

BACK ON CAMPUS

The college scene is getting older, and by 1990 half the student population will be adults seeking additional education. Here's a guide to the area's continuing education programs with pointers on how real-life experiences can earn you college credits.

By Kathleen M. Hanser

About four years ago, in the midst of a January snowstorm, Shelly Dionne, a Foreign Service secretary in her late thirties, stuffed herself and about six pounds of bulky winter clothing into a taxi already occupied by a woman in her mid-sixties. By coincidence, they were both on their way to enroll for night classes at American University. But only one could talk; Dionne was plagued by a severe case of laryngitis.

"Oh, I imagine you're going to enroll in the apple program," her cabmate said. Not wishing to appear ignorant, and thinking this "apple program" was some sort of freshman requirement, Dionne managed a raspy "yes," and then listened as the woman chatted during the ten-minute ride.

At registration, Dionne tried to enroll in a freshman English class, but all the classes were already full. So, she walked around to another desk and signed up for the mysterious apple program—which turned out to be the "APEL Program." "I figured, whatever the acronym stood for, I'd find out later," Dionne recalls.

APEL, or "Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning," is one of several programs in the Washington area offering "lifetime learning" credits to adults who want to pursue a college degree but balk at the time and money necessary. In Dionne's case, she was awarded thirty credits, the equivalent of one full year of study, after spending only one semester compiling a written portfolio demonstrating her self-acquired knowledge.

Dionne's lifetime learning arose from having lived overseas. For the portfolio, she wrote everything she knew about the two African countries—Chad and Gabon—in which she had lived, and was awarded credits for her cross-cultural perceptions by the School of International Service. She also wrote an informative piece on the United States boycott of the Moscow Olympics, one of the main issues she was involved in during a one-year White House assignment in the office of the Counsel to the President, and was awarded credits in international affairs.

Dionne's encouraging beginning started her off toward a joint bachelors degree in

international studies and French—with a grade point average of 3.74, membership in the Phi Kappa Phi honor society, and eventual admission into the prestigious Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where she hopes to earn a masters degree.

Through the APEL program adults are offered credit for self-acquired knowledge if it mirrors topics taught at the university. Most common is experience acquired on the job, but credits are also granted for knowledge gained through volunteer work, hobbies, military training, and non-credit courses.

Each college has a different system for assessing the worth of a student's experience. Generally the student spends one semester preparing a detailed portfolio explaining what she has learned and how she learned it. Sometimes, guidance for portfolio preparation is given in a three-credit course for which the student pays regular tuition; other programs allow students to put their portfolios together on their own. For lifetime learning that can best be demonstrated rather than expressed in writing—say, playing a musical instrument or public speaking—the student is given an opportunity to perform for the appropriate faculty member.

Experiential learning programs eliminate having to sit through classes in subjects long ago mastered. "Students are not repeating in areas that they are already competent in," says Dr. Malcolm Leith, director of continuing education at Southeastern University. Leith points out that in disciplines such as accounting, if a student has attained this knowledge in her job, there is not much more she could learn in a classroom.

Some people who thrive in the workplace can feel intimidated at the thought of entering a classroom after so many years. Some programs, therefore, also include college orientation seminars. Students are given information about the library, financial aid, and studying techniques that help make transition into col-

lege life easier.

"It gives people like me a basis to start," says Anne Wheelock, the widow of a Foreign Service officer. "They give you this big helping hand and tell you, 'Don't worry; it's not going to be that bad.'"

Wheelock had never attended college but based on her experiences overseas, she was able to prepare a portfolio for which she was awarded forty-five credits at American University. (Under the rules at AU, however, she was allowed to post only thirty of the credits on her record.) Her experiences included teaching Arabic to other embassy wives, teaching English to Arab and Israeli children, working in a baby clinic, and extensive volunteer work. She also had picked up a vast amount of information on the culture and history of each country in which she had lived. All this added up to credits in anthropology, sociology, and international affairs. Wheelock is now working toward a bachelors degree in Latin American studies.

Some students appreciate the fact that colleges with these programs are offering them a second chance. "As someone who made a bad decision young in life," says Cassandra Deck, director of systems and productivity improvements for an executive vice president at Amtrak, "it gave me an opportunity to rectify that mistake." Deck is typical of many young women whose parents could not afford to send them to college and who only received encouragement to learn "traditional" women's skills such as typing and shorthand. Later, as an adult who wanted to return to school, Deck found that many schools wouldn't accept her. Southeastern University, however, not only accepted her, but also recognized the value of her on-the-job training in accounting and computer systems analysis by awarding her fifteen credits in those fields. Deck is now working toward a bachelors degree in accounting.

Experiential learning programs are not limited to working women. Many homemakers have come up with topics readily converted for college credit. One woman, for instance, had a child with a rare disease that had doctors across the country baffled. Her unfortunate situation later became the basis for a portfolio compo-

ment detailing the vast information about this disease. She was awarded three biology credits.

Still another woman wrote a fact-filled report on Judaism from knowledge gained as a learned member of the Jewish faith. Other women have detailed their experiences as volunteers in which they learned skills in fundraising, public relations, political campaigning, and lobbying. Others have picked up credits from recreation activities such as playing musical instruments, aerobic dancing, or involvement in amateur theater.

Earning these college credits isn't as easy as it sounds, however. "The students have to carefully document what they've learned in writing," explains Janet Nagler, an adviser at American University. Many students lack the communication skills necessary to document their non-traditional learning to the satisfaction of the faculty evaluators.

These programs aren't without critics. Some graduates of traditional four-year college programs scoff at such a shortened method of earning college credits. Other critics feel experiential learning programs were begun purely for economic reasons, as a way of boosting enrollment. The faculty at George Washington University has considered adding a lifetime learning program several times, but each time the idea was rejected. "We are more traditional," says George Stoner, director of admissions. "In general, we don't consider this type of learning to be academic enough." Leith of Southeastern takes the opposite view. "In some cases the learning is more effective than what one would have achieved in a classroom," he says, because the students are actually working with concepts "rather than just reading about them abstractly."

Other proponents of the programs are quick to discount these criticisms. Not everyone who applies for entry into these programs is accepted, and not all credits a student thinks she deserves are eventually awarded. Most programs have limits on how many credits can be earned this way. Also, the procedures for evaluation are generally rigorous, and if the student doesn't demonstrate the learning in a way that convinces the faculty evaluator—who is usually the same person teaching a similar course—then she doesn't get the credit. "It takes a lot of work," says Nagler.

Women interested in experiential learning programs should start by listing all activities since high school. No activity should be overlooked at this stage. This list will help identify important experiences that may have resulted in college-level learning. Then, try to match these experiences with course descriptions in catalogs from colleges offering credit for experience. This gives a rough idea of how many (if any) experiential credits might be attainable. Finally, talk to advisers at various schools and choose the program best suited to your needs. •