Flexible programs help employed

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For adults returning to college, there are more options than ever to accommodate those with full-time jobs, hectic family schedules and no time to waste.

Take Maria Pulles, 33, an operations manager for Wal-Mart for the past nine years. She earned an associate of arts degree but could only take a class here and there because of her demanding schedule. She usually works 55 hours or more each week.

"Time is of the essence for someone like me in a professional career. I close, I open, work nights, weekends — it's hard to juggle," said Pulles, who lives in Miami Lakes.

So last fall, when she stumbled upon a new program offered by Florida International University that lets students who have been accepted into the college of business earn a bachelor's degree in 18 months, she figured she'd give it a shot.

"I felt like a ping pong ball," Pulles said of the frustration she experienced trying to get into classes that were closed, prior to learning about the program.

"With this program, you don't have to think about what classes to take," she said.

Pulles is one of 12 students who began the BBA+ Sunrise program in January. Classes are Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 7:30 to 8:45 a.m. at FIU Pines Center at Sheridan Street and Northwest 172nd Avenue in Pembroke Pines. Each semester runs 12 weeks, with students taking three courses at a time.

Cliff Perry, associate dean of undergraduate programs and academic affairs at FIU's College of Business Administration, designed the program. He says the idea was to attract students like Pulles and incorporate a sense of teamwork within the small class.

"We wanted to reach out to students we couldn't traditionally reach — who were working and who also live in the Broward area. It's an 'integrated program' — where students work on projects together as part of a cohort of about 12 students."

Pulles says she likes the structure. There is constant communication between professors and students.

"We even have their cell-phone numbers," she said. "It's hard to find that."

The students also share a common challenge — juggling school and life.

"You have to be organized, and this program makes you organized. Everything is set up for you. Once you're in, you're in. You have somebody you can talk to, relate to because everyone is trying to juggle the same things — family, work and college."

Sandra Curless, 52, of Hollywood knows all too well the struggle of trying to earn a college degree and raise a family, but the mother of four proves it can be done. Curless will graduate from St. Thomas University's law school in May.

"I wish I had done this earlier," said Curless, who works as a piano tuner for Victor's Piano in Miami in addition to working part time as a research assistant for a professor. "Now that my children are all grown and have their own college degrees, it's Mama's turn."
The Hollywood resident says she never gave up her dream of finishing college. Despite having been dual-enrolled in a few college classes during her last years of high school in Nashville, she didn’t complete her four-year degree until almost 30 years later. She did it one course at a time, while working several jobs over the years as a secretary, a waitress and cashier.

The piano tuning Curless does now gives her a flexible schedule so she can find time to study, go to school and spend time with her son, who also lives in South Florida.

“I just couldn’t stand to have a project out there dangling that wasn’t finished,” Curless said. “It’s been very difficult, but it’s worth it. If people could stop and think — my life is only so many years long. What is the one thing that is important?”

Curless made a deal with herself to see how much further she could take her studies after earning her bachelor’s degree.

“My test to see if I really belonged in law school was to take the LSAT,” she said.

To her surprise, Curless did well on the test and was accepted by several schools. St. Thomas offered a scholarship covering 75 percent of her tuition, based on her score and good college grades.

Curless says her best advice to others is to follow their dreams, no matter how challenging it may be.

“I would like to see more people my age go to school,” she said. “We bring more understanding and experience. And those of us who have to work learn more skills — it makes us more prepared for the future. Now I finally feel like I’m beginning to live my life.”

MAKING IT: Maria Pulles, an operations manager for Wal-Mart, listens to professor Wendy Gelman during a Monday morning class. Pulles says Florida International University’s BBA+ Sunrise program will enable her to fulfill her dream of getting a bachelor’s degree in business.

HELPFUL BOOKS

Several books address older students’ challenges.

- Going Back to School: College Survival Strategies for Adult Students by Frank J. Bruno. This book includes a quiz to see if going back to school is the right choice.
- How to Be a Successful Online Student by Sara Dulaney Gilbert. This book focuses on being a cyber student.
SMART BOX

LOCAL PROGRAMS
Here is a list of programs aimed at working adults.

- FIU'S BBA+ SUNRISE AND BBA+ WEEKEND
  http://easylbleague.fiu.edu
  The cost for Florida residents: $97.12 per credit hour, plus $47.75 per course. For a nine-hour load each 12-week session (three courses), the fee would be $2,300. FIU also offers an evening MBA program.

- BARRY UNIVERSITY'S "THE BREAKFAST MBA"
  www.barry.edu/mbe/about/breakfastMBA.htm
  This new MBA program will start in January. Classes will meet Tuesday and Thursday, 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and the program can be completed in 23 months. Barry also offers MBA programs in the evening and on weekends.

- UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI
  www.miami.edu/cstudies/bgs
  UM's bachelor of General Studies program targets those who have "delayed or interrupted" their education. It allows students to earn a customized degree — choosing an area of concentration — with day, evening and weekend courses.

- UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
  www.florida.edu/professional/mba/about.html
  This month marks the launch of UF's Professional MBA Program in South Florida. Classes meet on the weekends at the Wyndham Bonaventure Resort in Weston.

CLEP TESTS
www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/clep/about.html
You can save time and money by taking tests through the College-Level Examination Program to avoid taking basic introductory courses in college. CLEP exams cost $55 each and, if you pass, you'll get college credit. Before you take CLEP exams, find out which exams your school recognizes, as well as its requirements for earning CLEP credit. CLEP exams are free to military service members. There are free study guides and tips available on the College Board's website.

SMART BOX

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES
Carol Stanton, a career counselor at the University of Pittsburgh offers these 10 tips for students over 25:

- Organize your time. There are only so many hours in the day and week, so how you arrange them to fit your needs is paramount when you are trying to do many things at once. Read a book on time management.

- Organize your money. Visit the financial aid office to find out about loans or scholarships. Find out if your company offers tuition reimbursement. Many students work for the university and receive tuition benefits that way. Be realistic about how many hours you can work and still do justice to your studies.

- Ask for the support you need. Talk to your loved ones about what is involved in terms of your time and attention. Prepare them so that they, in turn, can support you in your goals.

- mingle with your fellow students. Form study groups so that you can stay focused and have built-in support in your classes. This is especially helpful for older students who may feel a little out of step with younger classmates. Also, if you miss a class, one of your classmates can catch you up.

- Meet other adult students. Attend events where you can meet other nontraditional students. It's helpful to know that other people are going through similar experiences, and you can also build a network of new friends and colleagues. Maybe you can car pool or share baby-sitters.

- Get to know your professors. One of your professors may become a mentor or refer you to professional resources.

- Take time to relax. You need to have a balanced life in order to accomplish your goals without burning out or getting sick.

- Be clear about your vision. It helps your motivation if you are clear about what you are trying to accomplish. Take time to think about your values, interests, and goals.

- Be prepared for difficult times. It's normal to feel discouraged at times. Remember that these times will pass and have a plan for getting support when you need it.

- Take one day at a time. Earning a college degree while working and living your life can be overwhelming, if you look at the whole picture at once. Try to stay in the present and take one step at a time.