

# The nontraditional Madison Experience

Adult students bring academic focus and valuable life perspectives to the classroom

BY JAN GILLIS ('07)

**A**fter a successful career in motivational training, Virginia Sandlin ('15) retired to concentrate on her grandchildren. But she soon found herself wanting more. An activist for more than 50 years, Sandlin wanted to use her writing skills to advocate for a more peaceful and equitable society.

"I decided to go to JMU because people look for academic letters after the names of authors they do not already know," she says.

At Madison, Sandlin found much more. "JMU is really different from other universities. I've always felt welcome. That's why I wanted to come here. This environment is one of a model collaborative community."

Having completed her undergraduate degree at 72, Sandlin holds the distinction of being the oldest graduate of JMU's Adult Degree Program to date. And she's not stopping there. Sandlin will graduate in May 2017 with a master's degree in education.

"There is a leadership feeling about this university," Sandlin

says. "The faculty encourage students' thinking. They are serious about assisting students in achieving their goals."

The Adult Degree Program brings a special kind of diversity to Madison's campus. The academic focus of these students, combined with their unique life experiences, enrich JMU's student body.

Students accepted into the Adult Degree Program are at least 22 years of age and do not follow any of the traditional majors offered at JMU. Instead, these individualized-study majors select courses from two or more subject areas to create their own specific concentration.

JMU fiscal specialist Amy Brooks began her academic career at Madison as the mother of five boys, including 2-year-old twins. "I figured I would start with one class and see how it felt," she says.

Her concentration in organizational communication and training has allowed her to explore instructional design. The coursework could be considered a natural fit: "As a mom, I'm used to organizing, delegating responsibility and pushing others to perform," she says.

The recipient of the Elizabeth M. Finlayson Scholarship, Brooks is a strong proponent for giving people opportunities for



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an education. “I came from a low-income family. There wasn’t discussion of college when I was younger. I went to cosmetology school right after high school.”

Like other adult students, Brooks has found academic life challenging, but also rewarding. “I’ve gone from being really scared to looking forward to getting a master’s in educational technology,” she says.

While only two or three years older than JMU’s typical student, Cara Tamberrino has an atypical schedule, putting in 40-45 hours a week at work while pursuing her degree. She’s planning on her concentration in hospitality management and communications to set the stage for a career in event management. Like other adult learners, Tamberrino has enjoyed JMU’s welcoming environment.

“At the very beginning of every semes-

ter, I always talk to my professors,” she says, “explaining that as an adult student, I may not have taken the same classes as other JMU students. I’ve found professors to be uniformly receptive to having me in class as an adult student.”

Nathaniel Morrison ('14) entered the program having already earned college credit. In fact, he had attended JMU from 1997 to 2001, but fell short of earning his degree. “I just didn’t have a direction as to what I was going to do in my life,” he says.

After spending several years in the financial services industry, Morrison decided to make a change. “To change industries, I needed a bachelor’s degree. I wanted more options in the job market,” he says. “I’ve lived all over the country, lived abroad in Germany, and my one regret was not finishing my degree.”


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The individualized program of study allowed him to craft an academic career tailored to his background and interests. “I chose environmental geography as my concentration. I loved traveling the world, exploring new landscapes and other cultures. People around the world are connected. We should be good stewards of the land.”

His second academic career enjoyed a far different trajectory than his first. Focused and determined, Morrison was a stellar student, posting a 3.9 GPA. “It’s not often we get a chance to correct a regret in life,” he says.

Though their backgrounds may differ from JMU’s traditional students, their experiences reflect the common assets of the Madison Experience: rigorous academics, intellectual exploration and a wide-open door to fulfilling opportunities and careers. 

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