide open again."

Before they can be similarly expanded, however, adult minds often face a big barrier. Simply put: Many adult students lack even the basic skills required for introductory college work. About 40 percent of all community college students are required to take at least one remedial course — usually basic math or English — before taking classes for credit. More and more students also need English language help, and still others start at an eighth-grade reading level. Although so-called developmental courses are designed to ensure college success, they can also stop many students before they have even started. A laid-off worker in a desperate hurry to earn a new paycheck can be terribly discouraged by a mandatory, weeks-long detour into non-credit courses that have him computing fractions or writing elementary essays.

In part because of such frustrations, fewer than half of all developmental students complete their studies and move on to for-credit classes. At Westmoreland, where 80 percent of the adult students take developmental education, those grim statistics compelled the college to retool its entire remedial program. "[Developmental students] are always discouraged because they see themselves in the deficit mode," says Snaden. "But we work hard to make sure that they see things the other way around. We ask ourselves: 'What are we not doing?'" Snaden says that 90 percent of students who pass the college's developmental education courses go on to enroll in credit-bearing courses. But if they fail, she says, "We only get half of them back. They are gone; gone in the wind."

In the past, part of the problem was a complete lack of data; the college's open-admission policy meant students didn't even have to fill out an application, leaving the college with virtually no knowledge of who its students even were. "We weren't even asking the questions," says Carol Rush, dean of the school's mathematics and science





After raising four children to adulthood and working three decades as a registered nurse, Paula Barker, 56, is attending Northwestern State to pursue her bachelor's degree — and her professional experience has already earned her some college credits.



Brad Barclay, 57, Somerset, Pa., parlayed his "gift" for welding into a well-paying blue-collar career. But that career hit a wall in 2007, when he was laid off after a wave of plant closings. Since then, Barclay's been attending Westmoreland Community College, working toward a high-tech degree that he hopes will lead to a state job as a welding inspector.

department. “And later we didn’t ask why they didn’t stay — only how we could replace them.” Since Westmoreland’s reforms — changing faculty and teaching methods, offering more tutoring, providing better assessments — the retention rate of developmental students has grown by 3 percent, an increase college officials consider statistically significant.

Brad Barclay of Somerset, Pa., is one student who has benefited from Westmoreland’s improvements. Now 57, Barclay dropped out of high school after the ninth grade when a devastating car accident paralyzed his father, sending him into a coma for weeks and to rehabilitation for nine months. The family moved to Ohio, but Barclay missed his friends so much that he left home and moved back to Pennsylvania. He attended the 10th grade for three months before school authorities discovered he had no parent or guardian in the area and expelled him. While his classmates were playing football and learning algebra, Barclay was living in a one-room efficiency and working at odd jobs, including at a hospital, a bowling alley and an auto parts store.

His situation improved considerably a few years later when he landed a job as a welder. The work, which paid high union wages, would eventually take him from the shipyards of Portland, Ore., to Las Vegas to Uniontown, Pa. — and ultimately to a satisfying career with a division of Bethlehem Steel, now Freight Car America. “Welding came so naturally to me,” he says. “It was gift, you might say. And I made good money.” Because of that income, he never felt the need for further education. But in 2007, after a round of plant closings, Barclay was laid off. This time, he found opportunity in catastrophe.

With funding from the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Reform Act, which provides aid to workers who have lost their jobs to increased imports, Barclay

signed up for the degree program in welding engineering technology at Westmoreland. His plan was to become a welding inspector, a secure state job with good pay. First, though, he needed a lot of remedial work. Even before he started classes, Barclay had to spend a summer brushing up on basic math — multiplication, fractions and decimals — and improving his vocabulary and reading speed. “I was never a reader,” he says, “just newspapers.”

When he enrolled in the fall of 2008, he was considered ready for algebra, basic composition, introduction to computers, and welding. “I had never even *seen* algebra,” he recalls. “When I asked two young girls in the class who sat next to me, they said they had learned it in the eighth grade! I was so grateful for the opportunity to find out what 10th, 11th and 12th grade were all about.” Even the welding course was a revelation to him, he says. “As good a welder as I am, I had never learned the theory, the metallurgy, the characteristics of the metal,” he says. “Learning that was a big plus.”

It was also a big load. Barclay started with 12 credits per semester and was trying to complete 18 weeks of work in 11. “By the second week I knew it was too much,” he says. “It was really overwhelming.” With the consent of his adviser, he dropped one class. But algebra still tormented him. “I spent three hours with algebra in the morning and three hours at night,” he says. What made the difference, he says, was a regular tutor supplied by the college at no cost. For three semesters, tutors worked with Barclay from 4:30 to 7 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday. “Without them, I would not have made it,” he says. “And because of them I was an A-B student instead of a C-B student.” Barclay made the dean’s list his last two semesters.

More so than for traditional students, these sorts of support systems are hugely important to adult students,



Carol A. Rush, dean of mathematics and science at Westmoreland, has helped oversee changes at the college that are allowing officials to collect better data about student performance and outcomes.



For older adults such as Brad Barclay, college life means fitting in with new, much-younger peers and facing new challenges. Here, Barclay and classmate Anita Pardi ponder a point made during a writing course.

experts say. And counseling is essential. As ACE's Jackie King says, "the only thing that should be hard is the class." For many in education, that's a totally new approach, one that ushers in changes that educators had never even considered. For instance, says King, the vast majority of college counselors are women, and a woman's approach to the educational environment is typically different from a man's. When ACE held a focus group for a Lumina-funded project on low-income adult students, researchers learned that the women students formed study groups, traded baby sitters and generally sought each other out. The men, by contrast, were reluctant to open up. They were humiliated by being in school and by being with "kids" in the classroom. "The women thought that by going to school they were being good mothers," says King. "The men felt exactly the reverse. They felt that they were turning down overtime shifts and not providing for their families." But the dynamic can change, King says, when the men know each other and when the counselor himself is a man. "Male counselors went into tire plants and worked with men who worked on the line together. These men had a 'pre-formed cohort.' They talked over beers after class. It made a big difference."

At the University of Akron, where one-fourth of the students are over 25, free transition workshops help prospective students learn to study or overcome math anxiety. Also, peer mentors at the university help adult students with all types of issues, from where to park or buy the best cup of coffee to how to find the quietest

spots to study. The mentors must be at least 25 years old and be nontraditional students themselves. "If you are an adult and you don't know about computers and you're being helped by someone who could be your kid, that's not a good thing," says Laura Conley, director of Akron's Adult Focus Program.

Although it's not always a consideration for adults, social events and service projects can also build a sense of community, and thus support, for nontraditional students. At Westmoreland, adult student Jan Perkins helped build camaraderie among her fellow adults and all students by developing something the school had always lacked: a mascot.

Perkins, 51, came to Westmoreland in 2007 after she was laid off from her job inspecting televisions at the nearby Sony plant. It was a good job with great benefits and a nice family atmosphere, she says, but she had stopped her education after graduating from high school in West Virginia and decided it was time to pursue "a lifelong dream." As part of her business communication class for her degree in business, she polled students on their mascot preferences, wrote a paper on the potential benefits of a mascot, arranged for a costume to be made, and, in an oral presentation, sold the college president on the concept. The result, along with her credits for the class, was Westly Wolf, now a familiar face in the college's promotional materials and on the athletic field. As for Perkins, she is now focused on getting a bachelor's degree. "Here I thought I'd never go back, and now I just want to keep going."



Jan Perkins, 51, a recent honors graduate of Westmoreland, shows off Westly Wolf, the college mascot she envisioned as part of a proposal for her business communications class. Perkins' proposal was ultimately adopted by the college president, and Westly has been prowling the sidelines since September 2008.

Mature and motivated

The best adult programs acknowledge that seasoned adults learn very differently from younger adults and adapt their methods accordingly. Many, if not most, college instructors will say that they actually prefer teaching adult students. Older students are generally more engaged, motivated and focused than their younger counterparts. Their expectations are higher, and they aren't recovering from a night of partying or demanding to know what's going to be on the final exam. They are more vocal and interactive in class and online.

However, unlike younger learners, they have less tolerance for abstract concepts, and they want to use learning to help solve problems. "They have to have what is taught related to the real world," says Pam Tate, president and CEO of CAEL.

Paula Barker of Northwestern State is typical of students who say they got far more out of their classes as adults than they did as teenagers. "As an adult your mind just wants to absorb everything," she says. "With every class I want to learn and read so much more." Zimmerman, the gerontology instructor at Portland Community College (PCC), says adults take a "more organic approach to learning. They get into explorations of the subject, and they just lose themselves."

Adult experiences also influence what nontraditional students choose to study in the first place. It's no accident, for instance, that more than 40 percent of the students in the popular online gerontology major at PCC are over 50 years old. The courses, which end with an internship, a professional seminar and a jobs workshop, attract students who became interested in aging not



only because of growing job prospects in the field but because of situations they faced in the real world.

One such student is Nena Williams, 44, of Portland. She dropped out of Mount Hood Community College back in 1984 for financial reasons, enlisting in the Army in exchange for a \$50,000 college scholarship and a chance to see the world. While on the base at Goppening, Germany, she took courses toward a nursing degree at a branch of the University of Maryland. Back home, she started at PCC, then was recalled for active duty during the first Gulf War. Because the Army's nursing program was filled at the time, she pursued the unlikely option of becoming a certified diesel mechanic. "I just nursed tanks instead of people," she says.

Returning to the states, Williams got her nurse's aide certificate and took a job in a private nursing facility,

where she witnessed a colleague striking a wheelchair-bound stroke victim. She lost her temper, blew the whistle on the colleague and was rewarded with a suspension. That experience, along with a later one of having her foot crushed by a belt loader while working as an airport ramp agent, propelled her into a new career in aging advocacy. "I think things happen for a reason," she says. "And I think it's critical that we give our seniors compassionate care. I have always enjoyed older people, and I'm in transition, so I thought 'What the heck?' I'm going back to school."

Speaking out at one of the gerontology course's occasional in-person forums — discussions led by the students themselves — Williams provokes outrage all around as she shares the information she has learned doing an internship on senior services, and she wins

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Nena Williams, 44, Portland, Ore. (center), makes a point during a meeting of the Ageless Network, a student organization that helps gerontology students at Portland Community College find job opportunities. With Williams are fellow club members Janice Lloyd (left) and Mary Phillips.

Lifelong love of learning drives journalist/MBA/lawyer



Former newsmagazine journalist Christopher Schmitt of Oakton, Va., got his law degree the hard way, attending night classes for four years. Still, he says he's glad he did it, calling his pursuit of the J.D. "an intellectually rich and satisfying experience."

Christopher Schmitt of Oakton, Va., is by anyone's estimation an educated man. He has a bachelor's degree in economics and journalism from the University of Massachusetts, a master's in business administration from Boston University, and the wisdom gleaned from a decades-long career in investigative journalism. But for someone as intellectually hungry as Schmitt, it wasn't enough. Back in the early 1980s, when he had just completed his undergraduate work at UMass, he had been offered the opportunity to earn a law degree at the same time he was earning his MBA. He didn't take it. The combined JD-MBA program would take at least an extra year, and with his graduate business courses and a full-time job, he already had more than enough to do. Still, he says, "I always kind of regretted it."

Many years later, while on assignment for *U.S. News & World Report* magazine in Washington, D.C., Schmitt was walking down a corridor at the George

Washington University School of Law, and something stirred. "It rekindled some old feelings that I had had," he says. "Having passed on the opportunity the first time, (the law degree) was always at the back of my mind. Twenty years later, it came back."

Schmitt was then 45 years old. He had an interesting, well-paying job in a field that was still relatively healthy. He had a wife, two children, and a house to take care of. Did he really want to go to law school? "I was apprehensive, sure," he says. "So I engaged in a series of games with myself. First I would give myself permission to be interested. Then I would give myself permission to apply. With every step I was just sticking one more toe in the water." And it was all toward a decision that he had essentially already made.

In Washington, a law degree is a particularly useful credential. But Schmitt says his interest was "entirely extracurricular" at the time. "I was intrinsically interested in the subject," he says. "And as a journalist I was

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support from her colleagues for some novel business ideas. The forums play off courses covering such topics as death and dying, horticultural therapy, and architecture and design for aging at home. "We're all aging," says the course's motto. "You might as well make it a career."

In June, Williams received an associate degree in applied science from PCC, a gerontology certificate, and a certificate in advanced behavioral and cognitive care. Her advisers are helping her find an internship with an advocacy organization, and she plans to pursue a bachelor's degree in social science at Portland State University. Williams' education has taken a circuitous path, she admits, but it ultimately took her to the right place. "Sometimes I wish I had gotten my degree a long time ago," she says. "But I can't change any of the experiences I have had, and I wouldn't have changed any of them. They have been the driver of everything I want to be."

Most of these students have had the financial means to restart their educations as independent adults. But to other nontraditional students, lack of money remains a huge roadblock. Federal financial aid policies, for both loans and grants, discriminate against working adults in a number of ways. Federal education loans are available only to students attending at least half time. This discourages the many adult students who take just one course at a time or who start and stop a number of times on their way to a degree. "This does not mean that many working adults taking only a few courses at a time don't borrow," says *Adult Learners in Higher Education*, a 2007 study prepared by Jobs for the Future for the U.S. Department of Labor. "It simply means that they must borrow from higher-cost private sources." Indeed, according to ACE, independent students rely more heavily on credit cards to finance their studies than do young people.

Grant rules also pose considerable obstacles to adult learning. Adult students qualify for the biggest of these benefits, the Pell Grant, in roughly the same numbers as traditional students do. But, according to a study by Future Works, only 7.7 percent of adults enrolled less than full time who met federal poverty standards received any federal, state or institutional aid. This has little to do with students' aid-worthiness, experts say, and everything to do with how Pell eligibility is calculated. For one thing, unlike traditional students who attend half time or more, those attending less than half time cannot count room and board and other expenses as indirect costs of their education. This is a particular problem for students who attend low-cost institutions, where the cost of housing can exceed that of tuition and fees, the study says.

Federal financial aid policies, for both loans and grants, discriminate against working adults in a number of ways.

Further, until very recently, Pell eligibility had been based on a student's income the previous year. This effectively penalized adults who returned to school after a layoff or another sudden reduction in income. Federal officials are now moving to expand Pell eligibility for displaced workers, and recent moves to align and coordinate the efforts of the federal Labor and Education departments should make it easier for newly unemployed adults to pay for higher education. Still, many roadblocks remain. For example: Pell grants can't be used for non-credit courses that are popular with many adult learners. Also, the Pell requirement that a student show "satisfactory progress" hurts those adults who can only take a course or two at a time. And because Pell limits grants to just two semesters a year, it effectively shortchanges students who pursue accelerated programs.

Also, according to noted labor and education researcher Anthony P. Carnevale, several "real-world problems" confront displaced workers — problems that highlight the gap between good intentions and effective government action to foster education and retraining. "Let's say I lose my job and then apply for unemployment insurance online," suggests Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. "No one ever tells me online about a Pell option or counsels me about going back to school. I get my checks in the mail, and there is no requirement that I show up at the unemployment office. Even if I show up, no one is there to counsel me about going to college. ... If available at all, they are job counselors."

The underlying problem, says Carnevale, is that neither the higher education system nor the unemployment insurance (UI) system is set up to proactively support the retraining of displaced workers. "It's all on the onus of the UI recipient," he points out. "The recipient has to take the initiative at the UI office — find the college, and then find the financial aid office" (where he is likely to be denied aid, Carnevale says, because the college is directing most of its funds to traditional students, especially during an economic downturn). "So, as the DOE will tell you, these folks are eligible for Pell ... but with no outreach or supportive services, they don't ever make their way into the aid office — and the aid office doesn't really want them when they do show up."

Still, the economy is forcing some changes, not only in how to deliver services, but also in how to pay for them. Displaced workers account for much of the growth at community colleges, where enrollment

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Chris Schmitt, here with son Alex and daughter Emma, insists his academic pursuits haven't simply served his own desires, saying: "I have a strong sense that it's worthwhile to model lifelong learning to your kids."

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always writing about law and the effects of the law. Now I was going to get inside the law."

It would not be easy. The first challenge, it turns out, was just getting in. He admits he "completely blew" one portion of the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), which led the George Mason University School of Law to deny him admission to the doctoral program. Instead, the Arlington, Va., school admitted Schmitt to a master's program in law with the possibility of transfer to the J.D. program. A year later, he got in. The evening law school program covered four years — instead of three for the day program — and the average age of the students was 29.

Schmitt at first attended classes five days a week and studied on the weekends. "Work took precedence," he says, "because that was where the bread was buttered." Classes often didn't end until 10 p.m., and "at that point," he says, "you just want to eat dinner and go to bed." He had to accept that his time for studying was limited. "I had to say 'I have this much time, and I get what I get, and then I have to stop.' Efficiency was imposed on me." A 12-credit semester was the hardest, he says, and at one point he dropped back from 9 to 6, costing himself a half year. "Many times I would be walking back to the Metro station and thinking, 'What I am I doing?' But it was like that

scene in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, where the sergeant (Louis Gossett Jr.) is trying to get Richard Gere's character to break down, and he says: 'You can forget it! You're out!' and Richard Gere says: 'But I got nowhere else to go! You do feel ground down at the end, but I was too far in to quit.'

Schmitt sacrificed time with family. He gave up movies and curtailed his bike-riding for four years. And he neglected some projects around the house. But even though he shortchanged his kids out of some time (although as teens they were starting to live their own lives), he believes he gave them something arguably more valuable. "My kids were watching me day after day, month after month, year after year, slog through this stuff. And I have a strong sense that it's worthwhile to model lifelong learning to your kids."

Aside from his reluctance to join a study group, which had more to do with his personal learning style, Schmitt says he wasn't particularly aware of the age gap between himself and most of the other students. Except, he says, for one thing: "The degree of civility and politeness accorded the professors and the educational process." Schmitt said he was "astonished" at the Web surfing and digital messaging that routinely took place during class. "It's like their attention spans are minuscule if they aren't entirely riveted," he says. "And they are just incredibly brazen about it. Kids were playing video poker. I even saw one kid surfing porn. It is just incredibly different from when I was a young student."

In December, 2008, Schmitt finished his studies, and in May, he donned a cap and gown and collected his doctorate in law with honors. In the meantime, what he had started as a purely intellectual pursuit had become a serendipitous career booster. At the end of his first semester, when *U.S. News* was radically downsized, Schmitt's job was downsized along with it. But with his legal studies as an extra selling point, he soon found a job as a senior analyst in the financial markets section of the federal Government Accountability Office. "I can't say I enjoyed it (law school), but I think I'm proud that I did it," Schmitt says. "It was an intellectually rich and satisfying experience."

Schmitt being who he is, though, his education is not likely to end there. "My mother always said that you can consider yourself all grown up when you stop being curious about the world," he says. A reader of everything from political thrillers to geological history, Schmitt also travels widely to learn. His interest in solar eclipses has taken him from Costa Rica to Turkey to China. He traveled to Louisiana to explore the workings of a river-control project, and a love of history recently sent him to see why the stretch of U.S. 50 in Nevada is billed as "the loneliest road in America." (It isn't, he says.) Next up: a digital photography course.

"It's like how sharks always need to move so the water can pass through their gills, or else they die," says Schmitt of his passion for learning. "I like to keep swimming." ■

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increases were as much as 27 percent last year, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. The \$787 billion economic stimulus law provides \$1.7 billion for adult employment services, including education and training. Also, in mid-July, President Obama announced a \$12 billion federal initiative to aid community colleges — a move that should increase opportunity for many adult students at two-year institutions.

Long before that announcement, however, a number of adult-focused colleges were responding to the economic crisis with special course offerings and tuition assistance. Students who sign up for the Purdue-Kokomo accelerated bachelor's degree, for instance, may qualify for stimulus funds and continue to receive their unemployment benefits. Oregon, which has the second-highest unemployment rate in the country (next to Michigan), offers adults up to \$5,000 for two years of retraining at community colleges. Westmoreland Community College, in partnership with the local Workforce Investment Board and PA CareerLink, has instituted a tuition waiver program for workers who have lost their jobs and remain unemployed or who have found work at considerably lower wages. Called Just in Time, the program pays all tuition and other fees not covered by existing student aid programs and applies to occupational programs deemed a high priority by the state of Pennsylvania, including accounting, small business management, early-childhood education and welding engineering technology. "Our goal," says Westmoreland President Steven C. Ender, "is to give folks the skills they need, in a relatively short period of time, that will put them back in a job by the fall."

Funds for lifelong learning

But many advocates of lifelong learning say it shouldn't take an economic crisis to make money available for adults who want to learn. To help ensure that money is there for education and training, CAEL has pioneered the concept of Lifelong Learning Accounts, or LiLAs. Much as they do with 401(k) accounts, employees with LiLAs make regular pretax contributions for tuition, books and other educational expenses through payroll deductions, and these deductions are matched by the employer. Employers in several states, including Illinois, Maine and Missouri, have tried LiLAs, and many other programs have been proposed.

One satisfied LiLA participant is Paul Kelvington, a 41-year-old social worker from Chicago. Kelvington's first experience with college, at the University of Tennessee in 1986, was "more a formality than something I really wanted to do," he says. "I wasn't mentally ready to do what I needed to do to excel. I was immature, and there was way too much partying."

Kelvington lasted at Tennessee less than a year, went on to some success as a professional musician, and never looked back. Not until 2003, that is, when he

was working as a waiter at Rhapsody, a Chicago restaurant that offered LiLAs. Under the plan, Kelvington could put in up to \$500 a year, his employer would match the contribution dollar for dollar, and CAEL would double that match. Kelvington signed up. "For the first time ever, I realized I didn't have to worry about where I would get the money for school," he says.

With the help of an influential mentor, he pursued a major in social work, first at Harold Washington Community College, then at Loyola University, where he earned a bachelor's degree magna cum laude in 2008. At the graduation ceremony, he says, he saw other students donning master's hoods and told himself, "I want one of those. I want one of those right now." Sure enough, a master's degree followed a year later, and today Kelvington is director of psychiatric services at a residential treatment facility for the mentally ill.

He says his college education encouraged him to be "a leader and a mentor" and brought out qualities that inform all aspects of his life. "It taught me that I am very empathetic. It taught me how to listen in a way that is therapeutic and healing. I now know that I was supposed to be in a helping profession." For his college education and his new career, Kelvington says he owes his employer and CAEL "a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid."

As successful as these programs have been, advocates say federal legislation is needed to expand the reach of LiLAs. Under federal law, employees can take tax deductions for education and training, but only if that training is related to their current jobs. Likewise, there is no savings vehicle that allows employer participation. There is no question that the timing for such legislation is poor; despite the tax credit, many employers are reluctant to offer a new benefit at a time when they are struggling just to pay existing ones. But advocates of LiLAs insist that such resistance is shortsighted. Says Jennifer Herman of the UCSF Medical Center in San Francisco, which offers LiLAs: "This was a way for us to invest in the people we know, some of whom just needed a little extra push to go back and learn what they need to learn. There aren't a lot of resources we can invest in training and development. We can invest a small amount and make a big difference."

Perhaps that attitude could describe the renewed passion that's driving the whole world of adult learning. An extended hand, thoughtful counseling, caring tutors, dedicated mentors, some help with the tuition bill — the investments may not always be small, but they're not impossible to make. And the payoff — for students, the institutions and the global economy — can be immeasurable. ■

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Susan M. Headden — who worked for more than 10 years as a senior editor at "U.S. News & World Report" magazine — is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington, D.C.

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August 2009

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