

# Not Too Cool For School

## As the economy struggles, higher education can provide a safe haven for adult learners

by [Deborah Rudacille](#)

*As the economy struggles, higher education can provide a safe haven for adult learners.*

When the going gets tough, the tough get a degree. For the legion of professionals returning to the classroom in this bitter winter of economic discontent, the classroom is the new corner office—both status symbol and refuge.

"School is the only place you can hide at this time that can accommodate your intellectual needs and advance your career," says 39-year-old Samson Ndanyi. A Kenyan émigré who recently earned a master's degree in social science from Towson University, Ndanyi hopes to be hitting the books in a doctoral program come fall 2010.

The adult learners swelling enrollment at local colleges and universities seem to have taken to heart Aristotle's dictum that "the roots of education are bitter but the fruits are sweet." Maryland has a lower unemployment rate than many states (6.2 percent), and it boasted the nation's highest median household income in 2007 (\$68,080), but even so, from community colleges to graduate schools, admissions counselors are swamped.

Unsurprisingly, health care and education top the list of disciplines being looked at by career-changers. Over the past year, those two sectors grew more than any other part of the economy, adding more than 500,000 jobs nationally; by contrast, construction and manufacturing shed 1.5 million jobs.

Lois Simmons, director of Selective Admissions for the School of Health Professions at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), says that her office has been deluged with phone calls from people looking for a quick fix to their economic woes. Two of the most common questions she hears: "What do you have?" and "How fast can I get it done?"

Like those callers, some mid-career adults are motivated by the need to find more secure—or more lucrative—employment. Others aren't interested in changing careers so much as becoming more marketable in their current fields. Some hope to find more fulfilling work. But one quality most seem to share is the tendency to view unwelcome events as opportunities, not catastrophes.

Take David Herzog. At 40, he has spent his professional life in one of the industries hardest hit by the current recession—home construction. At 16, he was carrying wood on construction sites; later, he started a framing business and a real estate sales and marketing firm. Then, the crash: Local housing starts plunged from 30,000 in 2006 to 17,000 in 2008 (with 12,000 projected for 2009). Colleagues and coworkers have declared bankruptcy. "I know 50-year-old men who have roommates now," says Herzog, who had just earned an executive MBA from Loyola College's Sellinger School of Business when the recession struck.

He wasn't interested in changing careers—he loves his work. But he saw a chance to get ahead of the competition when the market rebounds, using a two-pronged strategy. First, he immediately returned to Loyola for a master's

degree in finance, and second, he started his own home construction business.

It's a risky gambit on the cusp of what may be Great Depression 2.0, but Herzog's experience with a downturn in 1991 taught him that "all recessions eventually end" and that recovery benefits those who have used their furloughs wisely. The economic theory, case studies, and real-world examples he's studying at Loyola should make him better prepared than most to navigate the new realities of credit for homebuilders once the economy turns around.

"Chaos," he notes ruefully, "provides an awful lot of opportunity."

Mike Smith, 46, can testify to that on a more visceral level. After earning a bachelor's degree in geography at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), Smith spent fifteen years as an aircraft refueler and ten years as a mail carrier in the U.S. Postal Service. He was a good worker—"I was never one to jump from job to job," Smith says. But something was missing. "I never really knew what I wanted to do," he says. "I didn't have any sense of purpose."

It wasn't until he was 44—when he became involved in what he calls "a very unhealthy relationship," followed by a harrowing journey from addiction to sobriety—that he found his calling. Smith is scheduled to earn a certificate in chemical dependency counseling at CCBC this spring and plans to continue taking classes to earn a B.A. and an M.A. while working in the field. "It's been a blessing in a way," Smith says of his addiction and recovery. If it weren't for the hard times, he jokes, "I might still be a mailman."

Using personal or social distress as a springboard for career change is not uncommon, says Marilyn Kuzsma, coordinator of the chemical dependency counseling program at CCBC. Like Smith, about 40 percent of the program's 107 students are in recovery themselves or have known someone who has struggled with addiction. Even those without a personal history of addiction or alcoholism "want to do something meaningful," she says. Kuzsma says that in her nineteen years teaching at the school, "I've never seen such a booming spring semester. All three sections of our introductory classes are fully enrolled."

The popularity of the counseling program is not an aberration. Admissions counselors are seeing increased interest in service professions across the board, particularly those related to medicine. Economic pragmatism drives much of the trend. Health care jobs are seen as recession-proof, CCBC's Simmons says—and for the most part, they are.

Hospitals are open every day, she points out, with three shifts—and starting salaries, sign-on bonuses, and benefits for hospital workers can be tempting. CCBC-trained radiation therapists, for example, typically earn \$50,000 per year in their first jobs after completing the two-year program. In recent years, the deal was sweetened by a \$3,000 sign-on bonus at many area hospitals. "We routinely graduate students who make more in their first jobs than the faculty here," Simmons says.

The program, offered at CCBC's Essex campus, has eliminated the shortage of radiation therapists in the Baltimore area, but the deficit persists elsewhere in the state, she notes. Mammography technicians are still in short supply. Dental hygiene "is really hot too," Simmons says. "We had doctors' offices calling us even before we started our program last fall."

Meanwhile, the Board of Public Works recently approved a plan for Baltimore City Community College (BCCC) to lease space in the BioPark of the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) for a new Life Sciences Institute. BCCC plans to move its biotechnology, environmental science, pre-dental, pre-med, and pre-pharmacy programs to the

campus. The school also plans to develop certificate programs for laboratory, animal, and cell culture technicians and forensic scientists at the site. BCCC and UMB will collaborate with the Vivien T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy High School to support graduating seniors as they earn associate degrees at BCCC, followed by bachelor's degrees at UMB—training 200 workers annually to staff the city's burgeoning biotech industry.

Nursing remains a popular option for both recent high school graduates and adult career-changers. The Johns Hopkins School of Nursing, for example, saw an 11 percent increase in applications in 2007 from students who have already earned a baccalaureate degree in some other field. Most require a couple of semesters of science coursework in order to apply to the accelerated program at Hopkins. But once accepted, they are in and out in thirteen months—attractive for those who need to get back to work quickly, such as 26-year-old Julia Stephan.

Stephan worked as an event planner after graduating from college but got bored after a few years. "I wanted something that would challenge me," she says. Nursing won out over teaching and public relations after she shadowed a couple of nurses in a neo-natal intensive care unit and fell in love with the job. She took the basic science credits she needed to apply to nursing school while working full-time at her old job. Midway through the thirteen-month program, Stephan says that she is more certain than ever that she made the right choice. "Everyone is now saying, 'Bravo, good choice,'" she laughs, given the field's reputation for security even in tough economic times.

Nursing students about to graduate from local programs say that jobs are still available, though the big sign-on bonuses Baltimore hospitals paid in the past—\$5,000 to \$7,000—have shrunk to \$2,500 or flat-out disappeared. Daisy Lopez is scheduled to graduate from CCBC's nursing program in May. "It's definitely harder to find that first job," she says. The jobs available for new nurses tend to be on medical-surgical floors, where the hours are long and the work is hard and heavy. Lopez has a job lined up at St. Joseph Hospital's cardiovascular unit, her first choice. But she already works at St. Joseph's as a nursing assistant. "I have my foot in the door," she says. Though new nurses still earn \$25 an hour, the shift differentials and overtime that once boosted weekly paychecks are also being phased out. "Now it's just straight pay," Lopez says. Even so, few nurses fear unemployment.

Crystal Dixon, 38, and Chris Barnes, 39, first-year students in the doctoral program in pharmacy at UMB, also don't fret about their job prospects. The aging of the population, together with the possibility that 48 million uninsured Americans will eventually be enrolled in some kind of national health insurance plan, virtually ensures a stable future for pharmacists, they say.

And that's a good thing, because right now they are working harder than they have ever worked in their lives. Dixon, who has two children, 11 and 6, says, "Plenty of time we're in the library 'til 9, 10, or 11 at night. During finals 'til midnight."

Dixon came to pharmacy school by a roundabout route that included stints studying engineering at Howard University, a decade in the banking industry—and a diagnosis of Crohn's disease. Swallowing eleven pills a day to manage her illness, she started poring over the product labels and wondering, "What is this stuff I'm shoving down my throat?" She decided to become a community pharmacist.

Her friend and study partner Chris Barnes likewise turned to pharmacy after personal exposure to serious illness. A former graphic designer, Barnes says his colleagues "used to joke around that we weren't curing cancer. But then my mom contracted cancer in 1999, and I decided that I should pursue something more substantive than corporate communications."

At first, he considered getting a Ph.D. in molecular biophysics or chemistry, but then he realized that a doctoral degree in pharmacy provided the opportunity to start working immediately after graduation, rather than "being a student researcher until 50." He plans to combine research with clinical practice when he finishes the program in 2012.

The fact that he is securely in school during an economic downturn is icing on the cake. "I'll get to sit this one out," Barnes says—unlike the '91 recession, when his newly minted mass communications degree led to a stint delivering pizza.

Like the health professions, teaching is an increasingly attractive option for people looking to combine job security with personal enrichment and community service. That's especially true for those interested in the perpetually understaffed STEM disciplines—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

UMBC is just concluding a grant-funded initiative with the National Science Foundation and Baltimore County public schools to train teachers for high-need schools in Baltimore County. "All fifty-six students in that program have been offered jobs," says Tracy Irish, who helped direct the program, "and most of them were career-changers—a mechanical engineer, a physician, and a cancer researcher among them."

Though that program is no longer accepting applicants, the Sherman Teacher Education Scholars program at UMBC still offers substantial aid—in the form of both financial and academic support—to those interested in teaching in STEM fields. The program is merit-based, so Sherman Scholars tend to be "some of UMBC's brightest students," says Rehana Shafi, assistant director of the program.

Ex-Marine Chris Buckler, 28, is finishing his teacher training this spring while interning at Woodlawn Middle School in Baltimore County. He is grateful that he came to teaching after life experiences taught him the virtues of perseverance and flexibility. Six days after graduating from high school in 1999, Buckler started boot camp on Parris Island, South Carolina. He ultimately decided that military life was not for him, but five years in the Marines "gave me discipline and focus," he says. "If I had gone to college right away, I might very well have flopped."

After leaving the Marines, he enrolled in the mechanical engineering program at UMBC. But he reconsidered after a less-than-stellar performance in Math 225—differential equations. "I thought long and hard about whether or not I was headed in the right direction," Buckler says. Recalling his enjoyment of previous teaching experiences and knowing "that there was a certain future in teaching math," he decided to change majors to engineering education.

Strangely enough, "I took Math 225 the next semester with a different professor and earned an A," he says—a sign to him that "the situation was set up that way for a reason," to facilitate his switch to a career better suited to his interests and gifts.

Interning at Woodlawn Middle in his final semester, Buckler now enjoys the autonomy of teaching (compared to the rigidity of military life) and the challenge of motivating apathetic students who have "tons and tons of potential." His task is finding "the magic key to unlock those kids and release some of that potential. These kids are smart and they need good educators that can engage them."

Buckler admits bluntly that job security was a factor in his decision to teach, but more importantly, "I'm in it for helping the kids."

Samson Ndanyi is in it for a kid too—his 18-month-old daughter. Ndanyi left Kenya after years of harassment for his political activities, including several months in detainment. After arriving in the United States in 2001, he began his educational odyssey at CCBC before transferring to Towson, where he earned a bachelor's degree in electronic media and film production in 2006, followed by a master's degree in social science in 2008.

He is currently applying to doctoral programs in African history in preparation for a career as an academic and hopes to use the social science and filmmaking skills he has acquired over the past eight years to produce documentaries about Africa.

Like many adults returning to school these days, he is seeking greater security, not just for himself but for his daughter. "By becoming a professor, I'll have secured the future of my little girl," he says. "She's the one who is keeping me in school longer. I had to do it for her."

*—Freelance writer Deborah Rudacille earned a master of arts degree in the Johns Hopkins University's Writing Seminars program at age 40.*

## **PAY PALS**

So you've been laid off and want to go back to school to retrain for a new, better job. Paying for it may be easier than you think.

Despite the tightening of credit markets over the past six months, grants and loans for students are still available. Virginia Zawodny, campus coordinator of financial aid at CCBC Essex, says that "federal student loan programs are still strong." About half of Essex students fully finance their education through Stafford loans, she says, with the federal government as lender. Those who need to fund living expenses as well as tuition must apply for private loans.

The Federal Pell Grant program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students and to some post-baccalaureate programs, such as those leading to teacher certification. Students in certain programs are eligible for grants from the state of Maryland if they are training in an area that has been identified as a "workforce shortage" area. The award is \$2,000 per year for community college students and \$4,000 per year for those attending a four-year school full-time. Part-time students are also eligible and receive half the full-time awards, which are automatically renewed so long as the student continues to meet eligibility requirements and maintains satisfactory academic progress.

Community college education remains a bargain—around \$4,500 in tuition and fees for a two-year program. The cost of attending a four-year college is substantially higher—full-time students at Towson University will pay \$3,808 in-state tuition per semester in fall 2009, a cost projected to rise to \$4,114 per semester by fall 2011.

Meanwhile, the sticker price for a master of arts degree in teaching at UMBC is about \$18,906 at \$528 per credit hour for the 36-credit program. About 50 percent of UMBC's the students receive some form of financial aid, however. Sherman Scholars receive grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per year. TEACH grants from the U.S. Department of Education of up to \$4,000 per year for two years are also available for students willing to teach high-needs disciplines in low-income schools anywhere in the country for four years.

Tuition for the accelerated baccalaureate program at the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing is \$57,683. The average loan indebtedness of baccalaureate graduates at the school over the past three years has been \$52,000.

—*D.R.*