

Do Old Dogs Want to Learn New Tricks?

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The makeup of students on college campuses across the nation is changing. The average student no longer is nineteen years old and right out of high school. More and more nontraditional students are returning to college or attending for the first time. This trend means that college students today have different concerns and needs than did their counterparts twenty years ago. Many adults are finding it necessary to gain a higher degree of education in order to be able to compete in an ever-changing work force. Factoring in job and family makes the decision to return to school a very complex one. Add to that the fact that a student is Deaf and the equation become even more complicated.

Jimmy and Amy Peterson, a married Deaf couple, faced many obstacles when they decided to return to college. They had both attended college after graduating high school, but marriage caused them to put their education on hold. Years later they began to consider the possibility of returning to college and finishing their degrees. However, they now had a daughter and comfortable jobs. One of the first questions they had to ask themselves was, “Do we want to learn new tricks?” After much discussion they decided it would be best for them and their daughter if they had college degrees. The acronym TRICKS summarizes the process they went through in their decision making.

T stands for transition. The move from a comfortable lifestyle to that of a college student involved many transitions of both mind and body. The Petersons had to resign from their jobs in order to become full-time students. They sacrificed the luxury of a stable life in order to prepare for a better future. They wanted to teach their daughter, by example, that education is crucial in today’s world. Another transition they had to make was moving to a new city. The area in which they lived did not offer the resources they needed. Thus, they packed up everything and embarked on a new adventure. This sort of “carefree” move is common among those right out of high school, but there is much more to be considered when it is a whole family packing up to go to college.

R stands for resources. As the Petersons planned for their move, they took careful inventory of their resources. Realizing the need to find adequate resources if they were going to succeed in going back to school, they determined they would need financial support as well as a personal support system. They contacted their Vocational Rehabilitation Service counselor to ask for assistance. Through the help of VR and financial aid offered through the university, they were able to finance their education. Although their academic financial needs were taken care of, there was still the question of everything else. Their families afforded them the emotional support they needed, assisting them in many ways. They offered additional financial support, babysitting services, and, most importantly, they offered encouragement. Academic support came from the Department of Disabled Student Services, and DSS provided interpreters, guidance, and tutors. With the help of family, VR, and DS, the Petersons were able to attend college.

I stands for investigation. The Petersons had to do a lot of research before choosing which college to attend. They needed to find a college with good support services for students who are Deaf, and they also had to find a good school for their Deaf daughter. One of the contributing factors was the location of Jacksonville State University (JSU) relative to Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD). Amy graduated from ASD and knew that was the environment they

¹ Jacksonville State University is an affiliate of the Postsecondary Education Consortium (PEC).

wanted for their daughter. JSU offered the most extensive support services for the sensory impaired in the state. The fact that these two institutions were within easy driving distance was the deciding factor.

C stands for communication. If the Petersons were going to succeed, they would have to have good communication with each other, with their families, with their VR counselor, and with DSS. Each of these is a link in the chain of success; and if communication breaks down at any point, the goal will not be reached. They knew it would not be easy for both of them to return to school, but they were willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Keeping the lines of communication open was crucial to ensuring success.

K and S stand for keys to success. The keys to their continued success in college were the support of Vocational Rehabilitation Service, Disabled Student Services, and their families. They were able to investigate their options, gather resources, and prepare for the transition. Each of these steps was important in the process of succeeding in the college environment.

The Petersons want to encourage more Deaf adults to become students and learn new TRICKS by going back to school, so that they will have better career choices. Although it is not as easy to return to school after establishing a family and home, it can be very rewarding. There are many factors that mature adults must consider that young adults take for granted. The carefree college days are not so carefree when people must find time for their children and their homework. However, even “old dogs” can and must learn new “tricks” in order to succeed in today’s society.

