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'It's not too late to go back to college'

By Rachel Leifer

Like many college students, Richard Waite crams for exams, waits anxiously for grades and takes in the occasional sporting event.

But he also helps his wife study, works 20 hours a week and drives his 6-year-old daughter to school.

"When I get out of class, I go home and figure out what I'm going to eat, spend a little time with my family and then get as much homework and studying done as I can before bedtime," said Waite, 28, who is pursuing his bachelor's degree in business administration at the University of Southern Mississippi.

He is not alone. In fact, the 21-year-old bachelor's degree holder seems to be going the way of the dodo. Nationwide, more and more students are entering college later, often with jobs and families to worry about.

The proportion of college students older than 25 increased from 28 percent in 1970 to about 45 percent in 2000, according to the American Association of Higher Education. The American Association of Community Colleges says the average age of two-year college students is 29.

Though about half of the students who completed a bachelor's degree in 1999-2000 did so by age 22, 9 percent were ages 30 to 39 during their last year of college, and 7 percent were age 40 or older, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

To accommodate older students with concerns beyond rushing sororities and staying awake in art history class, colleges and universities have expanded course schedules and online offerings.

"We've had to be more flexible in scheduling and had to be more understanding of problems students have because of child-care problems," Jones County Junior College President Emeritus Ronald Whitehead said.

JCJC and Pearl River Community College now allow students to schedule classes only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, or Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Afternoon, evening and weekend classes have been expanded as well. Older students tend to use summer sessions to pick up credits, too.

Southern Miss also has embraced flexible scheduling, added online courses and introduced mini-sessions - concentrated courses offered between semesters in which students can earn three full credits in one or two weeks.

Numerous factors contribute to the trend, said Joe Paul, Southern Miss vice president for student affairs.

"Adults are recognizing it's not too late to go back to college," he said. "We know the value of a bachelor's degree over the course of an average worker's lifetime is \$1 million to \$2 million, in terms of what they're likely to earn."

Other forces are at work too, Whitehead said.

"There's been a big increase in the number of students attending who have taken GEDs - more of them are high school dropouts," he said. "People who drop out of high school ... are realizing they have to have education in order to have job opportunities."

That realization struck Waite almost 10 years after he dropped out of a Jackson high school after ninth grade and took his GED.

"I wasn't all that keen on going back to school, but I didn't want to work for eight or nine dollars an hour for the rest of my life," he said.

So both he and his wife enrolled at two-year colleges before transferring to Southern Miss two years ago. Waite is taking advantage of the university's summer courses and is currently enrolled in his first online course.

The flexible scheduling makes it possible for him to be a student and a father simultaneously.

"I'm able to stay home with my little girl, and I'm still able to get something accomplished during the meantime," he said.