

**= CHAPTER 14 =**

**Re-Entry and**  
**Career Transition**  
**Students**

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college students was 28 years. Community college students between the ages of 22 and 39 accounted for 45% of enrollees, with 15% of students aged 40 years or older. Similarly, community college students include more minority students (45%), first-generation college students (42%), and single parents (13%) than ever before. Four in 5 full-time students were employed either part-time (58%) or full-time (21%).<sup>4</sup>

## Career Transitions

With a social trend toward adult career changes, a career as a physical therapist assistant offers a practical, meaningful vocation, where life experience tends to enhance applicable decision-making and communication skills. Physical therapist assistant students tend to be older, female, and seeking a second career. In fact, these students

may succeed because of their maturity, experience, and motivation.<sup>5</sup>

## **Ages 25, 35, 45,...**

Younger re-entry students, aged 25 to 34 years, have much in common with traditional students. Many are still single and without dependents, although this is also the classic marriage-childbirth-divorce age group. Time since previous schooling is minimal, and interests and activities are broad, often involving group trips and athletic recreation.

Middle re-entry students, aged 35 to 44 years, are frequently in committed relationships or have been in one, often have children to care for, have multiple outside interests or steady employment, and may own a home or have other major responsibilities or debts. These students often have been out of school for many years and often find it

difficult to make time for classes and assignments in their already full lives.

Older re-entry students, aged 45 years and older, are a distinct minority. They may have established careers, teenage or grown children, and elderly parents. They are beginning to deal with issues of aging and may have begun to consider financial planning for retirement. They are old enough to be their younger classmates' parents and have few sociohistoric bonds with students a generation younger.<sup>4</sup>

## **Predictable Strengths and Benefits**

Re-entry students tend to be highly motivated, grounded, goal-oriented students who are eager to learn and have a sense of purpose and dedication. Findings that nontraditional students more eagerly attend classes and do homework

may suggest their higher enthusiasm for learning after time spent away from classrooms.<sup>6</sup> This often is their second chance, so there is no backing out. This is particularly true of older students who may feel that their career time is running out.

Older or nontraditional students tend to see themselves as more applied and process-oriented than their concrete, task-focused, traditional classmates who may be more interested in short-term goals.<sup>7</sup> Other unique attributes of re-entry students may include a more serious view of education and a high value placed on positive working relationships with faculty.<sup>7</sup>

One study comparing non-traditional female students with housewives found that the returning students experienced greater self-respect and respect from others, a more diversified life, and less boredom.<sup>6</sup> Service to community, enhancement of quality of life, personal career satisfaction, and acqui-

sition of a practical skill are reasons given by reentry students for taking the leap.<sup>8</sup>

## Can I Learn as Quickly as my Younger Classmates?

Contrary to the popular notion that adult age and cognitive abilities are inversely related, recent longitudinal studies suggest that mean cognitive performance may not significantly decline until late adulthood (age 65 and older).<sup>9</sup> Vocabulary increases with age, and performance on language ability tests has been shown to be more strongly associated with the subject's educational level than with his or her age.<sup>10</sup> In addition, students with vast life experience have more finely tuned their social and communication skills through years of practice in diverse settings.

Helen Hislop has written about the importance of “productive dissent” and the “ability to listen to opposing perceptions in a non-judgmental manner, to deal with different ideas with an open mind” versus rigidity and resistance to dissent.<sup>11</sup> Older or multirole students often have encountered a greater variety of people and ideas than their more youthful classmates and they have experienced many decision-making challenges. These experiences may prepare them to accommodate for clinical ambiguity, “the uncertainty principle that intrudes into every human interaction between patient and therapist,” and facilitate their development of clinical intuition.<sup>11</sup>

## **Predictable Challenges and Sacrifices**

### *Technology and You*

In spite of their many positive qualities, re-entry students can face challenges when it comes to current technology and recent schooling trends. Some did not grow up with access to information on the Internet, as students do today. For students who completed prerequisites 10 or 15 years before re-entering, certain subjects may be distant memories. Test-taking can feel terrifying, and sitting for hours in a classroom may be unfamiliar, as well as uncomfortable.

What school was like 20 years ago is not what it is like upon re-entry. Trivial, everyday procedures for most students can be traumatic at first for a returning student.

*Years ago, Lilia attended a technical college to train as a medical assistant. Returning to college at age 40 was exciting, yet perplexing. Sitting at her first kinesiology exam, the Scantron*

*testing form on the desk, wearing reading glasses for the first time, wedged between 2 other students, surrounded by what seemed like dozens of younger students, feeling insecure about putting her backpack up front, Lilia felt like an alien and remembers saying to herself, "This is crazy; I can't believe I'm doing this."*

*Reevaluating the stressful situation, Lilia requested a different seating arrangement and left her backpack in her locker for the next exam. By the end of the semester she was tutoring fellow students and received an "A" on the final exam, but it was a rough start.*

## **Physical and Social Challenges**

Older students may experience physical challenges, such as worsening eyesight, slower thought processing, and increased sensitivity to noise,

time pressures, crowding, and bedlam. Middle-aged female students may be experiencing perimenopausal symptoms. Multirole students may resent the tedium of class meetings, birthday announcements, and busywork assignments, knowing they have a sick child at home or a long night ahead at a job. They may share little in common with younger students involved in dating and struggles with roommates.

## *Time and Stress Management*

Time and stress management are challenges for all students; re-entry students are just more experienced at coping with them. Fortunately so, because they often have less time and potentially more stress than their traditional classmates. Various studies have replicated findings that nontraditional students' complex time and role demands are sources of anxiety and tension.<sup>6</sup> They have more responsibilities at

home, have less time spent with friends and peers, and have less vacation time than traditional students.<sup>6</sup>

## ***Financial Needs***

Starving students can be found at all echelons, but for re-entry students, financial woes are usually more complex than just paying rent and borrowing a little more from parents. Re-entry often means job loss, which results in downward mobility for adults accustomed to a steady income with health insurance and other benefits. Dependents further complicate matters, especially if they also have college expenses. Homeowners may have mortgage payments as well as maintenance and homeowner's insurance to continue to pay.

# Unpredictable Struggles and Growth

Returning to full-time study can be an enormous transition. You are settled, stable, and competent in what you do. Everyone's reaction is, "You want to do what?" What may have begun as an off chance of qualifying for a long-postponed dream, suddenly looms as a dire threat to financial, marital, and mental stability. There may be an overwhelming sense of "Help! I can't really do this" or "Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into?"

## *Older Students, Younger Faculty*

In spite of expecting skills to be a little rusty, the challenges of navigating through online class resources with a distant instructor and virtual

classmates can be unsettling. In addition, even in classroom experiences, faculty and staff are no longer similar to memories of previous school days. Traditional students may look up to faculty as older and wiser, whereas students who are the same age or older than their faculty may have a hard time submitting to the conventional faculty-student hierarchy. In their own areas of prior expertise and training, re-entry students may have specific skills superior to those of some faculty. Some older students also may have more experiential wisdom than their younger faculty.

## *High Expectations*

Expectations are another pitfall. Re-entry students have been through a lot to get where they are, and they may be demanding, impatient, and judgmental of faculty's shortcomings, which are viewed as impediments to their own goals. They may

feel more competitive than cooperative. In a recent study, nontraditional students reported greater frustration from poor teaching than did their traditional counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Re-entry students may cope with these perceptions with arguments, direct confrontation of authority, refusal to follow instructions, and endless unsolicited suggestions for improvement and change.

## *Relationships*

What about friendships? Outside of school, faculty and older students may have mutual friends and common bonds, and would be inclined to socialize, but role boundaries may limit social contact between faculty and students. Older students may have more in common with faculty who are closer to their own generation than with students 2 decades younger but are segregated by artificial barriers. Where are the limits? Faculty may be well aware of their

own roles and boundaries, but newly returning students, unaccustomed to academia may find it initially confusing to differentiate between acceptable friends (classmates) and friendly authorities (faculty, clinical instructors, staff).

## ***Support Systems***

At the same time re-entry students are trying to foster a support system on campus, they must redefine their support network at home and beyond. One re-entry student remarked, “The magnitude of support I’ve had to find boggles my mind. I don’t think I’d have dared to try this if I’d known how much help I’d need.”

***Melody, a 36-year-old married mother of 3, works part time at a suburban health center near her home. Interested in furthering her education, she accepts***

*her employer's incentive to pay tuition and fees for her to upgrade her skills. She applies and is accepted into the physical therapist assistant program at the community college 25 miles away. At the new student picnic, she talks to a re-entry student in the second-year class about her concerns. "Will I be able to keep up with classes if I have children at home? It sounds great, but how difficult are the courses? My computer skills are weak. I have a 40-minute commute; I don't know how I'll manage evening classes. Can I live at home during my clinicals?"*

*The second-year student confesses that the first year was a struggle, but she has survived. "Sure, give it a try. Do you have enough support?" The new student answers that she plans to arrange after-school child care 3 days per week, her husband is employed full-time, and she's saved a little money for books and supplies. The second-year student*

*replies, “Not enough. You’ll need more help at home, more flexibility, and campus resources. Better see a re-entry counselor.”*

Support is more than tacit approval and occasional child care. Assumption of homemaker duties by other family members, residential relocation, noninvolvement in children’s school activities, extreme economizing, tutoring needs, scheduling nightmares, psychological counseling, aging issues, extended family participation, vacations spent barely catching up, zero recreational time, bouts of self-doubt, and major lifestyle disruption may be some of the challenges with which a re-entry student must contend, in addition to academic demands.

Multilevel support is crucial to transcend the demoralizing realization that the best one can do is to get by a day at a time. Professional and personal support can be key to recapturing the vision that

originally brought one to college and to making “insurmountable hurdles become just another day’s adventure...”[11](#)

## ***And a Midlife Crisis Too?***

To add to the complexities of re-entry, middle age is often developmentally a time of reevaluation, spiritual growth, searching, or midlife crisis for many adults. This may be what inspires a second-career decision in the first place. A 45-year-old student may have a very different perspective on the meaning of his or her chosen field of study than a 22-year-old traditional student who thought physical therapist assistant education sounded like an interesting program and hopes it will pay well. The following re-entry student statement is typical.

***I needed to change my life. I knew I could do more, and I didn't want to***

*get stuck where I was forever. I'd always wanted to go back to school but money, family, or other commitments got in the way. I finally just had to make the leap; small steps weren't getting me there, and time was running out. It was terrifying, but I'm glad I did it. I wasn't really sure it was possible, after so many years and with so many obstacles, but I had to find out. I would always have wondered and regretted the missed opportunity. Some days, I wake up very surprised that I'm here.*

These subtle surprises create un-subtle confusion for re-entry students who are already feeling slightly lost and overwhelmed. Returning students may repeatedly think, "This is silly. This shouldn't be a problem. I'm mature and experienced. I can handle this." When re-entry students experience conflicts for speaking out or being different, or experience burnout from being pulled in too many disparate directions, they

need help. It is important to identify students at risk for stress and burnout related to personal and environmental factors to initiate appropriate preventive measures.<sup>12</sup>

## Strategies for Re-Entry Students

### *Professional Counseling*

Competent professional counseling can make all the difference in the world. In a study of role strain of non-traditional female students, “Psychological support was found to be a significant factor in feelings of satisfaction for women who were re-entering the academic world.”<sup>6</sup> This may be related to another finding that women re-entering after an average absence of 10 years had depression symptom scores twice as high as a normative population.<sup>6</sup>

Re-entry students who seek campus counseling services often report they are dissatisfied with the support they receive; for example, commenting, “The counselor is younger than I am and doesn’t understand my problems” or “When I explained what I was dealing with, the counselor seemed overwhelmed by its complexity.” Campus services are geared primarily to traditional students and often rely on counseling student interns. Finding a good fit between counselor and counselee is sometimes difficult. If you are dissatisfied, talk directly with your program director or the head of the counseling center.

## ***Financial Aid***

Financial aid and scholarships can be lifelines. Talk with a financial aid counselor. Submit applications on time. Research scholarships for which you are uniquely qualified. Plan ahead; have es-

says and references ready well ahead of deadlines. Explore private loans from friends or relatives. Barter. Temporarily down-scale; this won't last forever. Work as a student assistant to integrate earning and learning.

## ***Use Re-Entry Program Services***

Re-entry programs exist at some colleges. Consider applying to schools that can offer re-entry services, including counseling, scholarship guidance, peer support groups, quiet study areas, tutoring, speaker programs, family activities, and the support of other re-entry students. Find a few students with similar concerns; get together regularly for support and problem solving. Network with same-age, same-interest students at other schools.

## ***Solicit the Support of the Faculty***

Faculty are allies. Appreciate them, trust them, work with them. Help them think of ways to help you. Tell them what you need and what you'd like to try. Be patient. Get involved with student clubs and professional associations.

## ***Collaborate With Your Classmates***

Your classmates of all ages can be treasures. Find a few with whom to work closely and have fun. Seek out other returning students. Welcome opportunities to work with students unlike yourself to expand your awareness and understanding. Trade skills—help those you can, ask for help as needed. Be a good group member; do your share or more, and use your maturity to help facilitate a good group process and to

resolve conflicts quickly and effectively. Model appropriate behavior—honesty, trustworthiness, reliability, and clear communication.

## ***Involve Your Family and Significant Others***

If you are parenting very young children, carefully evaluate whether this is the best time to return to school. You may miss a substantial part of your child's first few years.

Family members need to play a part in your educational experience. Elicit broad support. Clearly explain the potential benefits for everyone of your success. Give every family member a role to play. Primary school children can help label supplies, color charts, sort laundry, and unpack groceries. Older children can help locate library and Internet materials, organize files, create quizzes, critique practice presentations,

and assist with meals and cleaning. Establish quiet study hours. Organize routine chores for maximum efficiency. Share lots of hugs.

Spouses or significant others can make it or break it for a re-entry student, especially if there are dependents who need care. Household help, multifaceted child or elder care, and transport, school liaison, meals, laundry, car care, banking, bills, and shopping can eat up oceans of time. Reassurance and pep talks may be vital, and general organizational help is essential. Assistance with typing, proofing, printing, collating, and photocopying, as well as being available for deadline crunches, can be sanity preserving for the overloaded student.

Siblings, parents, or friends can help by providing loans or special gifts, such as children's piano lessons, orthodontist care, soccer shoes, or summer camp. Child care, meals, shopping, and transportation assistance may also

help. Everyone can give moral support. Invite family to special presentations and include them in your accomplishments and celebrations. Ask for what you need. Remember to express appreciation, and when you can, return the favor, or the money.

## ***Upgrade Technology Skills***

Make sure that you are using technology to help you. Invest in an up-to-date laptop computer with wireless access to take to class and use at home. Learn how to manage documents and files, how to transfer data and download software and references, and how to access and take advantage of web-based resources and e-books. Invest in high-speed Internet access at home to allow use of distance learning and library search engines. Learn how to format *Word* documents, create *Excel* spreadsheets, and design *PowerPoint* presentations. Practice new computer

skills prior to panicky deadlines. Use applications that allow you to store documents in the “cloud,” that will be accessible with your mobile phone, tablet, or from any computer. Acquaint yourself with the campus computer laboratory, for last-minute edits and printing. Have faith; it is all possible.

## ***Be an Active Learner***

Assert your desire to learn. Ask questions. Question discrepancies. Follow your interests. Share your enthusiasm and thinking. Get involved in interesting projects. Initiate. Explore. Seek out like-minded individuals. Accept opportunities.

## ***Use All Your Best Survival Strategies***

Do what you need to do to succeed. Sit at the front in classes, record

lectures (always ask first), find a tutor, schedule time with faculty, borrow materials, buy a computer, hire childcare, eat healthy snacks, wear the glasses, and get comfortable. Don't waste energy worrying about not fitting in. In the long-run, it won't matter and may even be an advantage.

## ***Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously***

Relax. Sure you're different, but don't dwell on it. You're probably more okay and acceptable than you imagine. Contribute your perspective; so much the better if it is unique and interesting. Be yourself. Focus on what you can do, rather than what you can't do. Smile a lot, stay sane, and do the best you can.

## ***Be Your Best Ally***

YOU are your own best friend and advisor. Listen to your inner self. Believe

in yourself. Trust your intuition. Take care of your health—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Make choices that support your success. Let yourself enjoy this fantastic opportunity.

## Summary

Re-entry students face academic, social, and family challenges as they enter physical therapy education. A positive attitude, combined with careful planning, can help to reduce some of the predictable stresses involved in juggling academic and family demands. Students may benefit from using available on campus services, such as counseling, child care, and financial aid, to assist in meeting their needs.

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## Additional Resources

Adult Learners and Students with Children Listserv. To subscribe, send an e-mail to [subscribe@naspa.org](mailto:subscribe@naspa.org) and include in the body that you wish to join the Adult Learners and Students with Children Listserv.

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Website. Adult Learner and Students with Children Knowledge Community provides national and regional networks, newsletters, links, and resources to address needs of adult learners and students with children. <http://www.naspa.org/>

[constituent-groups/kcs/adult-learners-and-students-with-children.](#)

Accessed April 30, 2014.

# PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. Write down the contact information for your campus counseling center. If there is a website, also write down the URL address.

Name of Director:

Campus location:

Telephone:

URL address:

2. Interview another student in your class.

What did he or she do prior to entering the physical therapist assistant education program?

What changes has your colleague made in his or her life since entering the program?

Who else was influenced by your colleague's decision to enter the physical therapist assistant education program?

What emotional, academic, relationship, and/or financial stresses has this decision created?

What similarities do you recognize in your own life?

What differences have you experienced?



= SECTION V =

Planting the Seeds  
for a Bright Future

A *re-entry student* is loosely defined as any student aged 25 years or older.<sup>1</sup> The concept of re-entering the academic arena also implies that a student has not been continuously enrolled full-time at the college level.<sup>1,2</sup> The term *nontraditional student* is also commonly used to describe this student population, but, more specifically, it refers to students who do not fit the traditional profile of first-time college students (those who attend full time and immediately following high school) and are characterized by their older age group, discontinuous enrollment patterns, active employment status, and substantial financial and/or family responsibilities.<sup>3</sup>

## Changing Demographics

Recent statistics showed that 58% of community college students were women; the average age of community