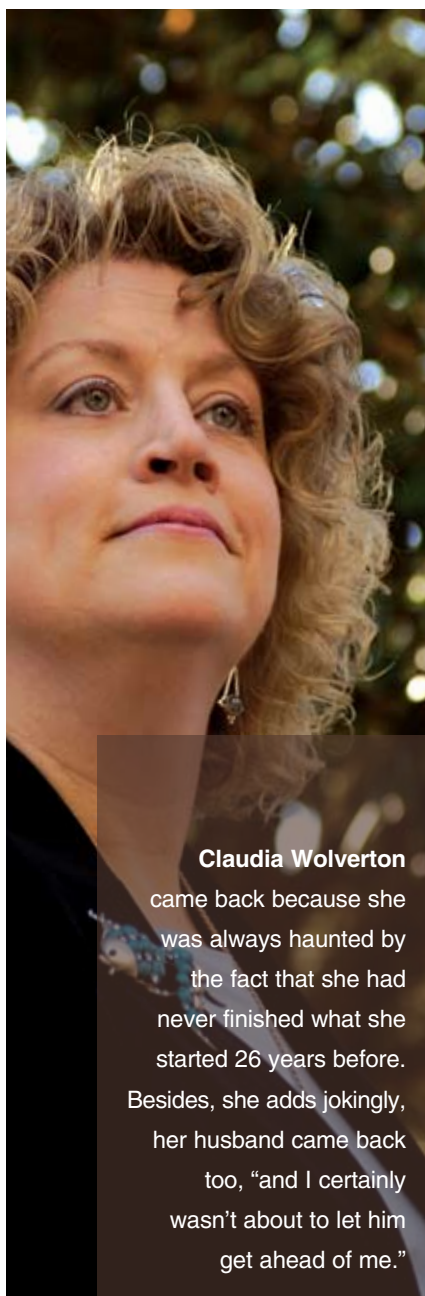


It's never too late to be what you might have been

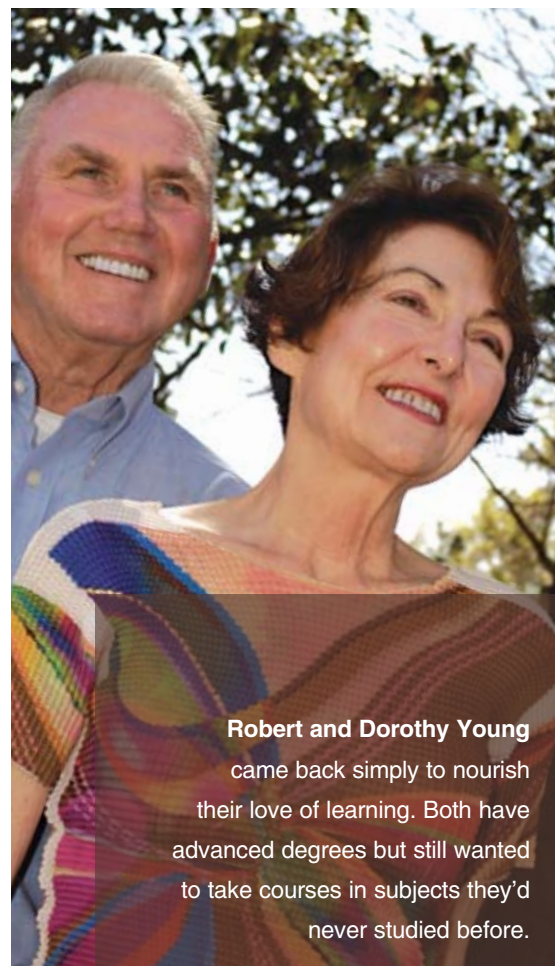
Sometimes decades older than their classmates, Carolina's nontraditional students bring a passion for learning.



Michele Beagle decided to come back to Carolina on her 33rd birthday when she arrived at her humdrum job and read her desk calendar's thought for the day: "It's never too late to be what you might have been."



Claudia Wolverton came back because she was always haunted by the fact that she had never finished what she started 26 years before. Besides, she adds jokingly, her husband came back too, "and I certainly wasn't about to let him get ahead of me."



Robert and Dorothy Young came back simply to nourish their love of learning. Both have advanced degrees but still wanted to take courses in subjects they'd never studied before.

Beagle, Wolverton, and the Youngs are among approximately 1,500 nontraditional Columbia campus undergraduates who are 25 and older (there are about 3,000 at all eight Carolina campuses). All have made the same discovery: USC is “adult friendly” and goes out of its way to help those who want to pursue college studies no matter their age.

“We have lots of students who come back to school for different reasons,” said Harriett Hurt, director of adult student services with the University’s Office of Regional Campuses and Continuing Education. “Our mission is to serve adults and to help them navigate this unfamiliar system.”

Hurt is herself a former nontraditional student who earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English and adult education, respectively while working in the Adult Student Services Office as a graduate assistant. She describes her office as an ombudsman for all adult students: “When someone calls an academic department and says they’re 30 years old and want to come back to complete their education, they’re referred to us.”

The office helps with the admissions process, provides academic advisement for the University’s Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program that caters to nontraditional students, and makes students aware of the Continuing Education and Adult Incentives scholarships.

The office also recently helped institute the Adult Student Advancement Program developed under the tutelage of Sally Boyd, assistant vice provost for continuing education credit programs. The program provides provisional re-admission to the University for previously unsuccessful students. They’re allowed to take up to 30 hours of coursework that is transferable into a degree program.

In addition to students returning to school after a less than stellar first attempt,

other nontraditional students include those with little or no earlier college credit who enroll because they’ve hit a promotion ceiling in their jobs; people like Hurt who always had intentions of going to college but didn’t; and empty nesters.

The latter group are often retired and might want to pursue a degree, but more often just audit courses that interest them. Those 60 and older who are not employed full time can attend state-supported colleges and universities tuition-free on a space-available basis if they meet admissions criteria.

Hurt often hears expressions of trepidation from nontraditional students about enrolling in college. But part of her job is to reassure them. “I tell them about my own experience and that it was all positive,” she said.

Robert and Dorothy Young came back to college as retirees to take courses they couldn’t fit in when preparing for his career as a professor of obstetrics and gynecology and her career as a social worker.

Their continuing education has included auditing one course per semester in a variety of subjects. Recently they audited a survey course on the Middle East because they wanted to know more about Iraq and understand the differences between Shiite and Sunni religious sects.

The experience has been wonderful, Robert Young said. “We’ve been very pleased with the quality of the professors. They’ve been outstanding.”

Claudia Wolverton came to Carolina as a 17-year-old art major from Bishopville, but had dropped out after her junior year when she was diagnosed with epilepsy.

Years later when she joined the staff of Carolina’s College of Education, a fringe benefit allowed her to take one tuition-free course each semester. She restarted work on her baccalaureate degree, taking courses with her husband, Wade, who is pursuing a bachelor’s degree as well.

“I absolutely love it,” she said. “I love being in the classroom, love the learning environment, and feel fulfilled in a way that I’ve missed for some time.”

That sentiment echoes Michele Beagle’s experience pursuing a dream she deferred for several years, which is a bachelor’s degree with a concentration in sport and entertainment management.

Like Wolverton, Beagle had earlier college experience, except that she earned an associate degree in liberal arts. She then married, had a child, and worked in the banking industry. Years later, having proved her ability and success as a personal banker and loan officer, there was still a void in her professional life, she said.

While working in North Dakota, she realized “something was missing that I needed to do for myself.”

Beagle moved 1,700 miles to Columbia with her child to enroll in the adult student advancement program, eventually earning grades that allowed her to transfer to the interdisciplinary studies program with a specialization in sport and entertainment management. She financed her education with savings, scholarships, and part-time jobs. She has had to sacrifice to receive her degree, she said, but has never regretted her decision.

“The University has been so welcoming, which has made me very excited about the education I’ve received here, as well as other assistance I’ve gotten,” Beagle said. “I can’t give enough praise to Harriett Hurt or Tom Regan [chair of the Department of Sport and Entertainment Management]. Without them, I wouldn’t be where I am today.” As for that page from her desk calendar, the one that read, “It’s never too late to be what you might have been,” it’s been on Beagle’s refrigerator door since she returned to college. When she graduates, she plans to have it framed for display—next to her Carolina diploma.