

Weekend college helps students balance school and work

by Kirk DICKEY

A flag stirs listlessly as a breeze blows across Collin College's Spring Creek Campus. Birds rustle and chirp in the trees. If you listen really hard, you can just hear the sounds of children playing in a nearby park.



Jessica Padron and Heather Alvarez

It's a Saturday, so you can't be too surprised that the campus buildings are quiet.

Well, they are mostly quiet.

Dotted among the classrooms and still hallways, you will find students gathered in animated discussions with professors on topics as varied as biology, Texas government, computer networking and care for special needs children. This is Weekend College and, for many of the students in these classrooms, this is the best way they have to pursue their dreams of higher education.

At an average age of 27, many of the students are a little older than the ones who fill the seats on weekdays, and many have full-time jobs, family commitments and other responsibilities their weekday counterparts have not yet even begun to consider. For Maria Narvaez Brennan, a Collin College alumna who took several weekend classes, that environment was just what she was looking for.

"I felt more comfortable attending classes with people my age who had a job and family," Brennan said. "As 'older' students, I felt that we were committed to gaining as much knowledge as we could from the lectures and assignments."

Weekend classes allow students like Brennan to balance home and work with school, so they can continue their education on their own time.

"After working 40 hours a week, you are usually exhausted at the end of the day," Brennan said. "Sometimes I had to work later hours, so I would never have been able to take night classes."

"The availability of Saturday classes was a huge factor in my decision to enroll at Collin College. I was able to take as many classes as I wanted without missing work."

Weekend classes are held on Friday nights, Saturdays and Sundays, with options to take a class one day per weekend over 16 weeks, two days a weekend over seven, eight or ten weeks, or self-paced flex-entry schedules.

There is even an option in an express format, where a full semester's worth of classes is fit into three weekends of intense full-day classes.

For some students, the express classes are also tools to get ahead in school in a shorter time frame.

"I work 40 hours a week, so I found it easier to take express classes and get them over with," Jessica Padron, a current Collin College student, said.

Padron said the longer class

periods during the express classes allow her to focus intensely on the subject she is studying. She took an express block class on early childhood development this fall, which met on Friday night, Saturday and Sunday.

"I like it because you have more time to concentrate, to do group work or whatever the class calls for," Padron said.

Heather Alvarez, a student in the same class, agreed.

"I saw the opportunity to take

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four classes in a semester, but not take all four classes at once, and I thought that might be easier to handle," Alvarez said, noting her need to balance school with her job as a field trip coordinator for McKinney Independent School District.

Alvarez has already earned her associate degree from Collin College but is taking more weekend classes now in preparation for a bachelor's degree. She said she appreciates the pace of express classes because the three-weekend time frame means everyone needs to be on top of their game.

"In express classes, you don't have time to waste. It is just go-go-go, and then it is done," she said.

That doesn't mean students get short-changed when it comes to their education according to Weekend College Director Brian Lenhart.

"We do not compromise the rigor or integrity of that class, so they are going to be doing the same thing a traditional student would be," Lenhart said. "They are still the same Arts 1301 or English 1301."

Professor Susy Mathews, who has taught weekend classes for almost a decade in addition to her other teaching duties at the college, confirmed that, saying she doesn't believe that just because a class is on the weekend it should be less engaging.

"You have to be 100 percent committed to the class," she said. "I don't reduce any assignments or course work because of the time frame.



Weekend College Director Brian Lenhart.

I don't reduce mid-terms or finals. I try not to change anything."

In fact, Mathews said that she believes the longer class periods allow her to present a broader picture to her students.

"I feel like during weekend classes, I am able to do a lot more with the students," she said. "I am

able to have more discussion. Even though you feel like it is cramped up into three weeks, I feel like we finish more work."

Weekend College classes are offered at all three of Collin College's main campuses: Central Park Campus in McKinney, Preston Ridge Campus in Frisco and Spring Creek Campus in Plano. General education courses are offered for students who want to earn associate of arts, associate of science or associate of arts in teaching degrees.

To learn more about Weekend College, you may visit www.collin.edu/academics/weekendcollege/, call 9782.881.5801 or e-mail weekendcollege@collin.edu. ❖

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