

The Flagship



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Back-to-school isn't just for kids anymore

By A.C. Mink, Special to The Flagship

When I dropped out of college to get married in 1991, I had every intention of returning to school. Every year I would tell myself and my family "Okay, this semester, I'm going back."

I had all the excuses – the children were too young and needed my attention; I joined the military; I deployed. Basically life happened and I never did go back – until now.

This summer I joined the ranks of the ever-increasing number of "non-traditional students." Non-traditional meaning the ever-growing ranks of adult learners. Moms, dads, career military members just like me are taking advantage of the opportunities to complete higher education. The U.S. Department of Education reports that adult students are the fastest growing demographic. And why not? With tuition-assistance currently paying 100 percent for classes at thousands of colleges and universities, what could possibly be the downside?

There was a catalyst to this giant leap in the direction of my degree. My oldest daughter is beginning her senior year of high school this year. I was going over college information with her and she said "Mom, you are so smart. It's too bad you never finished school. I know you like being a Marine, but after next year, I'll have more education than you."

Wow. She couldn't have given me a bigger wake-up call with a triple shot of espresso and 15 sugars.

However, at nearly 40, simply making the decision to go to school was daunting. Deceptively easy-sounding questions such as "what school should I attend" and "what should I study" stopped me cold. I was great at giving my children and my junior Marines advice, but searching through all the schools with their flashy websites and brightly-colored handouts just gave me a headache. Luckily, I had an asset that many adult learners do not – the Education Center onboard Naval Station Norfolk.

So, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed (oh yes, that term DOES show my age, doesn't it?), I made my way over to the Education Center and met the first of many hurdles – tackling the paperwork jungle. Don't let it stop you! They have a staff trained to help you wade through the information that is available.

The first thing they will probably tell you is to make sure your SMART transcript is up-to-date. It is available at <https://smart.navy.mil>. Navy Knowledge Online or MarineNet can also give you access to this information. If there is anything missing, get it updated as quickly as possible. If you've taken any college-level courses, make sure you have that information available as well. The next is for you to take Tuition Assistance 101 – it's a required course if you are going to get TA and it breaks down the process in a way that is easily understood by all.

Once your paperwork is working, your next step is to find a school. This is where your SMART

transcript can really help – things you have learned during your time in service can count as credits at some schools. You may be closer to a degree than you thought. I was. Once all my credits had been calculated, I found that I needed less than 60 hours to complete my Bachelor's degree – that's more than halfway there.

Shop around and don't go for the first school you look into. For me, it was really important that I find a school that was online, but that isn't always for everyone. I also wanted to maximize my existing credits by finding a program that could incorporate the highest amount. If you have to learn in a classroom environment, dozens of schools offer courses on base. If you don't know what you want to do or where you want to finish, a community college is a good way to go. Many community colleges, like Tidewater Community College in Hampton Roads, are now feeders for graduate-level schools such as Old Dominion university and Norfolk State University. Whatever your plan, take your time and decide what is right for you.

I checked out dozens of schools and met with advisors both on the phone and in person. I finally found one that fit my schedule and offered a program in which I was interested, and I was ready to go.

Every school is different, so check with their registrar to ensure they have everything you need to complete enrollment. If you've taken any college-level courses, contact any schools you've attended in the past and request official transcripts to be sent to your new school. Most schools will assign you an advisor to assist you with degree planning, to ensure you take the right courses for your program. I haven't been in formal school in decades, so I decided to only take a couple of classes to start. My plan is to take it slow the first couple semesters and see what works for me – online, classroom or whatever type of course.

Once enrolled in my courses, I was ready for the TA forms. If you're Navy, tuition assistance requests can be done online. However, if you are a Marine, you have to do it the old-fashioned way of walking it into your OIC's office. When I faxed my TA forms to the school, I was officially a college student again.

Whew! Scary, but almost as exciting as jumping out of a CH-53E into the Pacific. I found a link on the U.S. DoE website with great info for non-traditional students
<http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/returning.jsp>

There are a number of online resources available to military service members. Navy Knowledge Online is available at www.nko.navy.mil; Marinenet is available at www.marinenet.usmc.mil

Military, retirees and their family members can contact your installation education offices at the following:

- Army Education Office Ft Eustis: 878-2083 ext. 221
- Navy College Office Norfolk Naval Station: 444-7454
- Navy College Office JEB Little Creek: 462-8279
- Navy College Office Dam Neck: 492-6050
- Navy College Office NAS Oceana: 433-3129

I just finished my first course with a 92. My daughter said "not bad for an old lady." And you know what – she's right.

So, what's stopping you?