

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Supporting Non-Traditional Student Reentry

JENNIFER LAGIER FELLGUTH

Dear Higher Education,

I am a second-generation Italian American, the first in my immediate family to graduate from college. In my family, education was what one pursued after failing as either a farmer or wife/mother. My parents had supported my education at the local community college only because it kept me occupied while my fiancée served in Vietnam.

When I was 30, and my marriage ended, I craved education, knowing it was the only way I could transcend my current job of shoveling out dog runs and dispatching veterinarians, and pursue a career in librarianship or teaching.

My first obstacle as a re-entry woman was convincing the college counselor assigned to assist me that it was worthwhile for me to return to school to earn a degree. As I needed to work to support myself and could not become a full-time student, he had little interest in helping me develop an educational plan to complete my general education requirements and then concentrate on my areas of interest. To spite him, I found a different counselor who helped me plot my course schedule for the next four years, concentrating on an English Literature major with a split minor in business and computer science.

Working full time while attending classes at night was exhausting, but I figured the time would pass whether I took classes or not, so I persevered. My ongoing joke was that I'd be so old by the time I earned my BA, then my MA, that I'd be senile, collecting my diploma while strapped to a gurney and so cognitively impaired that I would fail to comprehend the significance of the moment. Instead, I stubbornly completed my coursework.

I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the Library and Information Science program at the University of California, Berkeley. While working on an MLIS degree, I also managed to complete courses necessary to earn my MA in English.

My parents were not in favor of me taking a year's leave of absence from my library assistant job to attend UC Berkeley. In fact, my mother ridiculed me for "sitting at a desk all day like a little kid" when I could be out in the world as an adult earning money.

After years working as a community college English and computer science instructor and in college libraries, I returned to school the year I turned 50 to earn my PhD in Computing Technology in Education with a concentration on digital library resources and developing effective online learning environments. I taught, developed online learning resources, authored studies, authored papers. In short, my education not only provided me with financial rewards, but also allowed me to give back to the educational community.

Current studies track an increase in student retention and persistence (Elfman, 2024) and tie these successes to implementation of supportive strategies (Vyse, 2025). Given the current federal administration's efforts to

curtail funding for such initiatives, I am concerned that institutions of higher education may eliminate programs that support non-traditional, re-entry students like me.

What are my recommendations? Nourish the learner. Do not allow agism, racism, gender bias, and so on to hinder your role in guiding and mentoring others eager to obtain an education. Help remove obstacles. Exercise creativity in the structure of educational processes to offer untraditional students the flexibility and coaching they might require.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Lagier Fellguth, PhD

References

- Elfman, L. (2024, June 27). *Report shows increases in retention and persistence*. Diverse: Issues in Higher Education. www.diverseeducation.com/students/article/156778520/report-shows-increases-in-retention-and-persistence.
- Vyse, G. (2025). Sustaining change: Efforts to expand student success." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/Sustaining-Change_Insights-Report.pdf.

About the author

Jennifer Lagier Fellguth taught at Modesto Junior College, Hartnell College, Monterey Peninsula College, and California State University, Monterey. Her degrees include a PhD in computing technology in education from Nova Southeastern University, an MA in English from California State University, Stanislaus, and an MLIS from the University of California, Berkeley. Her work has appeared in *The Dream Book*, *Unsettling America*, *New to North America*, *All the Women Came & Sang*, and *Rising Voices: Poems Toward a Social Justice Revolution*.