Non-traditional students utilize resources, services in collegiate careers

By Kevin Opsahl | Posted: Saturday, July 26, 2014 6:52 pm

Being a full-time student at Utah State University and holding down multiple jobs last fall, Mark Hobbs admits that fatherhood wasn’t the only thing on his mind when the doctor told him and his wife their baby could come that evening.

Hobbs, 23, and his wife, Jocelyn, are students majoring in social work, set to graduate next year.

“The doctor said, ‘Oh yeah, you can come back in tonight and have the baby,’ and we’re like, ‘Oh no! We’ve got to hurry and go do laundry and go to class and take a test!’” laughed Hobbs, who recently received a national “Working Parent Scholarship” established by job-applications.com to help pay for the cost of school.

As an aside, Hobbs notes he and his wife were back at USU the following week.

Hobbs said it’s definitely “been different” being a father and a student at the same time, but both he and his wife are able to hold down jobs and near-4.0 GPAs. Their senior years include the added challenge of working an internship for credit.

“It’s definitely crazy,” Hobbs said. “I keep thinking, ‘Oh there can’t be much more on your plate’ — and there’s always more. We seem to get through it really well. We’re a good support system for each other.”

The secret to being the nontraditional student, Hobbs says, is compartmentalization.

“As long as you can separate work, school and family life, and then prioritize,” he said. “The fuel behind it has to be love for your family. You understand that’s the reason why I’m working; that’s the reason why I’m going to school. I’m a husband and father first, then a student and then an employee.”

Sometimes Hobbs thinks about what it would be like to be a USU student like many of his peers — not married and no children — but it doesn’t stop him from focusing on his reason for going to school.

“I guarantee you I would do a little better and I could have excess money,” Hobbs said. “But I wanted to have a family, so I needed to be willing to work the other part of it. It’s harder, but it’s something I love. I think the payoffs are worth more than the costs.”

Non-traditional USU student statistics

Interestingly, a different type of non-traditional student — first-time attendees older than 25 years of age — are beginning to decline, according to USU statistics.

USU’s office of analysis, assessment and accreditation provided The Herald Journal with enrollment numbers for non-traditional freshmen students — those 25 and older.

Michael Torrens, the director of that office, wrote in an e-mail that the definition of a nontraditional student is “kind of tricky,” but sticking to the freshmen population without including other years, is “more certain to capture a population that would be ‘non-traditional.’”

According to the data, USU saw a spike in full-time freshmen students over 25 beginning in 2009 — the start of the so-called Great Recession — from a headcount of 56 to 85, taking an average of 12.9 credits. But in 2012 and 2013, that number dwindled down to headcounts of 78 and 73, respectively.

“There are a number of studies that suggest that in periods of economic distress, individuals may return to school, seeking
out opportunities to boost their skills, or seeking productive opportunities after job losses,” said Torrens, noting that he was not precisely sure of the reason for the up-and-down trend.

The number of part-time nontraditional students went up from 63 to 93 from 2009 to 2010. It has declining to 50 students in 2013. These students are taking between 6 and 9 credits.

USU’s total headcount in 2013 was 27,812, which included the regional campuses and distance education. The average age of an undergraduate student is 22.3.

Nontraditional student resources and perspectives

USU has multiple resources to help nontraditional students, including an association by and for the students. Participants are offered a range of services, from study sessions to guest lectures.

There is also a nontraditional student Connections course, similar to that offered every year for incoming freshmen.

Pam June, 43, a student at USU majoring in community health, is returning to school after a 20-year gap.

“I thought about it for a year … and I just finally decided, ‘I’m going to do it.’ And it’s working out very well so far,” she said.

June has noted the robust population of nontraditional students on campus and says nationally, more of them are coming to school.

“It tells me people aren’t satisfied with that they’re doing and they want to make a change in a positive direction,” she said.

She has enjoyed the experience so far, and laughs that every once in a while, she will run into her daughters on campus, who are also students.

“I was a little worried about being able to fit in and relate to other students, and I actually have made some really good friends — I haven’t had any problems fitting in with the cute little 18 or 19-year-old students; they’re very nice,” June said. “Us nontraditional students seem to sit in the front row in classes.”

June noted that she has been impressed by the younger generation of students, laughing that she’s probably old enough to be their mom.

“You hear a lot of negative things about this generation,” June said. “I have met students that have their act together a lot better than I did at that age. They work hard and they’re not just here for a social life.”

How does June attend to being a mom and a student, particularly when her youngest child is in kindergarten? Her Mom comes to Cache Valley to take care of the kids while she’s in school.

Studying, meanwhile, is “a balancing act.”

“I just study every possible moment I can and work on assignments, sometimes I’m up late,” June said.

Hobbs and June both gave advice for prospective nontraditional students, whether they’re returning to school at an older age or taking classes as a first-time parent.

June encouraged them to think carefully about what major to declare and which classes to enroll in; waiting too long or trying too many majors will only delay getting a degree.

Hobbs said he wants prospective nontraditional students to know higher education is achievable.

“If you want to go to school, there are ways to make it happen; you can’t be afraid to find a way to make it happen,” Hobbs said. “That’s the biggest false idea in people’s heads. It’s an investment and if you do, you’ll get a payoff.”