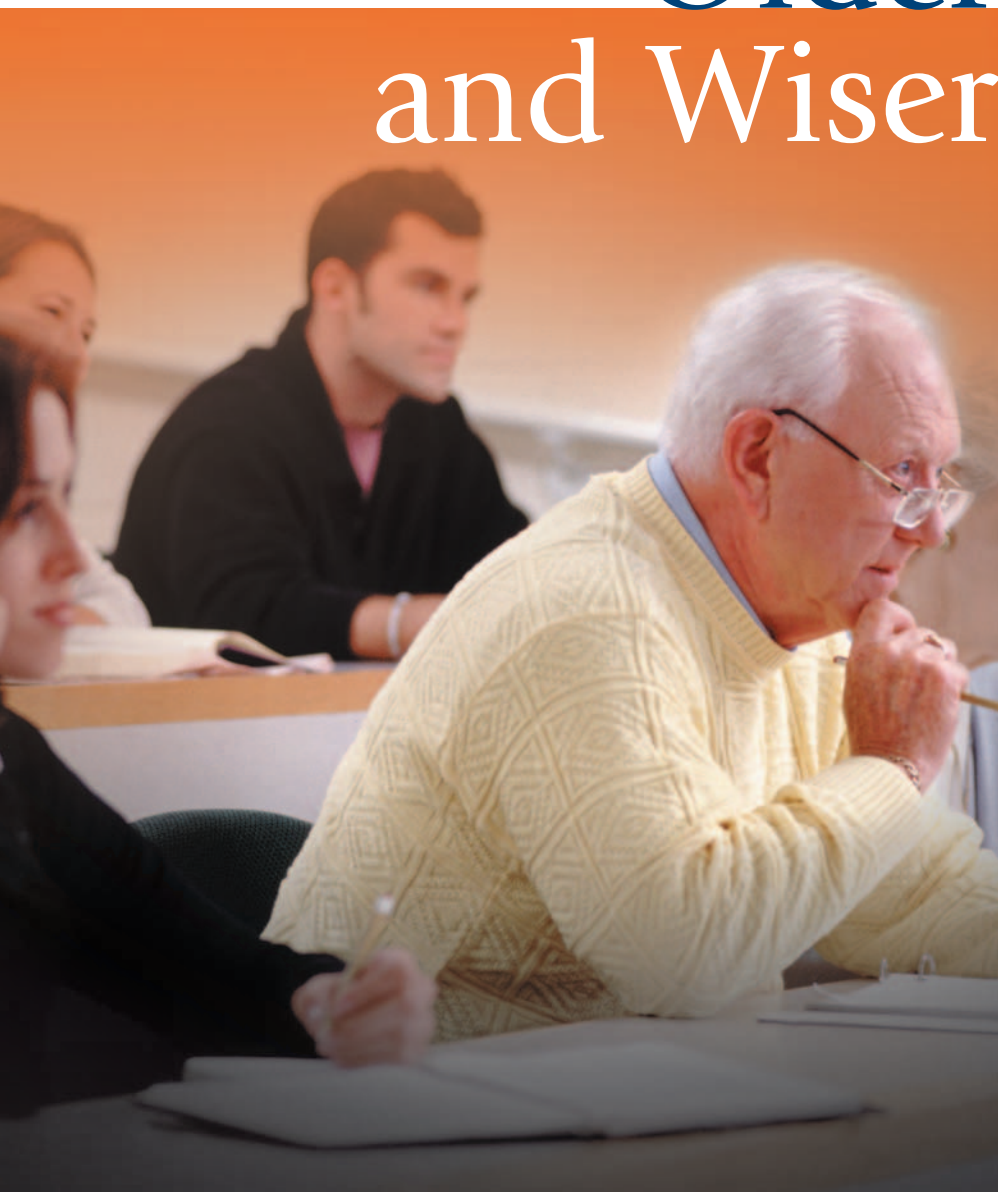


# Older and Wiser



‘Nontraditional’ students  
do well, but they face  
special challenges

by T.A. Parmalee '02

A recently retired professor calls them “curve busters.” They are the students who come to virtually every class, sit attentively, and ask lots of questions. And when a test is given, they inevitably score better than most of their classmates.

They did not graduate at the top of their high school classes and they are not here on any scholarship. No, they are typical, everyday people—except they are older than the average 19-to-23-year-old undergraduate at The College of New Jersey. And these days more than 400 such students over age 25 are enrolled, about seven percent of all undergraduates.

Joseph Ellis, who retired in 2003 from the history department, says he has great respect for these nontraditional students. “They are older, more mature, and paying their own way. They never miss a class,” Ellis says. Obviously, although some graduated from high school decades ago, they certainly have not lost a desire to learn.

To understand these nontraditional students, one must take into account they are here in spite of the expectation that they be somewhere else. Most of them work full-time jobs or have families to support. They have bills to pay, and not just tuition and fees, but mortgage payments, car payments, and medical expenses. Some are not just putting themselves through college, but their children as well.

#### **Donald E. Garrett**

Donald E. Garrett, 45, of Langhorne, PA, had been taking engineering classes on-and-off for more than 20 years before finally earning his degree last December.

He graduated from Somerville High School in 1976, but didn’t care for school. He married and had two children:

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Christopher, now 25, and Amanda, 23, a psychology major at TCNJ who, oddly enough, graduated in December 2003, along with her father. Once he had a family, Garrett decided to go back to school at Raritan Valley Community College, to study engineering. In 1989, he finished an associate's degree in engineering science and transferred here.

In addition to the need to work full time and to relocate twice because of his job, other factors lengthened his stay in college. He went through a divorce, his mother died of cancer in 1993, and last fall he discovered he had a detached retina. That proved so troublesome he nearly dropped his classes for the semester, but Alexander R. Czeto, professor of engineering and his adviser, convinced him to stick it out.

A few weeks before graduating, Garrett said he didn't really need the



Donald E. Garrett '03 and his daughter, Amanda '03.

degree since he is the co-owner of Incyte, Inc., a small and successful engineering company. "I just want to finish it because I've put so much work into it," he said.

However, he is such a tenacious learner that he plans to continue taking courses even after graduation. As he put it, "I'm more interested in learning now because I can relate it to something. When I was young, I went to school because I had to. It only seemed to have a purpose when I started college."

His classmate and daughter, Amanda, applauds her dad. "He's had to stop taking classes for extended periods, but he always picked up where he left off," she said. "I am proud of him for never giving up."

Garrett said he sees several disadvantages to being an older student. For instance, he often needed to use lab equipment that was not available off campus. And he missed out on some of the student camaraderie.

"A lot of the full-time students seem to get together and have study groups, or study before exams, and that is something I was definitely not a part of," he said. "I didn't even know they did these kinds of things until recently. I think it was a disadvantage because I had to figure out everything on my own." But that was offset somewhat by his ability to learn things more easily because of his work experience, he said.

When he was younger, Garrett didn't have difficulty relating to his classmates. "You know when I started, they probably weren't much younger," he said. "I think for a lot of years, I really didn't talk to too many people. I just came to

night classes and would leave." But once he began taking higher-level courses with students he had already met, he developed closer relationships.

"This is my luxury; this is my fun time basically," Garrett said. "When I started it didn't seem like fun time, but these days I really enjoy coming to school. I guess this is my hobby."

### Kate Warren

Another nontraditional student is Kate Warren, a 53-year-old who graduated from Woodbridge Senior High School in 1968 and has lived in Princeton 34 years. Like most students here today, she enrolled right out of high school—decades ago when it was Trenton State College.

The campus was a lot different then. The times were different as well; most women faced few career choices. Warren's father gave her three options after high school: "nursing, teaching, or secretarial school." While none of those appealed to her, she elected teaching even though she really wanted to pursue a career in music.

Warren completed two years here, but now recalls, "Teaching just wasn't for me. My heart was really set on music." It also was set on Benjamin "Roz" Warren, whom she married and with whom she raised two children: Ben, now 32, and Heather, 30. She settled into a job as a court stenographer, but sang and played the piano in her free time, and retired, briefly, five years ago.

About that time, her husband bought a motorcycle, something he had always wanted. "And I started to think about what I wanted to do," Warren



Kate Warren

says. "Always in the back of my mind was finishing a degree." Instead, she went back to work as an office manager and research director. Then two years ago, she saw an advertisement in a magazine for a car. Beneath the vehicle was a question: "How much longer are you going to settle for 'I always wanted to do that?'"

Warren didn't buy the car, but the ad sold her on its message. She started at Rider University because it offered night and weekend classes, but transferred here in September 2002. "I just had this in my heart, to finish where I began," she says. To make her dream a reality, she eased back on her outside activities. "I knew that something was going to have to give," she says.

Unlike some other nontraditional students, Warren easily made friends with younger students, possibly because she took the initiative. When she transferred, she e-mailed her classmates, explaining who she was and why she was going back to school after 32 years. She says she thought it might be difficult for them to have someone her age in class. Many e-mailed back, offering her support.

Although she wondered whether she would feel uncomfortable speaking up, she discovered she is very vocal. "I think a person my age has a lot to bring to the class because of life experiences," she says. "But sometimes, I find myself wanting to be quiet because I don't want to dominate the class. Finding a balance is key."

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While finding that balance may be delicate, it has been harder for Warren to lower the expectations she has of herself—something she is working on. "Sometimes I think to myself, 'I'm 53, I ought to get an A.'"

Warren anticipates graduating in late 2006.

### Wynton L. Dunham

When Wynton L. Dunham, 26, of Burlington Township, graduated from Hightstown High School in 1995, he went to Mercer County Community College for one-and-a-half years, but did poorly. So he joined the Marines, served four years, and came out saying, "It matured me a lot."

Sipping coffee at the Student Center, he explained: "You had to get up and go in. There was no 'I'm sick today, I'm not going to make it.'"

It was Dunham's 24-year-old brother, Craig, who graduated from Hampton University as a finance major, who encouraged him to go back to school. "We were on some kind of trip and the radio broke," Dunham recalled. "The conversation turned to how well Craig did in school and he turned it into a whole motivational speech about what I should do."

And even though Dunham was temporarily stuck on the fact that he had not always been the best student, by the end of his brother's pep talk, he decided to return to college. "Oddly enough, as soon as the conversation ended, the radio came back on," he said.

After leaving the Marines, Dunham moved back to New Jersey and stayed with his parents while attending Burlington. During that time, he met Marilyn Anderson, whom he later married.

Dunham anticipated having a hard time getting into the College and was

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happy to be accepted. "I did very well at Burlington," he says. "That really helped a lot and I went into my background in the military and how it changed me."

Kelly Williams, assistant director of admissions, is in charge of the College's transfer students. He says he gives careful consideration to the circumstances that have led nontraditional students to come back to school. About 15 older students apply each semester and his office typically accepts 10 or so of them.

Dunham transferred here in spring 2003 and majors in history education. Like other nontraditional students, he says he is doing better now because he wants to be in school. "It was more of a parental influence when I first decided to go to Mercer County (just out of high

school)," he says. "This time, it was something I wanted to do for me."

Nontraditional student life is challenging, Dunham says. "It's not the ideal situation because I've only been married for a year and a half and got married when I was in school. I can't devote all my time and energy to school. I have to support my wife."

The biggest challenge Dunham faces as a student is finding time to do everything. He is a corrections guard on the graveyard shift at the Burlington County Juvenile Detention Center and usually has to rush to make a 9:30 class.

Sometimes, he's late because another employee doesn't arrive as scheduled. "As long as I have an opportunity to catch up and professors are flexible, I can get it done," he says. "If they weren't that way, I would not be doing well here at all."

Daniel Crofts, chairman of the history department, has been particularly helpful, Dunham says. "He has probably helped me more than anybody," he says. "Any time I've called or e-mailed he's always responded and had his door open."

Dunham is so busy trying to do everything that he tries to sleep any free moment he has. "I may get on average two to three hours a night or a day actually," he says. "I mean, I may not even go to sleep today." Nor can he enjoy any campus life. "There's not enough time," he says. "I kind of did all that when I was in the military."

If all goes well, he expects to graduate in the spring of 2006.

### **Marielena Motta**

As a senior at Hunterdon Central High School in 1978, Marielena Motta intended to study social work at college. But just before graduating she visited a mental health facility on Staten Island and was disturbed by the deplorable conditions.

"It was a horrible place for people with mental illness," Motta, now 43, recalls. "It was a very scary place and I didn't have the stomach for it. I am very soft-hearted."

So after graduation, Motta married and had two children, Peter, now 21, and Mark, 17. She went into banking, but about five years ago realized there is more to life than managing other people's money.

"I guess I had a little bit of a midlife crisis," she admits.

So, like a handful of other nontraditional students at TCNJ, she got her start at Raritan Valley Community College, where she took a class that required her to do community service. She became hooked on helping people who suffer from mental illness and transferred here last fall as a psychology major.

As a result, she's now come full-circle, pursuing a career that will allow her to help people manage their lives in a healthy manner—the same career she thought she wanted as a sensitive high school student.

But Motta is no longer that same young girl. Yes, she wants to make a difference, and yes, she has lofty goals; but now she has a family and responsibilities and has learned to deal with the harsh realities of the world. Still, coming to a college where most students are in their late teens and early 20s required an adjustment.

"When I went to Raritan Community College, it was a wonderful experience," Motta says. "The College of New Jersey was a culture shock for me. I am the only adult in all of my classes. It is really difficult because the College is geared toward kids."

But Motta has persevered, largely by realizing she is not in school to make lifelong friends, but to get an education.

In the process, she gave up her job because she found it too difficult to work while going to college full time.

Motta now has time to concentrate fully on her courses, but still faces troubles younger students don't have. "It's a sacrifice for the whole family," she says of her college education. "There is a lack of income and everything else." She also finds she is not as energetic as some of her classmates, who can pull all-nighters without drooping an eyelid. "It is very difficult to get back into the swing of studying at this stage in the game," she says.

While Motta says she is happy with her experience at the College, she urges older people who may enroll here to realize what they are getting into. "It's not going to be a place where you can feel a sense of connectedness and also feel like you have things in common with the other students," she says. "If you can get over that, then TCNJ is the place to be."

Motta expects to graduate this year or next and then work in addiction counseling, specifically with those who suffer from mental illness and addiction. She plans eventually to earn a master's in counseling.



Even though most nontraditional students at the College fare well, some feel left out and isolated. Some complain about a lack of night classes and feel they are a forgotten group. Williams, the assistant director of admissions, says "one of the first questions nontraditional students ask is if they will be looked at any differently." Some who apply decide to go to another college that offers more night classes.

One nontraditional student complained about the lack of financial aid. Peter G.

Manetas, Jr., director of development, admits his office typically focuses on raising money for traditional undergraduates, but says more opportunities are being created for nontraditional students.

"There has been a growing interest on part of donors to support efforts to help (them)," Manetas says. He cites the Laurenti Family Foundation, which has established a new scholarship that will give priority to a single mother. Also, Barbara Pelson '59, a TCNJ trustee, has established a scholarship to help nontraditional students interested in music.

Manetas also suggests that in these uncertain economic and political times, when many people are delaying their education or being called to military service, there may be more need to provide support and encouragement to such students. With the continuing war in Iraq and the struggling economy forcing many people to go back to school, students should not be surprised if they begin to see more older faces in class.

*T. A. Parmalee, '02, is an editor at Bloomberg Business News in New York City. At TCNJ, he majored in journalism/professional writing and secondary history education.*

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