

Working Mother Career Advice

Back to School (Yes, We Mean You)

Looking to learn new skills for a better job, yearning to reinvent yourself or determined to follow a dream? Education isn't just for kids. These busy working moms went back to school for lasting benefits—and so can you.
By Renée Bacher



Working mothers returning to college? The concept seems, well, kinda nuts. But if you've ever dreamed about it (though you probably dismissed it before you woke up), you should know it's not as far-fetched as it might seem. Since the 1980s, women's enrollment in higher education institutions has almost doubled, to nearly 12 million, according to 2012 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. And more than 60 percent of online students today are women, the majority of them over age 25, says the American Association of University Women.

In today's economy and job market, many working moms see going back to school as a necessary step to greater pay and career advancement, says mom of three Mary Davis, a former college academic advisor and founder of the online resource thecollegemom.com. "Women don't want to be underemployed or stuck in jobs below their skill set," she explains. "Some seek further education in hopes of obtaining a fulfilling position that will also help them meet financial and family obligations." Others are simply looking for personal enrichment—something we richly deserve, don't you think?

Even though schools, both on the ground and online, have made taking classes and attaining degrees more flexible, we know the thought of taking time to study can still seem too improbable, too hard—or too guilt inducing. So how about a little inspiration? We found three hardworking moms who took the time to go back to school, and each reaped all kinds of rewards. Read their stories, and get ready to hop on the yellow bus!

Jessica Brayden, 38; Danvers, MA; executive director of RESPOND, a nonprofit intent on ending domestic violence; daughter Victoria, 18

Course of study: BA at a traditional four-year state college; executive MBA at a college, via traditional and online coursework

Financing: Primarily student loans

Up the Career Ladder

Jessica Brayden always wanted a career. The first in her family to attend college, the Danvers, MA, mom was 18 when she signed on to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) to study for a career in marine transportation. There, she met her boyfriend, Michael, and took classes aboard a ship that traveled the world. She also had a little too much fun. “Let’s just say being set loose with a huge group of students on a training ship in Europe wasn’t exactly great for my grades,” she recalls.

Jessica took a leave of absence, attended a community college to bring up her grades and was planning to reapply to USMMA when she discovered she was pregnant—not the best situation for a shipboard education. Then 20, Jessica transferred to Salem (MA) State College, and began new studies for a bachelor’s in criminal justice. Daughter Victoria arrived during the winter break from classes, and Jessica started the second semester when her baby was just 4 days old. “I knew going right back to school was the best way to make a good life for myself and my daughter. But when you’re young and unmarried with a new baby, perfect strangers think it’s okay to tell you how naive and stupid you are,” says Jessica today.

With the help of student loans, plus friends, family and Michael, who all helped watch baby Victoria during work and school hours, Jessica graduated with a bachelor’s degree and landed a job as counselor at a residential home for boys. Even as her career was beginning, however, “I recognized quickly that if I wanted to stay in human services and make enough to support a child and live in the Boston area, I needed more education.”

This hit home when Jessica was offered a role as HR director—a position for which she felt unqualified. Not wanting to turn down the opportunity, she signed up for an HR certificate program at nearby Bentley College in Waltham, MA, attending classes in the evenings. Eventually, Jessica took four of the six required courses before the program folded. But she gained a clear understanding of talent acquisition and principles of management and continued her upward rise. “I’m a lifelong learner who’s always looking to advance my skill set,” says Jessica. “The more education I have, the better I can be for my organization. And, of course, with more education comes more opportunity, more exciting work and better pay down the road.”

Jessica recently completed an executive MBA in entrepreneurial leadership at Endicott College in Beverly, MA, a 20-month program with classes held in person on a Saturday at the beginning and end of each course (a “bookend model”), with in-between classes held online. Often, she’d spend her lunch break at school driving Victoria from one activity to another. “We ate a lot of cereal,” Jessica recalls. “I remember one time being so exhausted and the house in such disarray, I thought to myself, *If I get robbed today, I’ll be too embarrassed to call the police.*”

Was it worth it? “One hundred percent yes,” says Jessica, who graduated in May 2011. “I love having the MBA. I learned so much and have a broader breadth of all the tools needed to do my job well”—including an in-depth understanding of marketing, financial management, human resources and global management. The MBA program was also a great networking opportunity for Jessica, whose classmates included bankers and engineers, among other professionals.

Jessica says her hard work has also given her daughter a solid example of someone setting a goal and meeting it. “People can find every reason in the world why they can’t accomplish something,” she says. “I wanted Victoria to see that if you roll up your sleeves, you can get what you work for.”

T’Jae Gibson, 42; Harford County, MD; lead, Television Programming and Operations, U.S. Army Research Laboratory; daughter Grace, 7

Course of study: BA at a traditional four-year state college; master’s certificate in logistics management and MS in project management at an institute of technology, via traditional and online coursework (three years)

Financing: Employer tuition reimbursement, as well as about \$2,500 out of pocket

Getting Better and Smarter

Some people have the Eiffel Tower on their bucket list; for T’Jae Gibson, it was a master’s degree. A PR advisor for a defense contractor in the greater Baltimore area, T’Jae knew that added credentials would boost her profile at work and beyond.

So single mom T’Jae enrolled in the Florida Institute of Technology, at a satellite campus in Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD, in 2004. Her daughter, Grace, had just turned 18 months old, taking two classes a semester and

summer school as well, T’Jae earned a master’s certificate in logistics management and, in 2009 (after a few breaks), a master’s degree in project management. T’Jae then took a new job producing television programming at the U.S. Army Research Laboratory in Aberdeen Proving Ground. “I had hosted a public affairs television show while working for the Air Force,” she says. “My interviewer saw that on my resume and liked it, along with my experience doing holistic PR for both government and industry. He hired me.” Her higher-education studies gave her the skills to plan, implement and manage large projects. And with her new degrees in hand, she had the newfound confidence to say yes.

While she had the help of her mom (who retired early to help care for Grace), T’Jae admits it wasn’t easy to study as a working mother. “At times I felt pulled in so many directions,” she says, noting that when she would come home the first year, she could tell her daughter missed her because she’d want to nurse all night long.

What helped was the combination of in-class and online courses and excellent teaching. “Many people have the impression that with adult ed classes and online education, you pay your money, show up and get an easy A. But my professors treated classes seriously. They didn’t cut us any slack because we worked full-time or some of us had sick kids at home,” she says. “If we left early or skipped class, we had to make up the work.” T’Jae stressed over each test and earned every A and B she got. She made friends with classmates, some of whom also had kids, and they’d eat dinner together and let the kids play while they studied—a bonus support system.

T’Jae adds that reputable universities with satellite campuses embedded in corporations and on military installations are mutually beneficial for students and employers. “It’s smart for them and it helps us, too,” she says. Her company paid for some of her education through a tuition reimbursement program. The last year she paid \$2,500 herself and made back some of it selling her textbooks on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Achieving advanced degrees gave T’Jae the credentials and confidence to grow her career. It also helped increase her competency level to the point that she was three months ahead of schedule on deliverables when, last september on Grace’s birthday, T’Jae noticed a lump on her daughter’s neck. the lump turned out to be T-cell non-Hodgkin lymphoma. After surgery and five weeks of treatment, Grace is in complete remission. Says T’Jae, “I was totally there for my daughter, and I didn’t miss a beat at work.”

Michelle Weinraub, 45; Denver; school nurse, Cherry Creek School District; daughters Miriam, 11, and Hannah Meg, 9

Course of study: BA from a traditional four-year liberal arts college; RN from a community college (three years prerequisites, two years nursing school)

Financing: Paid out of pocket, with small amounts on a credit card paid along the way

Pursuit of Passion

When she was young, Michelle Weinraub dreamed of becoming a nurse—but talked herself out of it for decades. “I didn’t think I had the math and science skills,” she says. “I worried I might fail.” then a tough turn in life brought her back to her passion.

A graduate of American University and an administrator at a 400-student temple preschool in Denver, Michelle was successful and not terribly willing to risk failure. Additionally, her father and grandfather were doctors and several other family members were health care professionals, which made the thought of nursing school intimidating. “Where I grew up in indiana, in the ’70s, girls weren’t really encouraged to excel in the sciences.”

But in 2004, something happened that changed everything: “I was 37, with a 1- and 3-year-old, and my doctor discovered a lump in my breast.” Diagnosed with ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS), an aggressive cancerous tumor that had not yet spread, Michelle was suddenly no longer intimidated by much else. “Getting breast cancer didn’t give me confidence so much as it gave me an attitude that was like *What the hell? What does it matter if I fail? I could die anyway*,” she says. Her dormant dreams moved front-of-mind.

Michelle’s lumpectomy was followed by seven weeks of radiation with nurses she idolized, which solidified her decision to go back to school. “Nurses provided about 98 percent of my care,” she says. “The doctor decided my protocol, but most of my care was implemented by nurses who asked me questions like ‘What are you going to do when you get home to make sure you don’t throw up?’ I thought, *I can do that. I can be good at that*. And I

convinced myself that my adult brain could handle the high-tech complexities of today's nursing profession.”

Michelle began prerequisites in 2005 at Arapahoe Community College in Littleton, CO, and worked full-time again at the preschool in 2006 and 2007 while in school. But in September 2007, a routine MRI revealed that her cancer had returned. This time, Michelle opted for a double mastectomy, followed by breast reconstruction and a complete hysterectomy and oophorectomy (removal of the ovaries)—all done by May 2008. “My form of cancer gives you a huge lifetime incidence of ovarian cancer, and I wasn't taking chances,” she explains.

Still, Michelle soldiered on toward her dream. The only concession to her treatment was that she had to withdraw from pathophysiology, her most difficult class, and pick it up again at a later date. The clinical part of her nursing training, requiring 40- to 60-hour unpaid workweeks while also taking classes, was grueling and meant a lot of hired child care for her girls when her husband, Mitch, wasn't home. Still, she kept going.

“Sometimes I left at 4:30 a.m. and returned at 8 p.m.,” she recalls. “I felt crappy about all of the hours I was away from them, and they were little and made me feel crappy about it, too. But I told them when I finished school, I would be on their schedule—part of my goal was working their school hours only and summers off. Meanwhile, I told Mitch I was going to quit nursing school about 500 times.”

She didn't quit. In May 2011, Michelle graduated with an RN and passed her state boards on the first try. (Take that, math and science!) In August, she landed a temp position 20 minutes from her house in her dream job—school nurse—and at winter break received word that the nurse she subbed for was retiring and the permanent job was now hers.

These days, Michelle nurses bloody noses and skinned knees and delivers asthma rescue inhalers to any number of the 40 kids who keep them in her office—just for starters. Mitch and the girls could not be more proud of nurse Michelle. “My happiness level is so high,” she says. “As my grandpa would say, ‘I don't work a day in my life.’”