

# Working Learners: Striving, Thriving, and Finishing Strong on the Postsecondary Journey

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“I would like, in the long run, to encourage people to keep on learning. Our education is never complete.” — *Nola Hill Ochs, who earned her bachelor’s degree at age 95 and master’s degree at age 98<sup>i</sup>*

“I had a lot of book knowledge but . . . . I know education is important, and in my field it’s critical. As a network person I have to have the certifications . . . .” — *IT entrepreneur Jay Patel, who, over the course of several years moving among many different institutions, eventually earned a bachelor’s and master’s degree along with numerous professional certificates to enhance his own business<sup>ii</sup>*

“[A student-employer matching program] allow[ed] me to expand my tool kit and at the same time facilitate my college education by providing funds and allocating time for school.” — *working mom Alejandra Lopez, who started college as an adult to enter a new career<sup>iii</sup>*

We all know a version of these stories, either personally or through a relative, co-worker, or employee. A hard-charging worker spends years in a job, or maybe even on a career path, that

doesn't require certifications or degrees. After many years, maybe because of a layoff, family problems, or maybe even a dark night of the soul, he or she realizes social and economic norms have changed and their life needs to take a different turn. It's time to take a few courses at a local community college to improve their skills and begin the journey to different possibilities. However, due to family and other commitments, the worker is unable to attend full-time, so continues to take courses off and on for years. If all goes well along this challenging path, they finally earn a certification, then an associate's degree. Finally, this rising working learner is able to transfer to a four-year college and focus on their finish. Maybe for them the finish means completing a bachelor's degree that holds the key to their career dreams.

This was the path—albeit a significantly longer version of it—for Nola Ochs. She spent years helping manage the family wheat farm and raising her children before taking her first college class right before she turned 50. By the time she started attending Fort Hays State University full-time in her 90s, she was still working on the family farm, but hoped to use her degree to obtain a public history job. Upon becoming the oldest person in the world to complete a bachelor's degree in 2007, Nola leveraged the publicity surrounding her record-breaking feat into her “dream job” as a living history storyteller for a major cruise line. Not long after, she returned to college to complete a graduate degree in liberal studies and in 2010 became the oldest person ever to earn a master's degree. Afterward, she promptly accepted a graduate teaching assistantship to work on a second master's in history and started writing her first book.<sup>iv</sup> Not bad for someone who doesn't fit the common image of a “traditional” college student!

Nola Ochs's story is just one that serves to inspire those thinking about postsecondary education at non-traditional ages and stages. Indeed, her experiences, as well as those of Jay Patel

and Alejandra Lopez, now reflect the norm among postsecondary education strivers. What we once thought of as “traditional” college students—those 18–22 years of age, going to school full-time right after high school and living on campus—are still around, of course, but they now represent a *minority* of college students. In fact, those “traditional” students reflect *less than one-fourth* of today’s postsecondary students. The vast majority of college students of all ages work at least part-time.<sup>v</sup> In other words, the stereotypical *Animal House* image of the campus-bound young collegian with enough free time and expendable income to focus on partying more than studying is growing as outdated as the toga.

So if you are a working adult thinking about attempting postsecondary education for the first time or resuming an interrupted college career, don’t think you can’t because you won’t fit in. Put simply, you’ve got lots of company.

### **Changing the Traditional Mindset**

Among the many problems with popular images of the “traditional college student” is how it perpetuates an inaccurate division between education and paid work. To call this division outdated is misleading, because for the vast majority of people, it never reflected reality. The idea that the “norm” should be for young people to focus only on school until they reach their early twenties, at which time they will suddenly obtain a great job despite having no work history and never worry about learning again, is not only wishful thinking, but shortsighted. The desire to separate work from schooling has its roots in the educational reform movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when progressives rightfully fought for compulsory education laws that would move young children out of dangerous factories and into schoolhouses to improve their chances of greater incomes and longer lives. Prior to this movement, education

(which often depended on family or religious institutions) and work were often intermingled. People were expected to begin learning work skills as soon as they were able, and they learned new skills from their elders along the way. Some might then move into an apprenticeship or professional training program, but the concepts of working and learning went hand in hand like peanut butter and jelly. Even the current format of our educational system, built around a long summer break, is rooted in an agrarian economic system in which students were expected to be working in the summer on the family farm. Ironically, although leaders of many educational institutions now promote the education/work divide, their institutions cling to a system based on fusion of the two.

Another problem with the education/work divide is that it perpetuates a system that may be harmful to learners, and doesn't properly prepare them for modern economic and educational realities. Educational accountability systems penalize postsecondary schools that cater to workers who study part-time, simply because they may take longer to complete a credential than someone who is going to school full-time and not employed. Yet the employed student may be adding to their work history and cutting down on their own personal debt by taking this path. In contrast, the "ideal" full-time student may be setting themselves up for more difficulty down the road as they rush to complete a degree, perhaps without gaining any work experience and racking up debt that they will be less able to pay off without a work history.

While we certainly don't advocate returning to the days when children went to work in sweatshops instead of kindergarten, nor suggest that no one should go to college full-time without working, we are saying that the rhetoric of many current debates over educational reform creates a false dichotomy between work and education that does not adequately prepare students

or employees for future success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Instead of using language that creates a mental image of education on one side of a canyon and employment on the other with only a one-way bridge between them, we would be better served to think of education and employment as an urban transit system, with constantly intertwining lines. In this effort, a classic model of the young worker/student is useful. Rather than talk about “students,” vs. “employees,” it would be more accurate to think of us all as “working learners” who continuously learn and work. Indeed, as any student who has struggled with an academic subject knows, school itself is hard work. At its best, the knowledge gained through well-designed academic programs not only prepares people to be educated individuals who can think deeply, participate in democracy as active citizens, and direct the course of their lives; it prepares them to succeed in the world of work—whether as an entrepreneur or employee. Indeed, studies have shown that the same non-cognitive, or “soft,” skills that best enable students to succeed in academic settings also increase the rate of success in the workplace. The skills truly do go hand in hand, and they are increasingly called upon in both classroom and employment settings.

As the recent recession has illustrated, it is more important than ever for workers to be lifelong learners. Rapidly changing workforce conditions make it harder and harder to predict job security and more important for one to be amenable to learning new skills and adapting to new careers. Job placement experts estimate that even among “traditional” students graduating from college today, most can expect to change jobs about *every four years*. Some studies predict today’s graduates will change careers up to seven times before reaching retirement!<sup>vi</sup> Does this make their initial academic credential worthless? Hardly. Despite the drum-beating by some quarters that question the value of postsecondary education, the economic reality is that advanced education is still the best way to improve one’s economic earning power over a

lifetime. And the learning never stops. Changing market forces increase the likelihood that workers will need at minimum, further professional development, and at most further credentialing up to advanced degrees to remain an engaged part of the ever-changing workforce.

### **Better Understanding the Working Learner Journey**

Alejandra Lopez represents the “advancer,” someone who had a job, but returned to postsecondary education in order to seek a better career. Lopez was able to take advantage of the Career Pathways program at her college, which helped her obtain part-time employment that matched her new program of study and allowed her to not only gain hands-on experience that was applicable to the classroom, but also work experience that would better position her to obtain full-time work in her new field once her studies were complete. Lopez entered a program in Environmental Hydrogeology at California State University in Los Angeles and through Career Pathways was able to work part-time for the Los Angeles region water board. She explained the advantages of this arrangement:

“Being employed by the water board has allowed me to change career paths from environmental consulting, which has erratic work hours and is physically challenging, to a career that is more family friendly with evenings and weekends off. Also being a student assistant gives me the advantage of familiarity when seeking full-time staff employment at the water board.”<sup>vii</sup>

Career Pathways is one of several programs that recognizes and embraces the working learner model, offering students the ability to learn and earn simultaneously. But many of these programs are limited in size and scope. Many students find themselves having to navigate their

own pathway through work and postsecondary education. Our forthcoming book seeks to help them on this journey by guiding them through the maze with proven tips and best practices.

As more and more jobs require ongoing education, it is absolutely necessary for a potential job candidate to get their foot in the door to begin a successful career. One reason for this is that employers view a postsecondary credential as a gauge of skills beyond mere subject matter mastery. Increasingly, employers are looking to hire people with strong communication skills and key character traits such as problem-solving ability and a strong work ethic. Earning a postsecondary credential has become one reflection of someone's ability to also be a good employee. And workers should not be surprised to find that over time they will need to gain further education to adapt to changing economic times. This may mean merely taking a few courses to update their skills or getting an additional degree to enter an entirely new field. That is why those best able to adapt and learn will succeed not only educationally, but economically over their lifetime. And it is never too late to start.

The learning and earning pathway may not even lead to traditional college degrees, but perhaps might include apprenticeships or alternative credentialing. No matter how it is obtained, in order to move laterally or vertically into new job opportunities, workers will usually need some kind of credential to prove their skill level. The head of a major national corporation was recently quoted as noting, "If you want to sweep the floors in our factory, you've got to have training."<sup>viii</sup> Training is constant, but completing a credential is crucial to mobility and sustained employability.

Jay Patel immigrated to the United States from India as a teenager and learned the skills of his first profession, surveying, by working for others in the field. On the side, however, he

pursued a hobby in information technology and networking that eventually led to the creation of his own IT service company. Despite his company's success, Jay's lack of credentials sometimes limited his opportunities. He had a wealth of knowledge, but because it was largely self-taught, some potential clients might be unsure of his true skills. Plus, in the ever-changing world of information technology, credentials offer greater opportunity and assurances that you are keeping up with the latest advances in your field.

When Jay started working on obtaining credentials, he started in the traditional college path, but found it difficult to work a traditional college schedule around his job duties. Plus, in some classes he already knew as much or more information about the subject as the instructor, a situation that can lead some students to boredom and lack of motivation. But Jay was a striver, not a quitter. Bouncing around between traditional and for-profit online colleges, he finally found a competency-based model at the non-profit Western Governors University (WGU). In this model, once he proved he had mastered certain material he could move on; he did not have to continue spending time in a traditional classroom studying what he already knew. It was the perfect fit for him.<sup>ix</sup>

As we learn more about these stories of the search for the right fit, we are compelled to note that if we want hard-working learners to thrive and our economy to hum, it shouldn't just be up to them to make these journeys work. Supporting working learner fit may take time and require various levels of investment by employers, from light support of offering flex scheduling to the deep integration of apprenticeships. Good employers, however, should be willing to work with employees on their journey to learn and earn, because in the end the employer will also benefit from a better educated workforce.



Rather than remaining stuck in “traditional” mindsets, workers should view postsecondary education as part of their path through lifelong learning, which increasingly is tied to lifelong earning power. If you can master the skills of learning how to succeed in postsecondary education, you will not only earn upon your initial job placement beyond higher education, but will be better able to adapt and continue to learn, and thus earn, throughout a lifetime of changing economic needs and job opportunities. If you’re already in a job and are going to college to improve your future advancement opportunities within the same career or to switch to a future career, you’re already ahead of the game. You’ve already leveraged your life and work experiences to hone in on your purpose for seeking postsecondary education. In that respect, you’re already ahead of most “traditional” students just entering college right out of high school.

## **Speaking to Strivers**

Our goal is to speak directly to strivers on “learn and earn” pathways—and those ready to support them—and share key success strategies for the journey. Each of the success strategies in our forthcoming book are based on sound research, proven practice, and the experiences of millions of people who have taken on the challenge of learning and earning. More importantly, these strategies are especially targeted to not only help you advance on the journey, but to achieve meaningful postsecondary credentials along the way, which will lead to greater career success further down the line.

Nola Ochs, Alejandra Lopez, and Jay Patel lived this dream themselves. In many ways, except for the sheer number of decades behind her, Nola’s story, as well as that of Alexandra and

Jay, represents the “new normal” of the postsecondary working learner experience. If they could do it, so can you. Follow us as we show you how!

### ***About the Authors***

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<sup>i</sup> “World's oldest bachelor's graduate finishing up graduate work on FHSU campus,” Fort Hays State University, <http://goforthaysstate.com/s/947/index.aspx?pgid=1028>.

<sup>ii</sup> “Graduate Profile: Jay Patel,” Western Governors University, [http://texas.wgu.edu/wgu/profile\\_patel](http://texas.wgu.edu/wgu/profile_patel)

<sup>iii</sup> “Meet Our Students,” Career Pathways, Foundation for California Community Colleges, <http://www.foundationccc.org/WhatWeDo/StudentJobs/StudentTestimonials/tabid/447/Default.aspx>

<sup>iv</sup> “Nola Ochs Turns 100,” Fort Hays State University History Department, Nov. 11, 2011. <http://fhsuhistory.wordpress.com/2011/11/18/nola-ochs-turns-100/> ; “Nola Ochs, World's Oldest Masters Degree at Age 98, Now Writing a Book at 100 Years Old!” *Helping You Care*, August 4, 2012. <http://www.helpingyoucare.com/21553/nola-ochs-worlds-oldest-masters-degree-at-age-98-now-writing-a-book-at-100-years-old>

<sup>v</sup> Frederick Hess, “Old School: College's Most Important Trend is the Rise of the Adult Student,” *The Atlantic*, September 28, 2011. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/09/old-school-colleges-most-important-trend-is-the-rise-of-the-adult-student/245823/> . Stephen G. Pelletier, “Success for Adult Students,” *Public Purpose*, Fall 2010; 2-6. [http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall\\_adultstudents.pdf](http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall_adultstudents.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Jeanne Meister, “Job Hopping Is the 'New Normal' for Millennials: Three Ways to Prevent a Human Resource Nightmare,” *Forbes*, 8/14/2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/08/14/job-hopping-is-the-new-normal-for-millennials-three-ways-to-prevent-a-human-resource-nightmare/2/>

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vii “Meet Our Students,” Career Pathways, Foundation for California Community Colleges,  
<http://www.foundationccc.org/WhatWeDo/StudentJobs/StudentTestimonials/tabid/447/Default.aspx>

viii Margaret Horn, at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Postsecondary Success convening,  
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ix “Graduate Profile: Jay Patel,” Western Governors University,  
[http://texas.wgu.edu/wgu/profile\\_patel](http://texas.wgu.edu/wgu/profile_patel)