



In Shasta College's ACE program, adult students can bring their whole selves to college

It's 8 a.m. on a Monday morning — a time when most folks are easing back into the workweek, checking emails and wishing they had just one more day of the weekend. But for Janet Hubbert, there's no settling in: her phone starts ringing right away. It's one of the students she supports in her role as student success facilitator for Shasta College's Accelerated College Program (ACE), which is designed for returning adults who want to continue working or caring for family while attending college as full-time students under a compressed timeline to complete their degrees. The stress is audible in the student's voice — she's worried she won't be able to make her classes work this year due to the pressures of child care, work and her partner's unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before she even identifies herself, Janet calls her by name — stunning the student, who never had a personal relationship with a college staff member before. The note of anxiety in her voice transforms to relief as Janet explains her options. Together, they make a plan.

Janet knows the importance of this kind personal connection, especially to returning adults — she was a student in the ACE program, herself.

To accommodate students' jobs and families, the ACE schedule compresses courses into eight weeks instead of the usual 17, and classes are fully online. Working at this accelerated pace, students can complete a certificate in just nine months and an associate degree in two years — even less if they have earned previous college credits. The program centers students through personalized support from Shasta staff, and they are encouraged to engage with other students in similar circumstances. These student connections are even more important (and challenging) to build during the current pandemic. Being in a cohort gives them a sense of community and belonging that often eludes older students.

Reflecting back on the origins of the program, Buffy Tanner, director of innovation and special projects, shared honestly that the spark for ACE came from recognition that one in three Shasta College district residents over the age of 25 had some college experience, but no degree to show for it. "That really made the campus take a hard look at ourselves — students step out for all kinds of reasons, but one in three is a red flag that something went wrong, and we need to share responsibility," Buffy says.

Shasta College's leaders realized they weren't serving their whole community — and in fact, as they would come to find out, there were multiple barriers within their programs for adults to get the education they needed.

Buffy and her colleagues put together a strategy to improve returning adult enrollment, what would become the ACE Program, with an absolute commitment to focusing on returning students — many of whom have jobs, and are parents or family caregivers. But, it didn't happen perfectly on the first try. "We were very deficit-minded — 'oh, they're going to need this and that.' None of that turned out to be the case," says Kate Mahar, Shasta's Dean of Innovation and Strategic Initiatives. ACE leadership found that the so-called, "remedial courses" it offered for adult students made it nearly impossible to graduate in any kind of reasonable timeframe: "It would have taken 13 semesters the way we had our courses set up," Kate says. Different course lengths and configurations also had to be considered, tried and ultimately adjusted. Part of the process meant surveying students and asking them what they wanted to help guide course and schedule structures.

While the process wasn't perfect, ACE program leaders were able to learn and develop ACE as they went: "We learned a lot when we first started that project. We went too fast without enough structure, it really made it hard for financial aid, IT," says



Kate. “There were multiple iterations before we got to the structure that we have now.” ACE is now key to Shasta’s commitment to supporting more of adult students’ needs, with a customized course schedule model that maximizes their time, ensures access to financial aid, and still allows them to rest and decompress between courses. As the adult students enrolled in ACE forge their own pathways, earn their degrees and open up new opportunities for themselves and their families, the program has grown to include approximately 156 students and 49 instructors. The program was just getting started when Janet Hubbert, the ACE facilitator who introduced our story, first learned about it.

Janet left the University of California at Berkeley at age 19 for health reasons. She had to get full-time work because living with her parents was not an option. She eventually started a family and stopped

working when daycare became too expensive. She wanted to return to school but wasn’t sure how to start. The day she met Buffy Tanner at ACE, her life changed, she says. Buffy supported Janet every step of the way — helping her get connected with the financial aid office, meet with a counselor to set up a plan and make course selection decisions, and make her adult education work with her life. As Janet began taking courses, she was amazed by the level of commitment of ACE’s counselor and other staff to the students, how closely they were following her success, and how quickly they responded to her needs.

As the months and course periods progressed, Janet and Buffy developed a working relationship, and Buffy offered her an unexpected opportunity: what started as a temporary part-time position as a student success facilitator for the ACE program — a role she had not imagined for herself,

but which she found she loved. “It’s rewarding for me, I know where they’re coming from, I know their struggles. And students know that,” says Janet. “I’m not just saying, ‘oh, you’ll be fine.’” With Buffy’s encouragement, Janet applied for and won the permanent position.

Janet says her experience as an adult student has helped her connect to and better support ACE’s students. “They all come from all sorts of backgrounds. Even when they go into some of the departments on campus, some of the staff may be a little younger, and they don’t always relate. And I understand because when I have to speak to a younger person, I don’t always feel comfortable,” she says.

The program is an example of how the Vision for Success is activated in the great work of colleges like Shasta College: learning by doing, solving problems along the way, and putting students first in all aspects of the work — whether it’s designing the curriculum or having staff personally check in on students.

Janet sums it up this way: “[Students’] strength and their willingness to keep pushing forward is what makes my job easier, is what keeps me going. If they’re willing to put in this much effort, I need to go 150 percent above that effort. Having someone in your corner rooting for you — especially in a public institution — makes a world of difference.”