

Mixing Work and School Requires Serious Planning

By Daisha Cassel

Thousands of people turn to part-time evening programs to earn everything from education degrees to culinary certificates to Master of Business Administration degrees. Indeed, the Graduate Management Admissions Council reports a 56% surge in applications to part-time M.B.A. programs from 2006 to 2007. Whether returning to school to move up at work or to make a career change, being a working student can be intense. Here are some ways to smooth the transition:

Chart a course. You'll be the boss when it comes to your academic decisions, so draft a proposal. Think of it as a white paper for your college plan. Examine your goals through professional, financial and personal lenses. Making an early decision about the school-work balance is imperative. You'll need to decide early which will get the lead and when you'll need to shift that balance.

Keep in mind, classwork does not end in the classroom. "Business school requires an extensive amount of teamwork and outside-the-classroom preparation," says Richard Angstadt, who was a consultant while attending Northeastern University's M.B.A. program.

Decide what you want. Educators estimate more than 70% of part-time graduate students want a career change. Often, those who want to stay in a similar field are interested in branching out. Lisa Romeo, a master of fine arts student and writer, earns her income from writing but wanted "to see if I could transition to a more literary rather than commercial approach to writing."

Mr. Angstadt says expanding his options was a chief goal. "I wanted to pursue a degree that would open up...opportunities for me, across disciplines and industries." Keep your motivation in mind.

Combine forces at home. Get efficient and creative with study schedules to preserve family time. Consider taking public transportation or car-pooling to turn drive time into study time. Get your family "excited about the process; let them share in it," recommends Joann Smith, director of continuing education at Sarah Lawrence College. Take your family to campus and introduce them to classmates. Set a study schedule and post it for your family to see; be sure to explain unavoidable changes and make up the time. Personal time should be personal, without a BlackBerry or school books.

Develop a network of advocates. It may seem impractical to schmooze with faculty or classmates when you feel rushed or have come to class after a long day at work, but just as in the business world, it is crucial that you take the time to cast a wide net. You might find your next job, a key contact or a study mate. The self-sufficiency that is valued in the workplace can be a negative at school. Professors remember students who are engaged. And classmates will be quicker to lend a hand if they know you better early-on.

Get your money's worth. Optimize your experience by participating in extracurriculars, hosting study meetings and seeking feedback from professors. For future semesters, scope out courses that you might not have considered but always dreamed of taking.