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From Project Fresh Start (LLCC Adult Re-entry Program)

Priorities  As an adult returning to school, you will find yourself re-ordering your priorities to reflect your changing interests and the new demands on your time. You probably will find yourself following the example of other re-entry students who place academic requirements and personal responsibilities at the top of their list of priorities. As one thirty-five-year-old student and mother of two children explains, "It's grades, kids, and husband, and everything else has to fall in between."

It takes time for a family to adjust to a major change in one member's life. To help everyone through this initial time of change, re-entry adults repeatedly emphasized the necessity of honest discussion with spouse and children. Many mothers stressed the importance of talking to their children and explaining to them that less time does not mean less love. A mother of three remembers having to tell her daughter, "I wish I could spend more time with you like we did before, but I have a test to take."

In addition to keeping communication lines open, it is a good idea to try to involve your family in your academic life. Including your spouse in academic and campus activities that interest both of you will give you more to share. You may want to bring family members to films, lectures on campus, or other appropriate activities. Perhaps your spouse can read a paper, help with a math problem, or simply discuss class topics with you.

Friends and Relations  Re-entry students find that the amount of time required for study leaves considerably less time to nurture friendships and maintain ties with relatives. Some friends and relatives may be very supportive and helpful while others may resent or misunderstand newfound academic interests. Beginning a new life often means distancing yourself from old friends, and it takes courage to let go of the ones who can no longer accept you. But remember that one of the exciting benefits of returning to school is making new friends.

Making the System Work for You  The college is designed to serve its students although this may not always seem clear when you are faced with its bureaucracy. Experienced students, therefore emphasize the importance of learning the system so they can make it work to their advantage. They say you must learn to persevere until you get what you want.

The advice of other students is invaluable in learning the ropes. If you have a problem, don't hesitate to ask them how they handled situations similar to yours. What you want to do may be fully within the rules and regulations of the college if you only knew them. Sympathetic instructors can also give you advice and, of course, you should read the catalog to find out about waiving requirements, petitioning, and incompletes. Procedures often exist to solve problem situations, so feel free to take advantage of them.
Adults also discover that rules require interpretations. For a rule which appeared hard and fast, there were often instances when re-entry students could point out exceptions. If you don’t like the first answer you receive, ask someone else. Don’t give up on the first try. Persist until you have exhausted all possible channels or get the decision you want (and then get it in writing).

When dealing with instructors, don’t be afraid to ask for special consideration. Many re-entry students handicap themselves by their reluctance to seek out help. They feel intimidated by the “academy” and neglect the extent to which members of this bureaucracy can—and wish to—be helpful. Many younger students certainly don’t hesitate to ask to bend the rules, so there is no reason you shouldn’t have the same rights. If you do have a legitimate excuse for not completing an assignment on time, or you have a conflict with an exam date, at least discuss the problem with your instructor.

**Have I Made the Right Decision?** With the many difficulties entailed in leading a life with added responsibilities, re-entry students do tend to stop occasionally and ask themselves if it’s worth it. It is a question you may also ask yourself from time to time.

How do other re-entry students answer this question? They will point to the confidence they have gained in themselves and the increased respect they receive from others as some of the benefits garnered from their education. But they will also mention the exhilaration derived from the learning process itself. A thirty-five year old re-entry student who has three children describes her feelings: “I think of myself more positively. I can feel myself developing. It’s so exciting to experience an education.” Another woman explains why her education is important to her at her age: “It’s growing older but in a good way, feeling good about it.”

And when graduation nears, re-entry students also focus on the benefits of a degree to provide expanded career opportunities and increased earnings potential. So, the answer they give is “Yes, it is worth it!”

(Adapted from *Re-entry: A Handbook for Adults* from Northwestern University, 1979, and *Barriers to Academic Re-entry and How to Overcome Them*, from Northwestern University, 1979.)