



Prodigal Sons & Daughters Become

Graduates

Through 49er Finish, more than 150 displaced Niners have graduated, with more than 1,500 on their way to a diploma

By Phillip Brown



Melissa LaMarche and Janet Daniel are integral to the overwhelming success of the 49er Finish Program, which reaches out to students who dropped out in their senior years, and shepherds them back into UNC Charlotte and toward graduation.

“My advice to anyone who was unable to finish his or her degree and has contemplated completing that dream, there is no better time than now.”

Susie Bernard recently started a dream job in the New York headquarters of Morgan Stanley. As excited as she was about the job, she’s really pleased to be in reach of becoming an official member of the Niner Nation.

So is National Gypsum Company’s James White.

While they both are considered UNC Charlotte alumni, neither individual completed their undergraduate degree – yet. But thanks to the 49er Finish Program, they soon will.

The program, administered by the University’s Office of Adult Students and Evening Services (OASES), targets former UNC Charlotte seniors who stopped short of finishing their bachelor’s degrees. The 49er Finish Program began in the fall 2005. Since then, more than 1,600 students are in the program and 156 have officially graduated.

For Bernard, a vice president in charge of North American Windows operations, when she left the University in 1993, she needed just a few classes to finish her bachelor’s degree in mathematical sciences. As a student enrolled in a cooperative education program, Bernard was hired at Microsoft’s product support center, where she worked for two semesters. She returned to the University for one semester before opting for full-time employment at Microsoft.



“I don’t regret leaving when I did. I loved my job at the time, it was exciting to work for Microsoft,” said Bernard, a self-professed over-achiever. She added her decision to leave was the result of “burn out.” Originally starting college in Virginia in 1981, Bernard moved around the country for several years before arriving in Charlotte. She lived in the area for several years before transferring her credits to the University in 1988. By 1993, the lure of full-time employment was too strong.

“I found it easier to go to work; college was the harder choice,” said Bernard.

Now, almost 15 years later, she’s ready to complete her degree.

“I’ve thought about it (finishing) many, many times. But I’d moved all over the country since 1993,” Bernard stated. After exploring options to transfer her credits to other institutions, she gave up after she discovered new transfer students would have to complete a full year of coursework.

Ultimately, Bernard discovered the 49er Finish Program by visiting the University’s home page this past summer. She was living in Maryland and had recently been laid off from a computer consulting position.

“I sent an e-mail using the link on the 49er Finish Web page, and I got a surprisingly quick reply from Melissa LaMarche,” said Bernard. Despite the response, she held little hope for a positive outcome.

However, LaMarche, who is the 49er Finish Program coordinator, “latched on to me like a fish on a hook,” Bernard joked.

Communicating primarily via e-mail, Bernard said LaMarche and Dr. (Alan) Dow, chair of the Mathematics and Statistics Department, reviewed her transcripts within a couple of weeks and advised how she would be able to finalize her degree.

While having a former student approach the University about completing her degree was welcome, said LaMarche, it was atypical.

According to LaMarche, the University proactively implemented 49er Finish with the intent to re-enroll as many former students as possible.

“The pilot program specifically targeted students who stopped attending the University within the last seven years but who left in good academic standing,” LaMarche stated. She added the program has increased its number of contacts by engaging in an extensive communications campaign.

James White said the mailings he received about the program prompted him to take the steps to complete his bachelor’s degree in political science.

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“At the end of October or November of 2007, I received a brochure about the program through the mail,” stated White, who is a national account representative with National Gypsum Company. “It outlined how the re-admittance process had been streamlined, so I decided to pursue it.”

White said shortly after the start of the year, he was contacted by LaMarche, who e-mailed him all the forms to get him re-enrolled. When he left the University in 1993, he was within six hours of completing a bachelor’s in political science and a minor in history. During the intervening period, degree requirements have changed, and he is awaiting word on whether the departments are going to allow him to complete his degree under the old or new catalog.

For White, this is not his first attempt to finish his degree. About four years after leaving UNC Charlotte, he made inquiries to a former professor. While the professor provided some help, White became frustrated by the process in place at the time. He said he had to physically come to campus each time and had to continually follow up with all the different offices and departments involved, which proved to be too much for a working professional.

With the 49er Finish Program, White found it to be a remarkable source of information and assistance. “From providing the necessary forms to following up with the Registrar’s Office and my respective academic departments to course enrollment, Ms. LaMarche has been unfailing in her commitment and dedication on my behalf.”

Such a positive experience is just the reaction that LaMarche and the OASES staff were hoping for when the program was launched.

“When someone drops out they have unintentionally put limitations on themselves and their career prospects,” said Janet Daniel, OASES director.

“By coming back through 49er Finish and graduating, they become more marketable. They are more likely to pursue graduate degrees; they are better-equipped for a competitive economy where college degrees are becoming essential to win jobs and earn more money.”

While the 49er Finish Program isn’t unique, UNC Charlotte is ahead of the curve nationally. According to a recent article in the “Chronicle of Higher Education,” more universities across the country are trying to lure back adult students. As the article noted, the United States has an increasingly aging population and a shifting economy that focuses on a higher number of jobs that require college degrees.

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Morgan Stanley's Susie Bernard has achieved outstanding career success, but she still decided to finish her UNC Charlotte degree.

“I would love to see even more students who have left the University come back and complete their degrees, but I know there are some students who have family or financial constraints that are a barrier to their participation in the program,” LaMarche said. For anyone contemplating returning to the University, the 49er Finish Program offers several incentives including fee-free readmission, enrollment assistance, mentoring programs and a referral service. LaMarche added that she and the OASES staff work with academic departments to meet students’ educational needs. Options include online classes, transient study, reversion to original catalog requirements and specialized/customized courses and projects.

“While it is up to the academic department to determine what will be allowed in a particular case, I help provide the students with suggestions,” LaMarche said. “I’m grateful to all the faculty and staff across campus who help support this program.”

Bernard and White also are appreciative of everyone’s efforts as they both close in on realizing the sense of accomplishment that results from earning a college degree.

“My advice to anyone who was unable to finish his or her degree and has contemplated completing that dream, there is no better time than now,” said White. “With the 49er Finish Program, you get access to the entire process under one umbrella with a resourceful, talented and professional staff to assist you and work on your behalf.”

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