BY TRACY M. FITZGERALD  
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For the first 20 years of her career, Paula Nee worked as a nurse at the University of Maryland Medical Center — a job she liked, but didn’t necessarily love.

While she enjoyed taking care of her patients and working with her team in the Coronary Intensive Care Unit, her real passion emerged as she prepared for tests and training curriculum related to her job. She was fascinated with the theory of instructional learning and volunteered to write study guides to help her colleagues. Over time, it dawned on her: She had found her true calling. (Read more about Nee’s experience on page 4.)

Nee quickly realized that establishing a new career path was going to take much more than passion and natural skill; she needed a different degree to officially make the change. She enrolled in UMBC’s Instructional Systems Development program, taking one class at a time to pursue a master’s degree while maintaining her full-time position at the Medical Center. Nee estimates she spent about $20,500 to go back to school; she paid $10,000 out of pocket and the rest was reimbursed by her employer.

Today, she works for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as a senior instructional designer and project officer.

It’s a job she truly loves.

Like Nee, thousands of professionals throughout the country and Maryland are returning to school to pursue higher education degrees for a variety of reasons. Some are bored with their career path and in search of new and exciting opportunities; others hope to secure their jobs or set off in a new direction after a layoff or corporate downsizing. Then there are those who find themselves lost in today’s tech-savvy world, and head back to the classroom after realizing it’s time to hop on the bandwagon.

“People want to get a job, a better job, a higher-paying job and a more interesting job,” said Greg Williams, associate professor and director of UMBC’s ISD program, from which Nee graduated. “The days of working for one company for 30 years are gone, and professionals today are taking the steps necessary to be prepared for what their futures might hold.”

The ISD program at UMBC is one of many that caters to “adult learners” — that is, it accommodates those returning to school to build a better or entirely different career path. Along with ISD, UMBC’s Cybersecurity and Information Technology programs are seeing record numbers in terms of applicant volume. Enrollment in the non-credit...
cybersecurity program has doubled in the past year and tripled in the master’s program.

“We see a lot of professionals returning to school as a way of keeping up,” said John S. Martello, vice provost of professional studies and president of the UMBC Training Centers. “It’s about equipping people with the skills and tools necessary to emerge into a corporate world that revolves around technology.”

The focus is similar for those taking classes through the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, which offers a variety of MBA programs that teach students how to run a business that “ticks” based on technology application and innovation around the globe. William Kooser, the school’s associate dean of students, said the school’s motto is to teach business with humanity in mind.

“Business has an important role to play in addressing a lot of the world’s problems,” he said. “We are constantly building and modifying our programs based on the needs that exist in emerging markets worldwide for a new kind of corporate leader.”

For Regina Leonard, a former teacher, Miriam Hafey, previously a computer science specialist, and Jennifer Bailey, who originally aspired to be a lawyer, deciding on the right career path was not as difficult as figuring out how to pay for it. A combination of scholarships, grants, work-study programs and student loans have supported the financial needs of these career-changing students, all of whom are now pursuing nursing degrees.

“More than 50 percent of our students are participating in some type of financial aid program,” said Julia Radar, associate director of student services at the Universities at Shady Grove. The institution comprises nine public state universities, including the University of Maryland, Baltimore, where Leonard, Hafey and Bailey are enrolled.

“Students are sometimes hesitant to apply for school loans, but the reality is that you are making an investment in yourself and there are ways to minimize your debt by taking advantage of a variety of financial aid options.”

Stephanie Johnson, director of financial aid and scholarships at UMBC, spends most of her time helping students understand exactly what those options are. She encourages every student, regardless of age, college of choice and intended program of study, to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid as the first step. Information provided on the form is used by financial aid officers at the federal, state and institutional levels to evaluate financial needs and determine eligibility for grants, loans and other aid. Johnson also recommends that those returning to school spend time researching scholarship offerings on their college’s website, as well as fastweb.com, a national database that lists scholarship opportunities and offers a wealth of information related to preparing and paying for college.
Every student, regardless of age or intended program of study, should complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid as the first step to understanding financing options.

“There are so many programs available for students to take advantage of and for those who end up needing to borrow money, the U.S. Department of Education makes it easy to manage school loan debt,” Johnson said. “They offer a lot of flexible repayment options, including interest-only loans, extended repayment and graduated loan plans.”

Although today’s economic climate has forced some companies to eliminate or reduce their tuition reimbursement programs, many continue to offer the benefit as a way to encourage employees to advance their skills while continuing to work on a full- or part-time basis. Those holding down a job while going to school should check with their human resources department about tuition reimbursement plans that may be available on an annual or per-semester basis. As tuition rates at Maryland state universities continue to climb, employer-based reimbursement programs can help to offset some of the cost.

That only full-time students are eligible for financial aid is “a really big misconception,” Johnson said. “Take some time and do your research. It’s a process, but it’s worth it.”