

One Class at a Time



Reinventing Careers Through UVA's Certificate Programs

by Charlotte Farley

Pamela Frank-Houndjo had a reward system. If she finished her homework by midnight, she would head downtown for a drink. Some of the bartenders knew the routine well enough to greet her with a question: "Oh, you did all your homework?" She had.

This isn't what most people picture when they imagine going back to school. They also don't paint a picture in which they're taking one class at a time while balancing work and family responsibilities on top of advancing their education. Yet for many adults, especially parents whose careers have taken a

back seat to raising a family or supporting others, returning to school has become a practical way to reinvent what's next. Frank-Houndjo is, by her own admission, the kind of person who gets bored if she is not doing several things at once. Still, she does not pretend the balancing act was without challenges.

"It was not easy," she says. "In fact, it was extremely hard."

For adults returning to school, education rarely happens in a vacuum. There are still jobs to do, bills to pay, children to care for, and a household that somehow continues generating laundry whether or not anyone has a paper due. UVA's



That flexibility is deliberate. Kai Degner, professor and director of certificate programs at UVA Continuing Education, says, “Working professionals choose our programs because they can fit them around their other commitments like their families, their jobs, and their civic and community responsibilities.”

Why Adults Go Back: A Second Act

Degner says adults generally return to school for one of three reasons. Some want to move up within the industry they already know, while others want to change fields entirely. The third group may not be chasing a promotion or a new job at all. Sometimes, after years of building life around careers and family, they simply want to learn something because it interests them. For many, those reasons coincide with a new stage of life. Children become more independent, careers plateau, or long-held interests finally have room to grow. Continuing Education offers a way to pivot without putting the rest of life on hold.

The average UVA certificate student is around 40, although the programs attract people at many different points in their careers. “The school is explicitly designed to serve working adults,” Degner says. “In one class, I might have police chiefs, nurses, project managers, and college athletes—anyone from young professionals to people in senior roles.”

Typically, they arrive with plenty of experience: most have already spent years navigating workplaces, family responsibilities, and plans that rarely go exactly as expected. Many also have a much clearer sense of why they are there than they did when they were undergrads.

A Route of Her Own

Frank-Houndjo became a single mother at 20. She knew she was intelligent, but she also needed an educational path that felt realistic. She began with a two-year business management and accounting program at Piedmont Virginia Community College.

Over the years, she held several positions as a nanny and caregiver. She enjoyed being with children and formed close relationships with the families who hired her, but one caregiving interview prompted her to think seriously about where her own life was headed.

The caregiver she met was exhausted. Frank-Houndjo looked at the situation



Pamela
Frank-Houndjo

continuing education certificate programs are designed with that reality in mind.

The university offers about 15 certificates across fields including business, government, healthcare, public safety, and technology. Many are available fully online, and most of the credit-bearing programs require around 18 credits, or approximately six classes. A motivated student might finish in two or three semesters, while someone with a fuller schedule can take up to three years.

There are still *jobs* to do, *bills* to pay, *children* to care for, and a *household* that somehow continues generating *laundry* whether or not anyone has a paper due.

inspiration: PARENT LEARNERS



and thought, “I don’t want that to be me. I don’t want to be 70 and taking care of someone who’s 60.” She eventually earned a bachelor’s degree from Averett University in 2020 and later enrolled in UVA’s Leadership in Human Resources certificate program, which seemed like a manageable next step.

“I didn’t think I had time to do a master’s, but I could do a certificate,” she says.

Then, as these stories sometimes go, she did both. Frank-Houndjo completed the UVA certificate while earning a master’s degree in economics from Longwood University. One of her UVA courses transferred into the graduate program, and a scholarship helped cover her final two UVA classes.

She continued working throughout the process, organizing her schedule carefully. When she was with the children

she cared for, she focused on them; when it was time for homework, she focused on homework. At the end of each semester, she rewarded herself with a trip—sometimes an Amtrak ride, a museum visit, or a few days away.

Her career was also beginning to shift. When the children she nannied returned to school, Frank-Houndjo started looking for a small nonprofit where she could put in a few hours each week. She found an opening at Virginia Organizing that initially required only five to 10 hours. Before long, the organization offered her full-time employment.

Three years later, she works in finance and administration, where her human resources training continues to prove useful. Even when she is not directly responsible for an HR task, she understands the issues being discussed and has the knowledge to support her opinions. Her first day as director of finance came the day after graduation.

Learning Around Real Life

For Bekalu Abate, returning to school was less about leaving one field than preparing for where his current industry was going.

Abate works for Bentley Systems, a software company where he supports users and increasingly encounters cloud migration. He wanted a better understanding of cloud systems and terminology, along with more confidence when working beside engineers on migration projects.

New to Charlottesville
or know somebody
relocating soon?



CharlottesvilleFamily
Ultimate RELOCATION Guide

sponsored by: **CAAR**



New Beginnings Family Counseling Services Inc

INDIVIDUAL COUPLES AND FAMILY COUNSELING

Services Provided

Individual, couples and family counseling

Areas of Specialization

Anxiety, Depression, Trauma, Marital issues, Parenting challenges
Life transitions such as: New parents; Young adults/college age
Navigating new stages, Retirement, Health-related struggles,
and working through life’s difficult challenges
including illness, death, and divorce.

Services are provided both in the office and virtually.

Frances Greenstein, LPC, LMFT
LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR (LPC) AND
LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST (LMFT)

newbeginningsfcs.com | 434-984-0023 | 911 E Jefferson Street, Charlottesville

CONTINUING EDUCATION OFFERS *a way to pivot* WITHOUT PUTTING THE REST OF LIFE ON HOLD.

When he searched for cloud computing programs, UVA's certificate appeared to offer the classes he needed. He began the program in summer 2025, around the same time he became a new parent.

Abate was holding down a full-time job, caring for a new baby and taking classes online. Something had to give, and for a while, it was much of his social life (something that any new parent will agree goes on the back burner). Abate planned his schedule around work, family and school. The program's online format made continuing his education possible, but flexibility didn't make the courseload disappear. He still had to find the time and energy to complete it.

A scholarship covering four courses removed a significant financial barrier and allowed him to focus more fully on learning.

The classes strengthened his understanding of cloud architecture and Python programming, giving him a stronger foundation for work he was already seeing inside the company. He is now looking for additional ways to grow within his field.

Technology, after all, has no intention of slowing down while anyone catches up. Cloud computing continues to expand, artificial intelligence is changing the industry, and today's new skill may be tomorrow's basic expectation.

"My advice is simple: take advantage of every opportunity.

Apply for scholarships, participate in class, and ask questions. I asked a lot of questions myself. If something didn't work, I reached out to my instructors and classmates. I also applied what I was learning through hands-on practice, using resources like Google and YouTube."

His point is practical: do not wait until you understand everything before joining the conversation.

More Than a Quick Credential

Certificate programs are sometimes confused with quick training workshops, but UVA's credit-bearing programs require a much larger commitment.

"Our credit-based certificate programs go beyond short-term skills development," Degner says. "Students take between five and eight three-credit classes, which gives them time to practice more advanced skills than would be possible in a short-term workshop."

That means something to employers. "Students who complete our programs have made a long-term commitment to their learning and growth," he says. "Employers recognize that." In fact, many students use



Kai Degner



Charlottesville Family **FAVORITES**
VOTE FOR US!

scored in a love of learning

A local favorite since 1983

nature • nurture
North Branch
preschool - 8th grade



- small class sizes • hands-on, project-based learning
- outdoor learning • outside play time
- financial assistance available

north-branch-school.org
540-456-8450 | northbranch@nbsva.org

North Branch School does not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, or income and actively seeks minority students.



CHESTERTON ACADEMY
OF ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST



HIGH SCHOOL
WITH A HIGHER PURPOSE

CLASSICAL. AFFORDABLE.
JOYFULLY ROOTED IN THE
CATHOLIC TRADITION.

NOW ENROLLING GRADES 9-12.

CALL OR EMAIL TO SCHEDULE A TOUR!



434-381-4284 | INFO@CHESTERTONSJE.ORG
256 E HIGH STREET | CHARLOTTESVILLE



tuition reimbursement or other educational benefits offered by their employers to help cover the cost.

UVA also allows prospective students to take one course before undertaking an entire certificate. “Every semester, we have students taking an online course for the first time or coming back

to school after decades away,” Degner

says. “We’re here to support them, and we know they can be successful.”

His advice is straightforward: “Just try one class.”

One Class Can Lead Somewhere

Beginning in spring 2027, students in some credit-bearing certificate programs will also have a new option. UVA is launching an online Master of Change Management degree created for working adults. Eligible certificate students and alumni from the previous five years may apply as many as 12 credits toward the 30-credit graduate program.

Not every certificate qualifies. UVA also offers noncredit programs, including Certified Financial Planning, Organizational Leadership Coaching and the Certified Public Manager Program, and those courses cannot be applied toward the master’s degree.

Still, the new degree creates a bridge for those who may begin with a certificate because a full graduate program feels too expensive, too time-consuming, or simply too large to take on all at once. For some, the goal is a promotion; for others, it’s an entirely new career.

Sometimes, it begins with the realization that they are capable of more and finally ready to make room for it.

Reinvention rarely happens all at once. More often, it happens one course, one semester, and one new opportunity at a time. Frank-Houndjo does not claim to know exactly where every credential or decision will take her next. “My life has always had a route of its own,” she says. So, she keeps taking the next class and seeing where it leads.

Preferably with a *reward* waiting at the end of the semester.

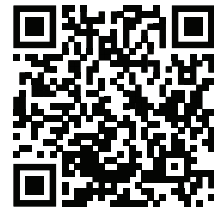


Charlotte Farley is an author, poet, and founder of Mayfair Storyhouse, an independent literary studio and boutique press devoted to stories of place, belonging, and home. She lives with her family in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains.



Charlottesville Family MOMS LIT SOCIETY BOOKS *after* BEDTIME

A QUARTERLY GATHERING FOR MOMS TO RELAX, CONNECT
& DISCUSS POWERFUL BOOKS BY VIRGINIA WOMEN AUTHORS



SPONSORED BY:

