

CASE  
STUDY

# Re-Enrolling Former Students

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PHOTO BY ALYSON MCCLARAN, COURTESY OF MSU DENVER

Aida Beyene, 49, returned to Metropolitan State U. of Denver after working in telecom for many years and is now earning a bachelor's degree in cybersecurity.

**A**ida Beyene's telecom career had stagnated. Annie Echeverry was tired of watching hospital colleagues get promoted over her. Jeff Hollidge, a police chief, decided to change careers. And Karah J. Donahey hit a salary ceiling in her construction work. More than [39 million](#) Americans have earned some college credits but no degree. Beyene, Echeverry, Hollidge, and Donahey are among the hundreds of thousands of Americans each year who do something about it. Logistically, financially, and emotionally, re-enrolling in college poses challenges, but it's also a potential win-win opportunity for the students and for colleges seeking to fulfill their missions and achieve financial stability in the face of the so-called [enrollment cliff](#).

Let's look at these four students' circumstances and how their colleges are helping them reach their goals.

## 'THIS IS THE TIME'

Beyene, 49, worked at Time Warner, AT&T, and other large telecom companies as a network provisioner, process analyst, and trainer. For years, she moved up the ladder, she says, but competing against colleagues who had degrees as well as experience, she found herself “falling behind” and, she says, “my pay was stagnant as well.”

She received an email from Metropolitan State University of Denver about its [Finish What You Started program](#), and it hit a nerve. “I thought, this is the time,” says Beyene.

Beyene had some MSU Denver credits from the 1990s and is now earning a bachelor’s degree in cybersecurity. She was attracted to the program, in part, by MSU Denver’s [Cyber Range](#), which gives students experience with real-time hands-on raid and ransomware scenarios.

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From a student emergency fund, the university paid off a \$500 balance on her bursar account that had lingered from 1997. It also helped her apply for credits from previous core courses in English and psychology and is offering her guidance in gaining further credits for her professional-experience portfolio. The university helped her find affordable housing and a roommate to keep Beyene’s monthly



PHOTO BY ALYSON MCCLARAN, COURTESY OF MSU DENVER

MSU Denver helped Beyene with housing, paying off a lingering fee, and getting credit for her professional experience.

housing costs under \$900, and it connected her to a work-study job and other financial aid and scholarships.

“It took a lot of people to get this plan together,” she says.

That re-enrollment program’s staffing and infrastructure was bolstered by \$5 million in state funds in 2021, explains Megan Scherzberg, MSU Denver’s executive director of orientation, transfer, and re-engagement. With a portion of that money, MSU Denver hired a financial-aid counselor, a prior-learning specialist, and an individuated-degree navigator. Those hires are part of the university’s efforts to help students transition back into the college environment, Scherzberg says, and save them time and money by creating majors tailored around their experience. Two hundred and eighty-six students with some credit but no degree have enrolled in 2023, and they have a retention rate of about 75 percent, which is 10 percent higher than that of transfer students. The goal, says Scherzberg, is to increase that

enrollment to 600 students and have them graduate by 2026.

Students hear about the program through industry work-force-development partnerships, like Amazon’s tuition-covered Career Choice, and through outreach via social media, email, text, flyers, and voicemail. Flexibility is key, with courses online, in person, or hybrid, and evening class times available.

#### **‘I WAS STARTING TO FEEL DEPRESSED’**

In Paterson, N.J., Annie Echeverry, 39, for years worked as an administrative assistant at a hospital.

Echeverry had held jobs since she was 14. Her parents “never said, ‘You need to,’ but it helped,” she says. “It helped a lot.” She was one of three daughters growing up in Paterson, her father working in textile factories to pay their tuition for Catholic school. At age 68, he still works part time at Home Depot.

After high school, Echeverry attended a semester at Passaic County Community College, did a stint in the military, and completed ultrasound-tech and medical-assistant programs at the HoHoKus School of Trade and Technical Sciences. But the bills kept coming, and the siren call of the

**Over the years, Echeverry was getting increasingly fed up with her hospital job. “You tell me I’m priceless and without me the department can’t run, but you’re not compensating me appropriately.”**

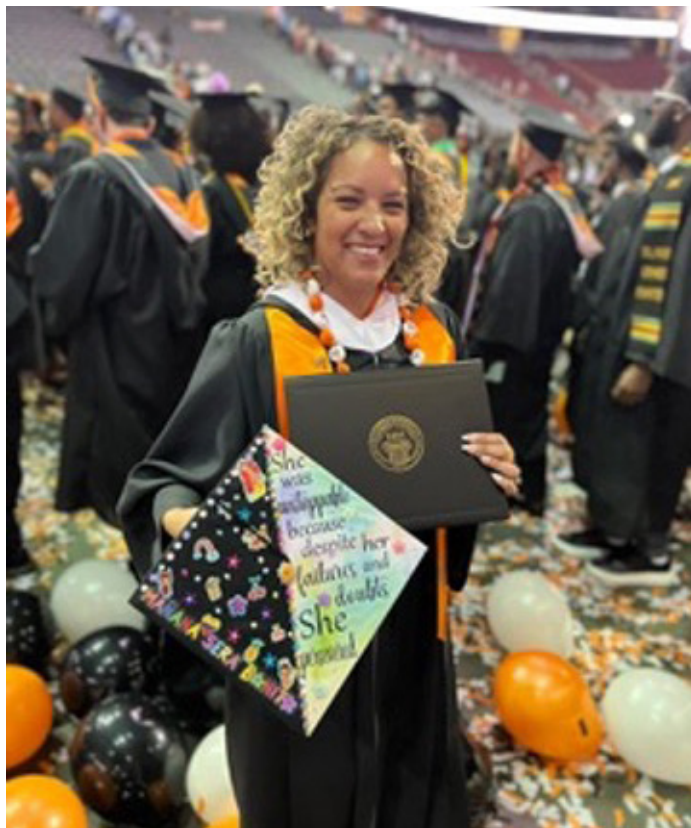


PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNIE ECHEVERRY

Annie Echeverry, 39, earned an associate degree in liberal arts from Bergen Community College and is currently finishing a bachelor’s degree at William Paterson U.

steady paycheck kept drawing her away from school.

Over the years, however, she was getting increasingly fed up. In her hospital job, she was bilingual in a setting with a high percentage of Spanish-speaking clients.

“I’m helping you make a lot of money,” she thought to herself. “You tell me I’m priceless and without me the department can’t run, but you’re not compensating me appropriately.”

She said the situation was beginning to take a mental toll on her. “I was starting to feel depressed.”

In late 2019, she enrolled in Bergen Community College and earned an associate degree in liberal arts. Then she enrolled at William Paterson University, where she’s finishing her bachelor’s degree

in communications studies. She has enjoyed working at the university's radio station and hopes to find a professional on-air position after graduation. "My mom says, 'Some people can't be quiet, and that's you.'"

At William Paterson, depending on the program, courses might be online, in person, or hybrid. Echeverry's classes have all been online. Good thing, too. Her 11-year-old son plays sports, and her study time is often around 1 a.m. "If it wasn't for the online, there's no way I could have done it," she says. A single mother and the sole breadwinner, she's received scholarships but will still end up with about \$5,000 in student loans to pay off.

William Paterson University has beefed up its adult and re-enrollment programs, emphasizing flexibility, with six

Echeverry is majoring in communications studies at William Paterson U. She's enjoyed working at the college radio station and hopes to find a professional on-air position after graduation.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNIE ECHEVERRY

## Online orientation, wellness, library, career, and peer-support sessions help make students feel part of a cohort, a family. Students see that they're not alone in a sea of younger faces.

course-term starting dates a year for its online programs and ample support in determining credits for prior learning. "That has been a game changer for students returning," says Kara M. Rabbitt, associate provost for academic initiatives. Online enrollment for such students numbered 86 in 2021 and has soared to 782. Courses for online students are priced at a flat rate of \$360 per credit.

Students can earn credit for prior learning by examination, credential, transfer credits, and military training and experience, says Johanna Prado, director of the university's Center for Degree Completion and Adult Learning. The number of established course-credit equivalencies has grown from three in the fall of 2021 to 81.

Those efficiencies are important because students can't afford to let coursework and job experience go to waste. Forty-four percent of the university's re-enrollment program students are Pell eligible, Rabbitt says, almost as high as the 47 percent for first-time students in traditional undergraduate programs. Faculty members who teach adult students online are urged to keep in mind their hectic schedules. Instructors, for instance, are asked to consider avoiding timed assessments to allow students to jump in

and out of the work during, say, a rushed lunch break.

Academic care teams meet weekly to triage cases in which students are struggling, says Prado. “We figure out where the pain points are, and we try to assure success.” Online orientation, wellness, library, career, and peer-support sessions help make students feel part of a cohort, a family, Prado says. Students see that they’re not alone in a sea of younger faces.

#### **FOLLOWING HIS ‘PERSONAL PASSIONS’**

Jeff Hollidge, 36, of Pleasantville, Pa., has worked in law enforcement for almost 12 years, with Thiel College Public Safety, the Emlenton Borough Police Department,

the Venango County Sheriff’s Office, and most recently, as chief of the Harrisville Borough Police Department.

His mom was a nurse, and his father worked for the local ambulance service. A community-service career intrigued him, and after high school he earned some law-enforcement credits at Clarion University before entering the police academy.

In recent years, Hollidge became a dad — he and his wife, a teacher, have a 6-year-old son and a 1-year-old daughter. When the pandemic brought a teacher shortage, he says, “I thought about what kind of future for their education and other children’s education will there be, what quality of education?”



PHOTO COURTESY OF SLIPPERY ROCK U.

After 12 years in law enforcement, Jeff Hollidge, 36, has combined his responsibilities as chief of Pennsylvania’s Harrisville Borough Police Department with his studies at Slippery Rock U. He plans to graduate in 2024 with a dual bachelor’s degree in early-childhood and special education.

He enrolled at Slippery Rock University in the fall of 2021 and, adding summer and winter courses to his school schedule, is on track to graduate in 2024 with a dual bachelor's degree in early-childhood and special education.

The schedule's been "probably the hardest thing, trying to juggle my current career with being a full-time student at the college but also making sure that I save that family time as well."

With monthlong teaching practicums Monday through Friday, he grabs police shifts when he can, nights and weekends, but meanwhile "my income has drastically decreased," he says, and by the time he gets his degree he'll have about \$25,000 in student loans to pay off. It's worth it, he says, to follow his "personal passions."

#### 'MORE OF A CAREER'

When she graduated from high school, Karah J. Donahey was told college would be a waste of time if you didn't know what you wanted to do. She'd taken two college-level classes in high school to earn some credits and planned to enlist in the Air Force. She pivoted from that and completed a veterinary-technician program at Great Lakes Institute of Technology, in Erie, Pa.

But soon Donahey found a well-paying position she liked in quality control at Pennwest Homes, which makes modular homes. She worked her way up the ladder over seven years to a supervisory position and was offered a job in management. Going from an hourly wage to a yearly salary, however, she'd be earning less, not more. She had hit the no-degree wage ceiling.

So in 2018, Donahey started taking one or two courses a semester at Butler County Community College while working full time and single-parenting her daughters, who are now 9 and 12. She enrolled

full time at Slippery Rock University in the fall of 2020 and expects to graduate in 2024 with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering.

Donahey, 33, has been interning with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's bridge-design unit, where she expects to work full time after she graduates.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SLIPPERY ROCK U. AND KARAH J. DONAHEY

Top: After a career in the construction industry, Karah J. Donahey, 33, is enrolled full time at Slippery Rock U. and hopes her civil-engineering degree will land her in a "challenging and rewarding" career. Bottom: Donahey is shown tubing with her daughters.



“I’m hoping to have more of a career and not just a job,” she says, “something that’s challenging and rewarding.” She’ll have roughly \$25,000 in loans to pay off. But, she says, “I got a lot of scholarships. That’s one thing about going to school later in life,” she says, “there is a lot out there if you look for it.”

In the last four years, Slippery Rock’s adult undergraduate enrollment has almost doubled, from 88 to 163, says Amanda Yale, the university’s chief enrollment-management officer.

## The sparks that bring adult students like Beyene, Echeverry, Hollidge, and Donahey back into the classroom are deeply personal. Something is missing. Something is calling. Something clicks, or snaps.

The university’s online adult-student programs include degrees in leadership, the liberal arts, nonprofit management, business management, accounting, health-care administration and management, nursing, and other in-demand skills, Yale says. But she credits “great enthusiasm

from the faculty. If it weren’t for their level of engagement, I don’t care what the programs were, it wouldn’t work.”

Centralized admissions counseling for adult re-enrolled students is also crucial, explains Robert Lagnese, Slippery Rock’s director of transfer admissions and new-student orientation. It enables students to apply the maximum number of previous credits to general-education requirements and streamlines articulation agreements with four nearby community colleges in a region with significant declines in the traditional college-age population.

In that sense, while adult students’ success is important to their futures, Yale says, it’s also important to Slippery Rock’s.

Colleges will continue to sift through the data on the millions of credit hours and tuition dollars vanishing into the bureaucratic ether.

But the sparks that bring adult students like Beyene, Echeverry, Hollidge, and Donahey back into the classroom are deeply personal. Something is missing. Something is calling. Something clicks, or snaps.

For Echeverry, it happened one day at her hospital job.

“If they tell me to order one more pie of pizza or one more coffee, I’m like, ‘Really? I’m done.’”

“Screw everything else, I know what I need to do,” she thought. “The quicker I start, the better it will be for everyone.”

Questions or comments about this report? Email us at [ci@chronicle.com](mailto:ci@chronicle.com).

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