Dear Alice,

How much more stressful is college on a non-traditional student, and what are some good ways to deal with college stress at 30?

Answer

Dear Reader,

What many people consider the "normal" college student - the recent high school graduate who lives on campus and graduates in four years - is actually not the norm on many American college campuses. So-called nontraditional students (students aged 25 years or older) make up almost 40 percent of class constituencies, and are usually balancing career advancements, families, and work schedules in addition to hitting the books. Older students enrich college environments by providing valuable life experience to classroom settings, and represent an element of diversity. Life circumstances for nontraditional students, however, may present some different challenges and academic pressures than those your younger classmates face.

Financial aid opportunities, family considerations, housing, and commuting options may all be different for older matriculates. Students of all kinds are eligible for federal financial aid and assistance programs for continuing education, usually in the form of loans. Scholarships may be harder to come by for students who have been out of high school for some time. On the flip side, employers sometimes offer tuition reimbursement programs for their staff. Tuition Assistance Programs (TAP) are sometimes offered through human resources as part of benefits packages, and are well worth investigating.

Housing, day care, and commuting are also potential sources of stress for the continuing college student. Some universities offer housing for older students, but most do not. However, most universities have departments of student housing that may be good resources in an off-campus housing search. As enrollments of nontraditional students have soared, many universities have catered programs or services accordingly. For example, some schools recognize how helpful it can be to provide day care facilities or partnering with day cares local to campuses. Similarly, while colleges may not have much to offer in terms of parking space or commuting assistance, many partner with local parking garages to make commuting for day and evening classes less burdensome for nontraditional students. As part of your registration, check with the student affairs department (or equivalent office) to inquire about
these considerations. You can also check out Stress at the start of school [2] for tips on dealing with stress for students of any age.

In recognizing student diversity, many colleges and universities have adult student groups that may offer a valuable sense of community in your new learning environment. Dedicated groups like these often discuss the challenges of being an older student in a group setting and provide social and service opportunities on and off campus.

As a nontraditional student, you are bringing a fresh perspective to the classroom. Older students tend to have a clear idea of what they desire out of life and academic pursuits, and lend this confidence and experience to their classmates. It’s likely that you really want to be sitting in that desk; if you do begin to experience stressors as you begin your education, know you can meet them with the same determination and drive that brought you to that place of higher achievement.

Best of luck entering this studious phase of life!

Alice!

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