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# Professionals head back to school

By Jeff Nicholson

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You can never have too much education.

That led Darin Gale, 38, who is married with four children, to sacrifice at least five nights a week for two years to pursue a master's of business administration at the new Sacramento campus of Drexel University.

"It was a sacrifice, of both the calendar and the wallet," Gale acknowledged.

Gale, the Economic Development manager of Yuba City, believes it to be a worthy sacrifice.

"It will open up additional opportunities for me," he said. "Having a graduate degree helps open the door in both the public and private sector."

Coleen Morehead, 48, who enrolled at Drexel about 10 months ago, hopes to parlay a Ph.D. in education into a teaching position at a four-year university.

"It just seemed like the next logical step," said the married mother of two teens, who finished her master's degree in education at the University of San Francisco in 2008. "When you look at the job market, and the requirement to get an advanced degree, it just opens up more opportunities."

Gale said there were about 16 other students, all professionals, in his class, and while some were in their mid-20s, the oldest topped 50. He estimated the average age to be in the mid-30s.

"I think there's more pre-professionals that have continued to get their graduate degree," he said, "but it's definitely growing for working professionals, to help distinguish yourself over your competitor, establish that advantage."

Morehead, who finished a stint as an instructor at Cambridge Junior College in its associates business program and has been on the Franklin District school board for the last seven years, estimated the average age of the students in her class in the mid-40s.

Competition is the primary motivation factor, said Keisha Liggett-Nichols, associate clinical professor of management at Drexel University.

"It seems to me that in the economic downturn, there has been an increase in folks trying to educate themselves, preparing themselves for when the economy recovers," she said. "Now that you have an economy on the upturn, the playing field is quite different, so you need to do something to differentiate yourself from the masses."

It's not easy for a working professional with a family to find the time to pursue an advanced degree.

"It is a balance of time and commitment," Morehead said.

There are some ways to deal with that, Liggett-Nichols said.

Drexel's business program "is a rigorous program," she said, "but the beautiful thing is, with advanced technology, there are a lot of ways to ensure the students get what they need.

"My colleagues and I understand that our students have full-time jobs and families, and it's difficult to create a balance, so we try to be flexible when we can."

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