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## SOME COLLEGE, NO DEGREE

# Getting Back to College

BY EMILY HANFORD

Like a lot of people who drop out of college, Marilyn Johnson Jackson always planned to go back.

"Every year I thought about going back to school, I wanted to go back to school," she says.

But she couldn't figure out how to make it work.

Jackson is from a large family in Shreveport, La. There wasn't a lot of money growing up so when she graduated from high school in 1989 her only option was to live at home and go to a local college. She didn't like it. Jackson didn't think the school was "serious about education." And she was ready to leave home.

So she told her mother she was going to take a year off, get a job and an apartment. She ended up working in the medical supply department of a state hospital making \$4.44 an hour. The older women Jackson worked with told her she was crazy to quit college.

"They would always say, 'Why are you here? You're so smart. Why would you want a job like this?'"

Jackson told them she would go back eventually. But at age 19, she loved the freedom of living on her own. Plus, she was making more than minimum wage. She thought it was good money.

Until she got pregnant. Jackson had no car, no health insurance. Her son's father didn't help with the bills.

Everything had suddenly changed. One moment Jackson was a temporary member of the low-wage workforce. Nine months later, she was stuck in it.

### A Vicious Cycle

Most people who drop out of college and want to go back are caught in a vicious cycle. They want to finish their degree so they can get a better job, but without a better job they don't have the money, or the flexibility, to get the degree.

Lots of them are working second and third jobs. They have families, they have bills, and they have debt; college dropouts who took out student loans **leave with a median debt of \$7,000.**

What most college dropouts don't have is time, or good information about the options if they want to go back to college.

"I've been trying for years to get back into school and I just didn't know how to go about it," says Julia Capece. She's 25 years old and works as a payment-processing clerk for the city of Philadelphia.



Marilyn Johnson Jackson. (Photo: Emily Hanford)



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Capece went to college straight out of high school and majored in large animal science. Her dream was to work with wildlife. But two years into college she had a falling out with her parents. She no longer had their help paying tuition and had to give up her car, which made getting to campus a huge hassle.

Capece has been trying to get back to college ever since.

"Anyone who had a college fair, I went," she says.

But she was overwhelmed by all the paperwork involved in applying for admission and financial aid. Plus, she needed to find a program that would allow her to keep her day job with the city, and she couldn't find any night or weekend programs that would allow her to finish the degree in animal science.

"I felt really defeated," she says.

When she went to college fairs the reps from the schools were saying: Here's what we have to offer. What Capece needed was someone she could go to and say: Here's what I need.

**Graduate! Philadelphia**

**Graduate! Philadelphia** was set up to provide this kind of service. Program founders say theirs is the first program in the United States to specifically serve the large and growing number of people who have some college credits but no degree.

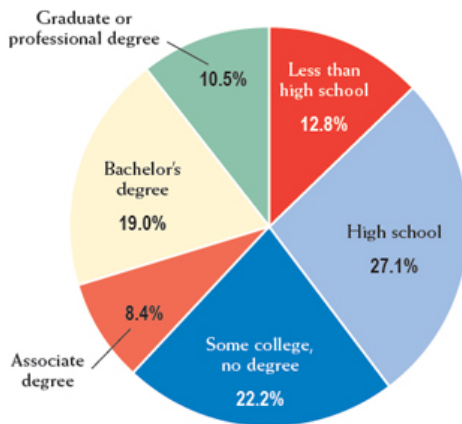
"When we started in 2003, everyone was talking about the brain drain, about how to keep people who have been to college in your region" to stay in your region, says the program's executive director, Hadass Sheffer.

But she and her colleagues took a look at the data and realized that in Philadelphia, there were more people who had started degrees and dropped out than there were people who had finished them. Finding a way to get dropouts to "make a comeback" became a rallying cry among city leaders and economic developers trying to improve Philadelphia's economy by raising the college completion rate.

Graduate! Philadelphia offers free counseling to adults who want to return to college. The program is paid for by the city and private foundations. Returning college students can get help online or in person at a center set up in the corner of a shopping mall in downtown Philadelphia. Big photos of smiling college graduates hang from the ceiling.

"We hear from people that they came to the center and sat outside for a couple of hours and then they came back another day until they got the courage up to come inside," says Sheffer. "They're afraid to take that first step. When you drop out of college, it leaves with you a big sense of failure."

Julia Capece found out about Graduate! Philadelphia through a meeting at work. She began



Levels of education for the U.S. population, ages 25-64

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey

Chart courtesy of Lumina Foundation. (Support for this documentary project is provided in part by Lumina Foundation.)

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The Graduate! Philadelphia "comebackers center" in the Gallery Mall in Center City, Philadelphia. (Photo: Emily Hanford)

working with a counselor at the center. He helped her research programs, fill out financial aid forms and figure out how to transfer her credits. This turns out to be a big obstacle for a lot of returning students; they can't get colleges to accept their old credits.

Capece wasn't able to find a way to finish her science degree at night. She says a lot of the programs designed for working adults focus on business. So she's pursuing a degree in accounting. She expects it will take her two years of part-time classes to finish an associate's degree and another few years for a bachelor's.

"We're looking at a five year plan," Capece says with a laugh. "By the time I'm 31, I'll be in good shape."

Her dream is to start her own accounting business. If it does well, she figures she can get her work done at night, go back to school again during the day and finally get the degree in animal science she always wanted.

Asked if she's disappointed that she didn't get the science degree her first time around, she says, "I'm not disappointed yet."

### To Set an Example

Capece says she's gotten used to the idea that getting a college degree is going to take a lot longer than she originally intended. But for a lot of dropouts, finishing a college degree seems like a mountain they'll never get over.

Marilyn Johnson Jackson finally decided she had to go back. She'd been wearing herself out working low-wage jobs at night and trying to move up at the hospital where she still worked during the day. But she could only get so far without a degree, even though when new managers got hired in her department she was often assigned to help train them.

The final straw was her son.

He was in middle school and he wasn't doing very well. To motivate him she said she was going to start saving for his college education.

"And he said, 'Mama, why didn't you ever finish college?'"

Jackson says she told him: "I quit one day and I said I was going back and I never did. But I'm going to tell you something, before you graduate high school, I'm going to walk across a college stage."

Surveys show one of the primary reasons adults return to college is to set an example for their children.

But Marilyn Johnson Jackson's experience going back to college was a nightmare.

She took out loans for night classes. With only a few credits under her belt from her first try at college, getting a degree was going to take years. She says the night classes weren't very good. And she was exhausted trying to work full-time, take care of her son, and go to school.

"Between leaving work and getting out to the college, there was no dinner fixed, there was nothing done," Jackson says. "My world was crazy, I was never resting."



Executive Director Hadass Sheffer (right) with Sallie Glickman, co-founder of Graduate! Philadelphia, in the "comebackers center." (Photo: Emily Hanford)



Marilyn Johnson Jackson (right) cooking dinner at home with her mother, Sarah Vinson. (Photo: Emily Hanford)

Jackson didn't see how she could live like this for years. She eventually quit college again, this time with about \$20,000 in student loan debt - and no degree.

### Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana

Jackson didn't think she would ever finish her degree until one day she noticed a new billboard for the [Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana](#). Also known as CALL, it's a state program designed to make it easier for working adults to get degrees.

Luke Dowden, director of the CALL program, says working adults need college to be quick and convenient. "Their time, their energy, and their finances are limited," he says.

Students who complete the CALL program get their degrees from existing state universities and community colleges. But they never have to come to campus. All of the programs are online. Each class is designed to take less than half as long as a traditional college course. Plus, students can get credit for what they already know by taking exams or producing portfolios. This allows people who have developed expertise in certain areas to opt out of introductory classes, saving them time, money, and in many cases, frustration.

Marilyn Johnson Jackson enrolled in the CALL program through a community college in the fall of 2007 and graduated with an associate's degree in December of 2008, four days before her son graduated from high school. Now she's a billing manager at the state hospital - a position she couldn't have gotten without a college degree. She's hoping to get a bachelor's degree next, but wants to pay down her student loans first. Jackson had to take out another \$12,000 to complete the CALL program.

John McGee is also a graduate of CALL. He too needed a degree to get promoted. He works at a casino in Bossier City, La, a gambling town across the river from Shreveport. McGee says when he first started taking online classes through CALL, he was just trying to get them done as fast as he could. But he surprised himself by enjoying what he was learning.

"Once I got in there, I just got addicted," he says. "Learning became interesting. It became less about chasing to get to the end as it was [about] going through the learning process."

McGee completed an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree entirely online through CALL. His employer paid most of the costs. Now he's starting an M.B.A. at Louisiana State University.



John McGee at the Horseshoe Hotel and Casino, where he works.  
(Photo: Emily Hanford)

### Too Much Failure

The United States needs more programs designed to specifically meet the needs of people who have some college credits says Stan Jones of [Complete College America](#), a national non-profit organization established in 2009 to draw attention to the needs of this group.

Jones says for too long the prevailing attitude towards college dropouts was "it's your fault." But he says when half the people who start something fail to achieve it, there's something more than personal failure going on.

"If you have an intersection and you have maybe an accident a year, you say well that was obviously the driver's fault," Jones says. "But if you have 80 accidents a year at the intersection you say, well something's wrong with that intersection. And that's what we're saying. Something's wrong because we have far too many dropouts."

Jones says most colleges are set up to meet the needs of young people just out of high school who have the time and money to go to school full time. But that doesn't work for returning students who have jobs and families, and it doesn't work for a lot of 18-year-olds either. Most of them have jobs too. They can't afford tuition if they don't.

Jones says colleges need to rethink everything about how they offer courses, when they offer courses, how long they are, what topics they cover, and how much they cost. He says



big changes are needed in higher education not just to meet the needs of dropouts who want to come back; changes are needed to keep so many people from dropping out in the first place.

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