

The 20th Grade: Women Overcoming Four Common Barriers to a College Education

by Andrew Stenhouse, Ed.D.

A single mom returning to college after a divorce was trying to explain to her son her new role as a college student. “Wow!” He counted in his head. “You must be in the 20th grade!” She certainly felt that way. She had not planned on being back in college at her age, but after her husband left, she was forced to make a new life for herself. Having married young, she had been a stay-at-home mom who hoped of living a very traditional family life. Now, everything had changed.

Meet four remarkable women who overcame four common barriers to a college education:

Barrier One: Negative Experiences

“It’s too painful” (Teri, age 36, marketing assistant)

When Teri thought of going back to school, she shuddered. For her, college was a time she tried desperately to forget. She had been a terrible student, the teachers didn’t seem to care and her classmates lived in a different world. College was not a priority. She had other things on her

mind. Remembering those early years brought back vivid and painful memories of a difficult marriage. Going back to college meant she had to face her demons and confront her heartbreak. It meant opening old wounds. But it also meant healing, new beginnings and taking control.

“Coming back to school was such a scary thing for me,” Teri confessed. The memories of college as an 18-year-old were so humiliating; she was terrified that she would simply relive those terrible experiences. Instead, the experience was far different than her first time on a college campus. She found the faculty to be supportive, and she made friends who helped her succeed. “We have really helped each other get through school. We built such a support system that we plan to keep in touch forever.”

Barrier Two: Age

“I’m too old” (Lucy, age 79, owner and operator of a private school in Los Angeles)

While not in the midst of her single parenting years, Lucy had her own barrier to overcome: age. Having attended countless college graduations of her former students, Lucy never quite got around to it herself—until now. While vacationing in Kenya, she became acquainted with a woman who had returned to college at the age of 40. This woman, who now

holds a doctorate, began the familiar line of questioning. “How old will you be in five years if you go back to school?” She had set her trap. “How old will be you be in five years if you do not go back to school?” She smiled at Lucy, realizing that her point had not been lost in the simplicity of her challenge.

So after the death of her husband, Lucy decided to, she said, “start all over again and not waste any time.” When she thought about it, she realized that now was actually the perfect time for her to go back to school. Her pastor encouraged her to pursue her dream no matter how old she was. That was all she needed. Once she was back in the classroom, she realized that while she was still older than everyone else, she was treated with respect. She actually felt that her age gave her an advantage. It did. Wisdom.

Barrier Three: Irrelevance

“It’s too meaningless” (Suzan, age 44, commercial property management)

Suzan sold her real estate company after enjoying a lucrative career and establishing herself as a success story. Once her kids became more

independent, she was ready for another challenge and even considered another career change.

A no-nonsense administrator, she was used to spending her time in the real world—meeting deadlines, meeting investors, meeting labor demands, meeting all the real-life challenges of business. Suzan could never quite see the value of a college education early on. That's why she dropped out in the first place; she'd been offered a job that paid her twice as much as most college graduates received. So for her, unless it added to her own marketability, going back to school seemed like a waste of time. She had no desire to listen to college professors pontificate about theories that seemed to have value only in ivory towers or on game shows.

Her perspective changed, however, when the college education she received proved to be practical. Being able to rely on her past experiences, she instantly recognized concepts that she had been using intuitively. Now, her business acumen makes even more sense. Applying theory to her experiences (rather than the other way around) has given Suzan a consuming quest for knowledge. She is now pursuing an MBA and plans to earn a doctorate. She will then start a consulting practice so she can provide pragmatic application to other businesses based on sound theoretical wisdom.

Barrier Four: Time

“I’m too busy” (Diann, age 39, financial manager)

Balancing a successful career as well as raising two children is hard enough. When you’re a single mom, it seems impossible. Going back to college sounded overwhelming when Diann first thought about it. Since one of her boys was disabled and prone to seizures, her demands as a mother were even more taxing. However, she decided that she would do it for herself as well as her children. Once Diann began to feel as though a college degree was “career insurance,” it became an urgent necessity. She would find the time, make education a part of her career and do everything possible to provide for her boys.

“I have actually become a better mom,” Diann says, which was her priority. She had vowed that she would not replicate her childhood through her sons.

As a young girl , Diann had lived in four foster homes. She was later reunited with her abusive mother until moving out at 17. From the slums of the inner city, Diann knew at an early age that she had to go to college in order to make it in life. However, she lacked emotional support throughout her childhood and two abusive marriages.

Plagued with health problems herself, Diann eventually found at church the support she so desperately needed. Through her new faith she went back to college with drive and determination. Even after 20 surgeries, including a bilateral mastectomy, Diann excelled with focus. After completing her bachelor's and master's degrees, Diann is now finishing her doctorate and wants to become a teacher and empower other women.

The wonderful thing about these stories is that they are more common than you might realize. If you think that these women are different and that you could not accomplish what they have, think again. Each of them admitted that their biggest hurdle was simply getting started. Once the decision was made to go back to school, their confidence continued to build, as did their commitment. Each would tell you today, the biggest step is the first. Take it!

Dr. Stenhouse, a professor at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, Calif., has a passion for helping adults in transition.

Sidebar:

What is your first step in going back to school? Think about these things as you S.T.A.R.T.:

S – Speak to other single parents who have gone back to school. How did they approach it? What can you learn from their successes? Their frustrations?

T – Take some time at the library and on the Internet. Visit the sites of various colleges and universities in your area. You can find out a tremendous amount (fields of study, possible financial aid, etc.) via the Internet. Some colleges even offer courses online, giving you some additional freedom in pursuing your education.

A – Approach family and friends, ask them to consider helping you with childcare, prayer support and (sometimes much needed) encouragement.

R – Research your financial options. Ask the colleges/universities you are interested in if they know of any assistance available to single parents.

T – Turn in your application and say your prayers. You could very well be in for the adventure of a lifetime!