

BIG MOM **ON** **CAMPUS**

The time commitment, the cost, the fact that you're already exhausted? These factors may be daunting, but it is still possible to get the degree, certificate, skill, or new career you've dreamed of pursuing.

by **LESLIE GOLDMAN**

FOR MOST PEOPLE, the words *college student* conjure an image of an 18-year-old in a dorm or pulling all-nighters at the campus library. But for Michael and Chad Rendon-Thofson, of Denver, college is two dads finishing up bachelor's degrees after more than a decade in the workforce—while juggling two kids under age 2. For Diana Vargas, of Brentwood, California, returning to school means logging on to an

online coding boot camp at 6 A.M. while her 4-year-old sleeps. And for Mary A. Hansen Smith, M.D., of Tucson, returning to college—med school, actually—meant jumping from more than a decade of playdates and school pickups as a stay-at-home-mom of five to taking organic chemistry courses.

Students who are not of typical age have long been known as “nontraditional,”

but about one-third of U.S. college undergraduates are over age 25, and more than 20 percent of undergrads are parents. Some return to school to boost qualifications or enter a new field, some seek degrees to ensure job security, while others crave personal growth or want to set an example for their kids, says Rebecca Klein-Collins, vice president of impact at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and



Handwritten notes on a page from a notebook, featuring diagrams and text. The text includes:

- Diagram 1: A flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, and B to C.
- Diagram 2: A more complex flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', and 'E'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, B to C, C to D, and D to E.
- Text: "Diagram 1: A flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, and B to C."
- Text: "Diagram 2: A more complex flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', and 'E'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, B to C, C to D, and D to E."

Handwritten notes in a notebook, featuring text and a diagram. The text includes:

- Text: "In the Mr. Gatsby the author..."
- Text: "...of the old money to appear..."
- Text: "...with some substance. The power..."
- Text: "...got some what is out and..."
- Text: "...what is not. The dream is the..."
- Text: "...first intention is to appear..."
- Text: "...so criticism was too too the..."
- Text: "...born with the aim of building..."
- Text: "...the relationship between the..."
- Text: "...customed public and the..."
- Text: "...before it wasn't allowed to..."
- Text: "...get to be out but later it..."
- Text: "...New people can enjoy it and..."
- Text: "...can try to understand it..."
- Text: "...In that moment, at because..."
- Text: "...more autonomous. Because..."
- Text: "..."Man is formed by nature &..."
- Text: "...passion = (emotion subject)"

Handwritten notes on a page from a notebook, featuring diagrams and text. The text includes:

- Diagram 1: A flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, and B to C.
- Diagram 2: A more complex flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', and 'E'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, B to C, C to D, and D to E.
- Text: "Diagram 1: A flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, and B to C."
- Text: "Diagram 2: A more complex flowchart with boxes labeled 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', and 'E'. Arrows indicate a flow from A to B, B to C, C to D, and D to E."





author of *Never Too Late: The Adult Student's Guide to College*. Still others are determined to finish what they started: According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's *Some College, No Degree* (SCND) report, more than 36 million Americans have left college without completing their studies.

However, for many parents, the idea of going back to school can be daunting: Cramming for tests while potty training and juggling work may feel impossible. (And then there's the cost...) But there are ways to make it work, according to the parents and experts we spoke to for this story. Consider this your required reading (a prerequisite, if you will) before taking the leap.

LESSON ONE

There's no time like the present.

In 2016, Chad Rendon-Thofson graduated at age 44 with a Bachelor of Music in vocal performance. One year later, his husband, Michael, earned his bachelor's in organizational leadership. They opted to return to school when

their kids were 1 and 2; Michael, who'd recently been laid off, had two years of undergrad, and Chad, a stay-at-home dad, had left college in 1998 one credit shy of a degree. Rather than both returning to work just as their family was growing, "we decided, 'Let's show our kids that it's never too late to put your mind to something,'" Michael says.

Chad and Michael, now 49 and 37, are two of the 1 million SCND students to return to school and earn a degree between 2014 and 2019. Whether your goal is to complete a bachelor's degree or embark on a new one, your first step is to explore nearby schools (unless you're open to relocating) and admissions requirements. Some schools are open admission, meaning all applicants are accepted (i.e., community colleges and some state schools). Other schools are more selective. Many no longer require the ACT or SAT, but some do, so make sure to do your research.

If you're applying to selective schools, Klein-Collins suggests starting the process at least nine months before you hope to begin, and longer if testing is required. Also, find out if the schools accept previous credits or if they conduct prior learning assessments, evaluations of your life

MANAGING THE COST

Turns out, college doesn't have to be wildly expensive. Here's how to find the funds.

FILL OUT THE FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID (FAFSA).

Available at studentaid.gov, the FAFSA connects you with federal grants, loans, or work-study jobs, plus aid offered by your school or state. It can be filled out as early as October for the following school year. "Even if you can pay out of pocket, fill out the FAFSA," says Rebecca Klein-Collins. "Don't turn down free money."

ASK YOUR EMPLOYER TO HELP.

Around 90 percent of midsize and large employers offer some form of tuition reimbursement. Ask your HR department for details.

KNOW YOUR LOANS. Federal loans usually have lower interest rates and more flexible repayment plans than private loans, Klein-Collins says. (Note: Federal loans are likely to be more generous for full-time students, and students considering certain professions may qualify for loan forgiveness.)

Dr. Autumn Green says subsidized Stafford loans are ideal. "You can borrow \$3,500 the first year and \$1,000 more with each year, up to a maximum of \$5,500." These must be paid back but are interest-free.

LOOK FOR SCHOLARSHIPS.

Schools, your state, the federal government, or local companies or community groups may offer them. Klein-Collins suggests the My College Guide overview of options for adult learners (mycollegeguide.org/paying-for-college/scholarships-adult-students).

LOOK INTO PUBLIC ASSISTANCE.

If you make less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$26,500 for a family of four), look into Medicaid, SNAP, TANF cash assistance, child-care and housing subsidy programs, WIC, and more. For Elizabeth Preovolos, the UC Berkeley mom, a combo of public assistance and a scholarship made her collegiate pursuits possible.

experience that will hopefully allow some of it to count as college credit. Some schools offer credit for on-the-job experience, military service, or volunteer activities.

LESSON TWO

The logistics may be more manageable than you think.

Many institutions offer flexible course schedules; accelerated, self-paced, or part-time degree tracks; and rolling admissions. Online classes are widely available. Many certificate programs can be completed in less than a year. (However, beware of suspicious promises. Per the Federal Trade Commission, if a program says, “no studying or exams required,” or promises a degree in just a few days or weeks, it’s probably a scam.)

When applying, “think carefully about what you need to make college work for you, approaching it like a consumer,” Klein-Collins says. “You want a school that meets you where you are.” Zero in on colleges where adult learners compose a sizable chunk of the student body. If a school is trying to attract adult learners, it will highlight the benefits it provides to parents and full-time workers on its website. Reach out to the admissions office and ask how its staff can help with fitting in classes around your schedule. And remember, Klein-Collins adds: You’re an asset to them, and they should “offer ways to help students like you get to the finish line.”

Finally, while statistics show you’re more likely to finish your degree if you carry a full course load, don’t get discouraged if that’s not feasible, Klein-Collins says. Seek out colleges with self-paced programs, and chip away at your goal in a way you can manage.

LESSON THREE

It really does take a village.

Joycelyn Keller, 30, a fourth-year medical student at Morehouse School of Medicine, in Atlanta, says that to make her studies work, her partner had to become what she calls Super-Househusband Dad. “During my first two years, sometimes I’d be gone before



our son woke up and home after he was asleep.” For the Rendon-Thofsons, the division of labor shifted over time. Michael’s classes were online, while Chad’s were in person, which meant Michael handled child-care drop-off and pickup and studied at night and on weekends. (Grandparents helped too.)

For single parents or families where help will be needed, tap extended family, friends, and neighbors: Can someone babysit for a few hours while you study? If your school has an organization for student parents, try to connect with people there. Switch off hosting

playdates to give one another time to tackle assignments, suggests Elizabeth Preovolos, a 39-year-old mother of two at the University of California, Berkeley. Mid-pandemic, she and other student parents took turns reading books over FaceTime to each other’s kids.

And while only 15 percent of colleges offer on-campus child care (public colleges are most likely to do so, as are historically Black colleges and universities), this resource can be game-changing. When Autumn Green, Ph.D.,

transferred from community college, she was a 19-year-old mom with a 2-year-old and an infant. She chose the University of Oregon, in Eugene, because it offered on-campus child care and family housing. Now a research scientist at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College, in Massachusetts, she created the Campus Family Housing Database, a nationwide list of about 250 colleges and universities offering college-affiliated family housing. (Search it at wcvonline.org/Family-Housing/family-housing-project-database.)

LESSON FOUR

Advanced-degree programs may be less flexible, but they’re still doable.

Master’s, law, and doctoral programs are typically tied to traditional academic schedules with fall start dates, involving two, three, and six years of full-time study, respectively. Admissions criteria are institution dependent, Klein-Collins says; some schools have dropped the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) requirement, but the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is still required to apply to the vast majority of law schools. Most programs require transcripts, recommendation letters, and personal statements as part of the application materials.

If you want to pursue a career in medicine, like Dr. Hansen Smith, scour the websites of schools that interest you, and make a list of courses needed to apply. (For most, this will include physics, biology, organic chemistry, and possibly genetics.) Geoffrey Young, Ph.D., senior director of student affairs and programs for the Association of American Medical Colleges, recommends consulting the school's admissions office to review your undergraduate record to assess if additional coursework might be needed. Dr. Hansen Smith took the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and was accepted at the University of Arizona College of Medicine-Tucson when her oldest was 12; she graduated in 2019. Now 43 and a third-year pathology resident, she says she “decided to brush up on basic science courses at the local community college” before the big test.

LESSON FIVE

Certificate programs are a quicker option.

Noncredit education is exploding in popularity, particularly in fields like project and program management and content development. The classes are typically flexible, brief (months, not years), and field-specific. A 2020 poll conducted by the Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights found that two out of three adults considering enrolling in education preferred a nondegree pathway, as compared with just one in two in 2019.

Certificate programs typically start in the fall or on demand. Some require a bachelor's degree, but they're increasingly designed for SCND students or those with a master's degree looking to switch fields or feel more confident in a certain skill set (like fund-raising or human resources management). When researching certificate programs, note whether the institution is accredited. Accredited certificate programs are taught by faculty and may come in handy if you choose to pursue a degree later on, whereas nonaccredited programs are typically taught by experts in the field,

WHERE THE JOBS ARE

If you're hoping to use your back-to-school journey as a way to begin a new career, consider trying one of these hot professional paths.

PARALEGAL

With a two-year associate's degree, paralegals support attorneys with document prep, client intake, and more. Enrollment is open all year, and many programs are online, says Debra R. Geiger, Esq., immediate past president of the American Association for Paralegal Education.

REAL ESTATE AGENT

With one to two months' worth of education and a licensing exam, you can work for a managing broker and help clients buy, sell, and rent property, says Toby Schifsky, executive director of Kaplan Real Estate Education. (Join the National Association of Realtors and pay dues, and you can call yourself a Realtor.) Schifsky calls real estate “a fantastic second career, in which you can take Wednesdays off because the kids have volleyball or work 60 hours a week—it's up to you.” You can take courses at a local real estate school, a community college, or a university, and they may be online or in person.

REGISTERED NURSE

Thanks to job security, competitive salaries, and flexible hours, nursing is a popular second career, says Debra Sullivan, Ph.D., M.S.N., R.N., a faculty member in Walden University's Master of Science in Nursing program. R.N.'s usually have an associate's degree in nursing (A.D.N.) or a bachelor of science in nursing (B.S.N.). The B.S.N. is usually a four-year program, but Dr. Sullivan says some schools offer two-year “bridge programs” if you already have an undergrad degree. Nursing school involves coursework, supervised patient care, and simulation (treating a fake patient for respiratory distress, for instance). Graduates must pass the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX-RN) to obtain licensure and earn the R.N. title.

keeping the cost lower, and are “intended to help you take the next step in your career,” says Rovy Branon, Ph.D., vice provost for the University of Washington Continuum College, in Seattle.

If you're hoping to break into computer programming or tech, you might try one of the popular coding boot camps. That's the route Diana Vargas, 33, coding-whiz mom of one, took after her military spouse was stationed abroad for several years. “I had a bachelor's degree in graphic design and had worked at Microsoft, but there was a gap in my résumé,” she says. “I needed something I could add on to my existing skills.” Vargas attended online classes full time from 6 A.M. to 3 P.M. for four months, though many programs allow you to move at a slower pace.

LESSON SIX

There will be sacrifices ahead.

You may feel guilty if your midterm conflicts with your daughter's softball game or question the wisdom of paying for your own degree instead of funding your kid's 529. “My kids didn't get fancy Pinterest birthday parties because there just wasn't time to plan something elaborate,” Dr. Hansen Smith says. But don't beat yourself up, because the bottom line is clear: Your going back to school benefits the whole family. “My kids have a better life because I made this decision,” says Dr. Green.

In order for the Rendon-Thofsons to make school work, they cashed out their 401(k)s, downgraded from a four-bedroom house to one half the size, and sold their cars. But, says Chad, “it was one of the greatest gifts. We were home for the first years of our kids' lives.” And when they found Sophie and Maximus jumping in bed, giggling in their dads' blue mortarboards after Michael's graduation, “we thought, ‘This is why we worked so hard.’” Says Prevolos, the mom of two at UC Berkeley, “I'd always told my kids they could be anything, and one day my daughter asked, ‘Well, what about you?’ It felt so good to go back. I did it for me as much as for them.” ✖