



# ALUMNI

CHRONICLES MAGAZINE

ISSUE : 02

REYES MEDRANO JR., TOLLESON, ARIZONA CITY MANAGER

20  
23

# Reyes

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# UOPX

PRESIDENT CHRIS LYNNE

Dear Alum,

University of Phoenix is a place for building and supporting community. Our virtual learning environments are enriched by the connections we make with our students and alumni, as well as with the communities in which we live, work and serve.

I know this both professionally and personally. My mother did not have a college degree, and I witnessed the struggles she faced throughout her life as a result.

When I was 10, she and I moved from California to Illinois, where she started over after not working for 16 years. She was a single mother taking care of me in a new and unfamiliar place. We lived in a low-income neighborhood that faced a lot of challenges — poverty, broken families, crime — which our neighbors had been dealing with for generations. That experience gave me understanding and empathy for how difficult it is to raise yourself out of such circumstances.

I always knew education would be my answer, and my mom did everything possible to ensure I had the opportunity to pursue it.

But the real story here is my mom's — a single mother with no skills trying to get by, responsible for raising her child. She wanted a college education; she couldn't advance in her job or gain access to promotions. When she signed up for local college courses, she experienced frustrating barriers of time and transportation. She didn't have a University of Phoenix with online instruction and deeply empathetic practitioner faculty or academic counselors to help her through rough times. She didn't have a career mentorship to help her think about a better blueprint for her career.

She didn't have that access or community support. I believe if she had, she could have changed her life circumstances.

That's why it's so important to me that University of Phoenix brings community as well as affordable, flexible and empathetic education access to working adults and parents. We are here to deliver on our mission, helping individuals — and moms like mine — be part of a community focused on helping working adults achieve their education and career goals.

Here at University of Phoenix, we have built a community where working adults can feel they belong, where their experience is embraced alongside their learning. In your stories, we can experience community and belonging together.



Sincerely,  
**Chris Lynne**  
President, University of Phoenix



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Finding opportunity  
within community



LaJoy Johnson-Law, Alumni and President Emeritus, DMV Chapter. Friends with Chris C. Celauro, Director, Alumni Experience, friends with LaJoy



Hello, Alum, and welcome to the second issue of *Alumni Chronicles Magazine*. I think I speak on behalf of everyone working on this project when I say it is our favorite initiative. Alumni stories are why we do what we do.

When I tell people that students at University of Phoenix can make lifelong friends, I often get strange looks and hear, “But you’re an online university.” We are. But we are more than a university too. We are a community, one that is attached to numerous other communities.

And this is exactly why we have local alumni chapters: to celebrate and give back to our communities as well as make lifelong friends.

In this edition of *Alumni Chronicles Magazine*, you’ll get to meet some of our local chapter presidents. These alumni lead the chapters in year-round community events, volunteering, professional development opportunities and, yes, making friends.

The picture next to this letter illustrates the last of these activities. In it, you’ll see two very good friends who are also alumni: I’m one of them, and LaJoy Johnson-Law is the other. She’s president emeritus of our D.C.-Maryland-Virginia chapter as well as a go-getter and my personal friend.

Of course, these leaders don’t do it on their own. Each chapter has a council of other involved alumni who help ideate and coordinate activities all while gaining resume-enhancing experience.

Speaking of leaders, I’m sure you’ll enjoy our cover story on alumnus Reyes Medrano Jr. and his unique approach to leadership, which has contributed to his being one of the longest-serving city managers in Arizona.

Also inside the magazine, you’ll discover career insight and tips that you can use today and tomorrow.

As a career university, we are committed to identifying job-market trends and offering pathways for our students and alumni to take advantage of them in their careers. For example, skills are turning into a game changer for many people, and our feature story, “How to Develop Skills for the Future,” takes a deep dive into the role they are beginning to play.

After you’re done reading, please join your local alumni chapter if you haven’t already. We are a community, after all, and we want you to be part of it.

All the best,

Chris Celauro, Director, Alumni Experience



Network with UOPX graduates, volunteer locally — and have some fun. **Join one of 50 chapters nationwide.**

[phoenix.edu/alumni/join-network/chapters.html](https://phoenix.edu/alumni/join-network/chapters.html)



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By Laurie Davies

I N N O V A T I O N A T T H E U N I V E R S I T Y

Since its beginnings as a university that pioneered online higher education, University of Phoenix (UOPX) has embraced innovation. And in that respect at least, little has changed. From a new tool that helps students tailor their job search to an upcoming Amazon series that will share alumni experiences to showcase what it's like to be a UOPX student, here's a roundup of the latest and greatest happenings at the University.

## Take Charge of Your Career

Building on its Career Services for Life® commitment, UOPX has launched new resources to help students and alumni explore job opportunities.

**Job Explorer**, a tool that displays openings relevant to degree programs, is accessible to students and alumni with a MyPhoenix login. The tool essentially functions like a job board, giving students and alumni access to available occupations based on their degree program and location (also showing remote jobs). Job Explorer works in conjunction with a skills profiler, matching previously attained skills (through classes and life and work experience) to those highlighted in job postings.

Additionally, the **Career Support — Tools and Resources hub** provides access to a suite of assets designed to aid in the job hunt, all in one convenient location. Developed by career advisors, the resources offer guidance tailored to different career stages, including:

- Changing careers
- Returning to a career
- Starting a career as a new grad
- Continuing your career as an experienced grad

The hub is self-service and includes resumé, CV and cover letter templates you can download and fill out based on your situation. The hub provides examples of each asset to model. Plus, it has step-by-step guides to support you through the job application process from start to finish.

→ **Learn more:** [phoenix.edu/blog/career-support/tools-resources](https://phoenix.edu/blog/career-support/tools-resources)

## Putting the Home in Homecoming

It's well known that University of Phoenix is a nontraditional university, so it's no surprise that it approaches homecoming celebrations differently too.

Rather than hosting a single homecoming in one location, UOPX staff and leadership travel to select locations to support homecoming events throughout the country. Each homecoming is chapter-led and unique to its area, creating a personalized experience for local Phoenixes. From professional basketball games and major league soccer matches to murder mystery parties and brunch cruises, alumni are brought together to meet face-to-face, network, share success stories and feel a sense of belonging.

→ **Learn more about upcoming events and locations:** [phoenix.edu/homecoming](https://phoenix.edu/homecoming)





## High-Def Dive Into UOPX Life

View University of Phoenix like never before in “The College Tour,” an Amazon Prime series that provides a glimpse into college life through the lens of a university’s students and alumni. Set to air on the streaming service in May, the 30-minute episode will showcase UOPX and take viewers on a virtual tour of the University. Segments will spotlight the online learning experience, the Career Services for Life® commitment, the new competency-based programs and alumni pride.

A cool coincidence: UOPX will be episode 89 in the series, and the school went online in 1989 (although it was founded in 1976!).

→ **Learn more:** [phoenix.edu/thecolleetour](https://phoenix.edu/thecolleetour)



## Alumni Benefits

University of Phoenix is with its students and alumni from Day One until Day Done — and that means retirement, not graduation. When students become alumni, the UOPX journey continues with a range of benefits designed to improve their careers and lives, including:

- One-on-one, no-cost career advisement for life
- Access to the self-service Career Resource Library
- A 50% discount on professional development courses at UOPX
- Exclusive tuition rates for bachelor’s and master’s degrees
- The opportunity to build personal and professional relationships in one of 50 alumni chapters nationwide
- Other networking opportunities, including an 800,000-strong network on LinkedIn®
- Yearly homecoming ceremonies
- Discounts on more than 900 brands

→ **Discover more advantages:** [phoenix.edu/alumni](https://phoenix.edu/alumni)

## Lean Library

There’s nothing more frustrating than being on deadline for a project and realizing you don’t have a license to access a journal, article or database you need.

UOPX’s collaboration with Lean Library can help.

Lean Library is an internet browser extension that adds features and functions to your browser. It works with your UOPX Library to give you seamless access to library materials when you’re working outside of the library website (for example, if you’re researching on Google or Bing). Once the extension is downloaded, you’ll be alerted via a pop-up message if you’re looking for something you can access through the University Library, including:

- Books
- Articles
- E-books
- Subscriptions
- Other UOPX-licensed digital resources

→ **Learn more:** <https://download.leanlibrary.com/universityofphoenix>

## Earn a Degree Faster and for Less

In February 2020, University of Phoenix launched its first competency-based programs (CB) so that students could gain a degree with career-relevant skills faster and at a lower cost. Since then, CB has continued to grow, empowering qualifying students to earn their degrees through the credit-based program in less than a year and for under \$11,000.

CB programs accomplish this by leveraging knowledge and skills the student already has to create a more flexible learning plan. In a CB program, students can demonstrate their knowledge through the completion of competency assessments rather than through predefined activities with set due dates.

Students can also apply their expertise in subject areas they already know as a way to modify their learning plan and focus more of their time in areas new to them.

UOPX currently offers four CB credit-based programs — three of which are master’s programs — with more than 3,000 enrolled students and 570 graduates.

→ **Learn more:** [phoenix.edu/competency-based-degrees](https://phoenix.edu/competency-based-degrees)

## Upskill to Stay Competitive

Skills matter in today’s workforce. For those looking to take on new challenges, remain competitive in a changing job market or simply up their skills game, UOPX has launched a suite of online, noncredit professional development courses in a number of high-demand fields. (Think digital marketing, information technology, health-care, human resources and education.) Even better: UOPX alumni save 50% on all courses.

These courses are built to be affordable, flexible and relevant to the modern job market. Self-led and self-paced, they also teach useful skills in about 30 hours, all without the need for prior experience. Certain courses can also prepare learners to take industry certification exams from Google, Facebook, Scrum.org and Amazon.

For individuals looking to grow their career or small business — or explore new career opportunities — professional development courses prove learning never goes out of style. 🌱

→ **Learn more:** [phoenix.edu/professionaldevelopment](https://phoenix.edu/professionaldevelopment)

# The Pursuit of Happiness

## Reyes Medrano Jr.

By Elizabeth Exline

If there were any question about whether University of Phoenix alumnus Reyes Medrano Jr. was born to lead, it would be resolved with a translation of his first name. Spanish for “kings,” Reyes is the kind of name you give to a first-born child, a son born on Epiphany, or a person who eventually becomes one of the longest-serving city managers in Arizona.

**Medrano, for the record,  
is all these things.**

*Reyes Medrano Jr. meets  
with a Tolleson resident.*

He’s also the first to point out he’s a “junior” and shares a name with his late father, who also worked in city government. Both men embraced an approach to leadership that centers on discourse, listening and progress, all of which underscores the fact that Reyes Jr., as Tolleson’s city manager since 2005, is answering a calling that brings him both happiness and purpose. “Our belief is that public service should evoke joy in the served and the servant,” Medrano says of himself and his colleagues. “We live that.”

“Happiness breeds success, not the other way around.”

### Opportunity Meets Personality

Of course, Medrano didn’t set out to be a city manager. He thought he would coach baseball or maybe go into engineering. But when he was laid off from an aerospace manufacturing company, he resolved that would be the first and last time that would happen to him.

Medrano took a position as a police dispatcher for Tolleson, and he volunteered for the graveyard shifts so that he could go to school during the day. Eventually, he earned a bachelor’s degree in business at University of Phoenix and, later, a master’s degree at another university.

The day before he was due to interview for a counseling position at a community college, Tolleson’s city manager approached him about a management assistant position.

“By that time, I had four kids, and I saw that [the city role] paid \$5,000 more than [the college] was going to pay me,” Medrano says. “The words, ‘We want to train you to be city manager,’ kind of glossed over, and I thought, ‘I’ll do that.’”

The paycheck may have attracted him, but it was the role that ultimately retained him. Medrano worked his way up to assistant city manager and then, finally, city manager.

“On Oct. 12, 2005, I was sworn in as the first kid from Tolleson to be the city manager,” he says, recalling how, at the time, he was also the youngest person in Arizona to do so.

### Like Father, Like Son

Medrano’s father left his son with far more than a name. He also influenced his approach to overseeing a city with sometimes competing interests.

“My dad used to get death threats,” Medrano says. “One of the most profound things he ever said to me was, ‘Look, if future generations are going to do better than us, then we need to learn to forgive and not repeat the same mistakes of those who oppressed communities like ours.’”

This outlook inspires Medrano in his daily work, whether he’s mentoring Tolleson’s youth (he’s proud of his involvement with the Tolleson Teen Council) or recruiting business to the city.

Economic development, in fact, is one of Medrano’s favorite projects, and he actively seeks opportunities to make Tolleson “recession-proof.”

Pilar Sinawi, the chief government affairs officer for Tolleson, can attest to Medrano’s economic focus. Sinawi has worked with Medrano for a decade and says economic viability is a top concern for Medrano — and, in her opinion, a valid one.

“I think something [people] in government don’t talk about is how, as a city, we need to make money,” Sinawi explains. “We need to ensure that the city is fiscally sustainable to provide residents services and programs [that provide] a good quality of life. ... It is because of Reyes’ leadership that the state of the City of Tolleson is fiscally sound.”

Medrano keeps this priority balanced with others. Sinawi points out that Medrano lives by the motto “Happiness breeds success, not the other way around.”

Medrano’s bridge building — both cultural and economic — ties back to his heritage and future. What propels him out of bed each day and gets him to the office is his deeply held belief that he can remind and inspire his community to choose daily what this nation’s founders believed in: the pursuit of happiness.

“I believe the most important thing for me to do every day is to model the desired behavior to everyone who sees me, and that desired behavior is happiness,” he says. “You’re not always going to be happy. It just not possible. It’s the pursuit that matters and finding the elements of happiness in victory and tragedy.” 🌸



# HELP WANTED

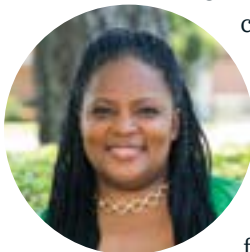
# Skills

## in the Job Market

By Aleece Reynaga

Employers once emphasized the need for degrees, but a new trend appears to be underway, one that's leaving them more concerned with which skill set an applicant brings to the table rather than which degree is listed on the resumé.

This is good news for those who have work experience, but it may be even better news for those who have both work experience and a degree. A diverse skill set often translates to more options for career enhancement and changing jobs.



University of Phoenix (UOPX) alumna and career advisor Ricklyn Woods understands this situation well. She works with clients daily to identify which skills they have, which skills they don't know they have and which skills they need to get. Here, she shares what employers are looking for and how best to stand out in today's applicant pool.

### What are the pros and cons of focusing more on skills?

Sometimes employers are looking for a particular profile, someone who has had a specific career trajectory and who has held certain job titles. In doing so, they may miss potential talent who might have been in totally different careers but have skills that are transferable. A disadvantage of focusing on skills is that sometimes job seekers have a hard time articulating their skills. If the talent pool doesn't know how to effectively articulate the skills they've acquired, then employers may find they're still not getting the right talent.

### How can people answer this trend in terms of education and resumé writing?

If someone is a current student, it's important to identify the skills they're gaining throughout their program and adding those skills to their resumé. There are two places you can add those skills: in a skills section on the resumé and in an academic experience section.

Traditionally, most people just list their degree name, but they don't add context. I advise most people, especially where there might be an experience gap, to showcase academic experience as a means of qualifying for the position. For example, they might list three to five courses they completed that are relevant to the job they're applying for.

I always encourage students and alumni, especially if they don't necessarily have the true work experience, to make sure that education is listed at the top of the resumé along with their skill section. Research has shown that recruiters spend, on average, seven seconds looking at the resumé. If your education and skill section is at the bottom, the recruiter may never get to it.

### Can you speak to the trend of copy-and-pasting skills from a job description into a resumé and hiding it, so it becomes picked up on an applicant algorithm to stand out?

I would advise against it. I'm sure most people will be like, "I'm going to try that because that sounds like a legit way to rise to the top of the applicant pool." While, yes, it might boost your keywords, there's still going to be a human who reads that resumé. So even if your resumé rises to the top because there's a 90% match in the applicant tracking system, when the recruiter looks at that resumé and doesn't see anything that shows you'd be the right candidate for the job, then you just wasted your time.

Also, if you are copying and pasting a job description and making the text white, you're essentially plagiarizing. It may come across as deceitful. But if you put the work in ahead of time and make sure your resumé is well written, then that's what's going to get you to the top.

### Do you have general advice for those seeking employment in today's market?

Get clear about your target job. Some people apply to anything and everything without really having a resumé that's targeted to a particular position. Understand that your resumé is a marketing document, not a transcript of your career. Tailor your resumé to every position that you apply for.

What the job seeker needs to understand is that no one is going to have 100% of the job requirements, and that's OK. But if you only have 10% and that's all you've been able to come up with on your own, it might be a good time to schedule an appointment with a career advisor. One thing we do is help individuals uncover some of those transferable skills and experiences that they may not see because they're too close to it.

A lot of people who reach out to us say, "I'm not sure what I want to do," or, "I'm applying for jobs and I'm not getting traction."

We are really like your career companion. You can talk to us about anything and everything career related. **That is what we're here for!**

**“** If someone is a current student, it's important to identify the skills they're gaining throughout their program and adding those skills to their resumé.”



UOPX alumna Cindy Banton brings her skills to work.



# Building Bridges

## Alumni chapter presidents grow the UOPX community

By Michael Feder

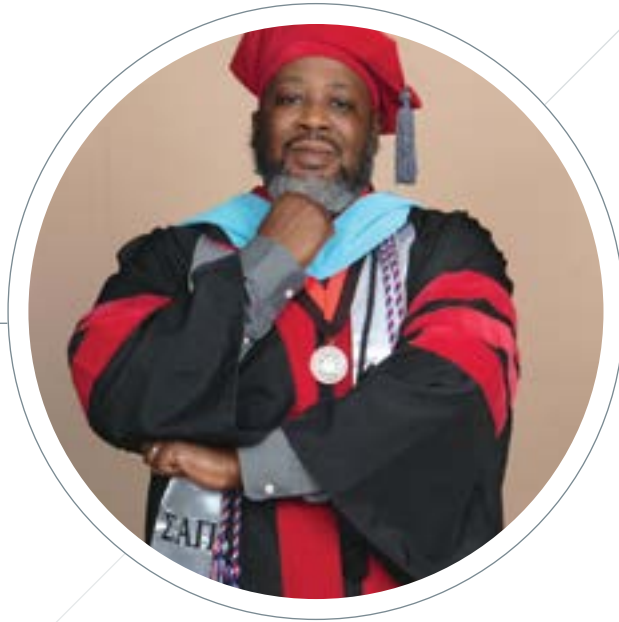
When students graduate from University of Phoenix (UOPX), their connection with the University doesn't come to an end. Fifty alumni chapters across the country pick up where the classes left off, fostering deeper and wider relationships among graduates and the University.

Chapter activities vary by location and can include in-person events (like bowling and barbecues) and charitable endeavors (like holiday toy drives or adopting a highway). All chapters also enjoy an online presence for regular virtual connections.

Without the help of alumni chapter presidents, however, none of this would be possible. Volunteering for two-year terms, the presidents support events, other leaders and fellow members. As a result, they turn an alumni network into an alumni community.

Here, three alumni chapter presidents reveal what the role entails and what keeps them in the game.

→ **Learn more:** [phoenix.edu/alumni/join-network/chapters](https://phoenix.edu/alumni/join-network/chapters)



### Dr. Anthony Maye

Raleigh Chapter

**What is the best part about being an alumni chapter president?**

Being able to build a strong leadership team and bring local University of Phoenix alumni together to network, exchange information and have fun.

**What has been your most memorable alumni chapter event so far?**

Besides homecoming, the most memorable events have been the annual alumni cookouts from when I was the president of the Charlotte alumni chapter. Our leadership council grilled food, and we had a bounce house for the kids, music and games. Many alumni and their families showed up, and we all had a good time. I'm planning on doing the same event with the Raleigh alumni chapter in 2023.

**What is one piece of advice you'd offer your successor?**

I would tell them to stay engaged with the chapter and make sure they have a dedicated leadership council in order to successfully plan events that benefit the chapter as a whole. Also, I would tell them to be active in the community in order to be recognized as a positive organization within the Raleigh-Durham area.



### Dr. Greta Zeimetz

Dallas-Fort Worth Chapter

**What is the best part about being an alumni chapter president?**

Meeting new people. I have been able to meet our members and get to know some of my chapter board members. Without this volunteer role, I would have missed out on these relationships.

Being active in an alumni group is a fun way to meet other people in your area; and for individuals without management or leadership roles on their resumés, it's a great way to build new and marketable skills.

**What has been your most memorable alumni chapter event so far?**

COVID put a damper on our first year together as a new group. However, I would have to say that the homecoming event has been the most memorable so far. We had a good turnout and enjoyed playing an electronic golf game. The University was very generous to provide free food, drinks and golf for attendees. I think everyone was probably sore from swinging the club so much the next day. Our toy drive for the holiday season was also a success.

**What is one piece of advice you'd offer your successor?**

Even though people say they will help coordinate or participate, they may not follow through. This could happen for a variety of reasons, none of which I fault them for. You just have to be prepared to take more on, reach out more frequently and decide when you need to perhaps find new volunteers. It will take a lot more time and effort than you anticipate, but it is worth it. I believe that giving back to the community is important, and this is a great way to do that.



### J Dianne Tribble

Jacksonville Chapter

**What is the best part about being an alumni chapter president?**

Working with an amazing team of council members. We share chapter responsibilities, spend quality time together and share the vision of providing support and camaraderie to our alumni members.

**What has been your most memorable alumni chapter event so far?**

In my opinion, the most memorable event took place in January 2022. Our chapter members and family members went to the movies to see *King Richard*, a film based on the determination of Venus and Serena Williams' father to write his daughters into history. The movie was very inspiring and motivating.

Another key reason this event really stands out is because it marked the first time in two years we were able to physically come together as a chapter due to the pandemic.

**What is one piece of advice you'd offer your successor?**

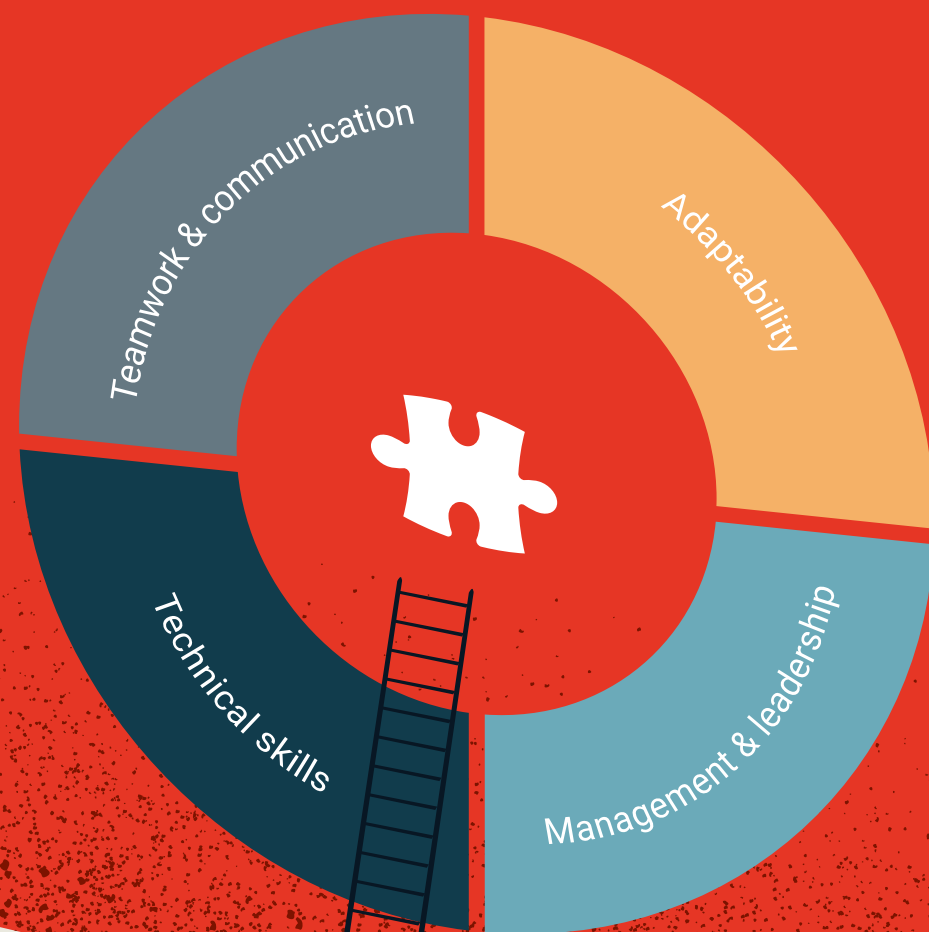
Lead the chapter with passion, and it won't feel like work. Check your motives. Make sure this is what you want to do. 🦋



# How to Develop Skills for the Future

By Elizabeth Exline

Once upon a time, it was enough to have a certain degree to be considered a qualified candidate.



Today, degrees are made even stronger by skills.



In 1999, **Laura Docter-Bennett** was working in customer service for a logistics and distribution company, and she was ready for her next opportunity. Human resources had always been an interest, but she lacked the necessary bachelor's degree to break into the field.

When her company had an HR generalist position open up, however, she took the plunge and applied, explaining that she was actively pursuing her bachelor's in management with a concentration in human resources.

This combination of on-the-job skills with the promise of her degree made her eligible for consideration. She ended up getting the job and launching a successful career in HR. But a lot has changed in the two decades since then. According to a 2022 *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article, "Skills-Based Hiring Is on the Rise," companies are increasingly moving away from degree requirements to skills-based hiring, especially in "middle-skills jobs" that require some postsecondary education but not a bachelor's degree.

This, the authors argue, is a necessary course correction following the "degree inflation" of the early 2000s when companies started requiring degrees for jobs that otherwise hadn't changed.

The walking back of degree requirements has happened in two waves: The first was between 2017 and 2019 when companies needed to fill IT and managerial roles; the second happened concurrently with the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted middle- to high-skill positions like nursing. This overall trend of resetting (and sometimes eliminating) degree requirements raises important questions. Specifically, are degrees still preferred? Will they be in the future?



## What Degrees Really Mean to Employers

The *HBR* article examined more than 51 million jobs between 2017 and 2020 to answer those questions. The field of IT proved to be a convenient case study. Not only does it experience high demand, the authors note, but there's a strong uniformity among IT roles even at different employers.

The results identified certain employers (Accenture, IBM) that consistently recruited non-degreed candidates for roles that, at other companies (Intel, Facebook, Microsoft), required bachelor's degrees.

“Employers used to use degree programs as a way to make assumptions about candidates' skill sets.”

How can a role require a bachelor's degree at one company but not at another? Part of the answer, the article's authors suggest, may have to do with professional soft skills. Indeed, the communication and time management learned in college lined up with the sort of soft skills those non-degreed job postings detailed in their requirements. "Employers used to use degree programs as a way to make assumptions about candidates' skill sets," explains Lisa Severy, a career advisor at University of Phoenix (UOPX).

"Many employers have come around to the idea that these assumptions may not have been the best way to source candidates. ... Basically, employers are getting better at articulating exactly what set of skills they need, and graduates need to be able to describe the skills they developed in school and in the workplace."



Skills and Degrees:  
A Happy Marriage?

UOPX responded early to this shift toward skills-based hiring. Designed to accommodate working adults, the University has always aligned its curriculum to real-world careers. But it recently took this concept to a new level with skills-tagging, which invites students to use a UOPX-designed dashboard to track skills they’ve learned.

The dashboard is important in a number of ways. Chief among these is that it informs students in real time of the skills they’ve mastered, so they can confidently convey that information to current and prospective employers.

“University of Phoenix has a rich history of meeting the gap between student and employer needs,” Severy explains. “Employers are no longer as concerned with degrees and degree levels but more the skills needed to succeed in a position. ... With so much activity and change in the job market right now, candidates who can quickly assess the needs of the job and articulate how they can meet those needs will be the most successful.”

Docter-Bennett concurs. “I think both the education and the skills are important, and I think that they create a balance.

“When you apply [to your work] what you’ve learned [in the classroom], you continue to build and develop skills.”

The other benefit to skills-based hiring? As both Severy and the *HBR* article note, opening up jobs to candidates with specific skill sets means you often get a bigger pool of candidates to choose from.

“I think both the education and the skills are important, and I think that they create a balance.”

Skills to Master

So, which skills are most in demand these days? That depends on your industry, of course, but there are some skills that pretty much every role requires. These include:

- 1. Teamwork and communication:** “We have very diverse workforces, and being able to work cohesively is important,” Docter-Bennett says.
- 2. Adaptability:** If COVID-19 taught us anything it’s that those who can handle ambiguity and change are those who thrive.
- 3. Technical skills:** From data analysis to knowing how to work with multiple platforms, tech continues to be king in the workforce.
- 4. Management and leadership:** “Generally none of us are taught how to do that,” Severy says. “Some are phenomenal at it. Others need some help. It’s a learned skill.”

“As you continue to grow and develop within your career ... you’re going to have to upskill to be competitive and to be effective in your role,” Docter-Bennett notes.

Sometimes that means a degree is necessary. Other times, a certificate or class might be in order.


Severy works with clients to determine when upskilling is necessary. Often, she says, she reverse-engineers the decision by asking clients to review job postings they’d like to apply for. Severy then instructs her clients to list the required skills of each posting. Soon enough, themes begin to appear.

“After we have a short list of [skills] still needed, we can research how to gain them through training, coursework, experience [or] certification,” she explains. “People tend to think ‘new degree’ right away, and certainly that can be effective. But there may be other ways to gain those skills. ... It’s best to be strategic about prioritizing gaps.” 🦋

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# How three alumni got their degrees **in their own time**

By Laurie Davies

What do a 51-year-old Boys & Girls Club CEO, a 63-year-old nurse and a 74-year-old MBA graduate have in common?

## A University of Phoenix degree.

Each started late in life and studied late into evenings. They all took laptops on vacations, they fought through not having the energy they once did, and one even battled a paralyzing fear of failure. But they all pushed through. Here are the inspiring stories of three recent University graduates who prove it's never too late to chase your dreams.

*Alumnus Todd Trout and his wife, Luz Trout, share a laugh in between activities at Boys & Girls Club.*

## Todd Trout

Bachelor of Science in Business, 2021

Todd Trout's University of Phoenix diploma hangs in a place of honor behind his desk, right next to his 1990s Tom Petty poster from the Fillmore. Not only does the diploma remind him that he can press through hard things — he earned his degree at age 50 — but he hopes it also inspires the kids he serves as CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Buena Park.

“In some ways, being a college student in midlife motivated me. Being older, it meant way more to me.”

Despite living near two major amusement parks in Southern California, some of the kids Trout serves have anything but carefree lives. “We ask our kids, ‘Where are you going to be in five years?’

“Sometimes it's heartbreaking and tragic. Some of them say, ‘I don't know, I might be dead.’ There's no hope,” he says.

He's trying to change that, describing the Boys & Girls Club as a wrecking ball in the community for good.

Trout started at the Boys & Girls Club 26 years ago as a team director and advanced to a program director. Eight years ago, he was named CEO. “Part of the contingency of my hiring was to finish my degree,” he says.

On one hand, he had already cut his teeth decades earlier, running a gym for inner-city LA youth and gangs. He knows youth development because it's his heartbeat and how he has spent his entire career. On the other hand, he has always pointed kids — his own and his Club kids — toward education.

“Here I was encouraging all the kids in my life to go to college and I was college-less,” he says.

Five years ago, he decided to fix that. Through his workplace, he successfully applied for a University of Phoenix scholarship and started his degree. “I would do a little bit of work here and a little bit of work there. I did homework on my lunches. I dove into my blind spots. And my academic counselor kept me grounded. He helped me find the confidence that I could do this.”

Running a \$2.3 million budget, serving 650 kids a day in an Orange County community that ranks high in gang arrests, leading a large staff, playing in a band, keeping up with Thursday date nights with his wife, and devoting nights and weekends to homework, Trout got it done.

In some ways, being a college student in midlife motivated him. “Being older, it meant way more to me,” he says.





Michelle Dellinger takes a study break at the library.

## Michelle Dellinger, RN

RN to BSN, 2021

An educator and pastor's wife who accompanied her husband on hospital visits for years, Michelle Dellinger would look at the IVs and monitors and think, "How does this all work? What is their diagnosis? How are they being cared for?"

As she got older, dreams of entering nursing felt foolish. After all, she had graduated in 1980 with a degree in education, and she'd spent years teaching junior high and high school students English, speech, choir and drama.

"Nursing is left brain, so I cried a lot in nursing school," she says, half joking and half not.

“ I have never regretted getting my degree. It doesn't matter how old you are. God leads you through so much to get to your desire sometimes. He may give it to you kind of late, but I don't regret it.”

But you read that right. After 22 years in education, Dellinger enrolled in nursing school at age 48. Today, she has worked as a nurse for 16 years. But even with her RN, she says there were certain leadership opportunities closed to her because she didn't have her Bachelor of Science in Nursing. That changed when, at age 63, she earned her RN to BSN degree from University of Phoenix.

"This degree was so much work. The clinicals were blood, sweat and tears for me. I cried over pharmacy questions, the biology of it, the science of it all," Dellinger recalls.

Today, she works as a head and neck surgery nurse at the downtown Franklin, Colorado, campus for Kaiser Permanente. She sees postsurgical patients who have had tonsillectomies, carcinoma treatment and other surgical procedures.

“ Teaching was my love, but nursing is my passion.”

"The realities of being a student later in life are you get tired. You have to prioritize your rest," she says. "I have never regretted getting my degree. It doesn't matter how old you are. God leads you through so much to get to your desire sometimes. He may give it to you kind of late, but I don't regret it."

Now 64, Dellinger says her BSN opens up more possibilities within nursing. And her personal satisfaction with her accomplishment is high.

"Teaching was my love, but nursing is my passion," she says.



Esther Akbar

Master of Business Administration, 2021

“Elderly people get pigeonholed into these generalizations about who we are, what we can do, what we can’t do,” observes Esther Akbar. “American society, I think, does not respect elders, but we have to respect ourselves, and we have to break out of these generalizations and create second-chance opportunities for ourselves.”

Akbar speaks from experience and not just in the context of her MBA, which she earned as a septuagenarian. Self-respect and pushing boundaries are two concepts that have stood her in good stead her entire life.

Akbar was born in the Philippines to a Filipina mother and an African American father. She immigrated to the U.S. when her mother married her stepfather, also an African American military service member. The family settled in San Francisco in the 1950s but moved to Denver in the ’60s, where they encountered racism in the housing market (they bought their house through a Caucasian friend) and at school where, Akbar says, “students and staff were unhappy with our presence.”

Still, Akbar persevered. Her father sat with her and her three siblings each night after school, teaching them both practicalities like self-defense so they wouldn’t get bullied and philosophical mores that helped them feel less alone in their journey through school. All this, Akbar says, underscored the emphasis her parents placed on education.

“Elderly people get pigeonholed into these generalizations about who we are, what we can do, what we can’t do.”

“My stepfather only had a GED,” she says. “My mother was an orphan and did not attend school. ... Despite their lack of education, they filled our home with books, took us to museums on the weekends and set a tone for learning. ... My stepfather used to say, ‘It’s better to have an education and not need it than to need it and not have it!’”

Akbar took that lesson to heart. She completed her undergraduate degree in social work when she was 23 and embarked on a rewarding career in higher education. But as she contemplated earning a graduate degree, life got in the way.

She had three unsuccessful marriages and spent much of her adulthood raising four children as a single mother. When her children seemed on track to become, as she puts it, “juvenile delinquents,” she stepped away from her career to focus on them.

“They’re wonderful people,” she says with a laugh. “They all turned out well, but I had to stay home and watch them. I said, ‘No, we’re not having that. ... I worked hard. [I’m] not having bad children.’”

One look from Akbar, and you might be scared straight too. She is poised and circumspect, her snowy hair cut close to her head and her bearing both unhurried and thoughtful. It’s easy to see how disappointing her would not be an option.

But Akbar held herself to the same standards. She came to University of Phoenix in the 1990s to start her MBA program, because she was thirsty for knowledge.

“I wanted the challenge of learning something I had no experience in,” she explains. “I realized everything is a business and the MBA would help me to bridge a variety of disciplines.”

It took her a few tries over the course of 30 years. There were setbacks aplenty, ranging from tragic family loss to personal health struggles to trouble with technology. But Akbar wasn’t in a hurry. With her trademark sense of self-respect and perseverance, Akbar completed her MBA in 2021.

She plans on using it too. She’s building out plans to offer business development courses, a book and retreats for women in business. Another goal? To help the youth in her community with “adulting.”

Just as she has her whole adult life, she juggles these plans with family commitments. Akbar regularly looks after two of her five great-grandchildren and relishes the opportunity to help raise them. But she is equally committed to her career goals.

“I have an aunt who is 100 years old,” she says. “When I was working on the MBA, she said, ‘Well, you make sure you use that degree. Don’t just put it up on the shelf somewhere. You use it.’ And she’s right, of course. I still have a chance to use it. I still have a lot to offer.” 🌸

“I wanted the challenge of learning something I had no experience in.”

Esther Akbar reflects on her journey so far and where she has yet to go.

Respect yourself

# Leading With Resilience and Understanding

By Sharla Hooper

Research has the power to transform, if not the world, then our understanding of it. At University of Phoenix, Research Centers in the College of Doctoral Studies emphasize the possibilities for change by facilitating research that is designed to improve workplaces and communities.

Exploring real-world challenges and trends in leadership, workplace inclusion and diversity, and education and technology, these centers serve as a pathway to shaping and understanding the world we operate in.

## Resilient Leadership

In the Center for Leadership Studies and Organizational Research, Rodney Luster, PhD, chair, considers how leadership can build resilience in the face of disruptions or disasters.

“The world of healthcare continuously practices for a variety of crisis-scale situations, and so one of our current areas of focus is to consider practices borrowed from preventive programming measures in healthcare as well as the discipline of psychology,” Luster shares.

With this in mind, Luster developed a visual tool he calls the “Stress Arc,” which is designed to foster mindfulness in the event of a crisis. The Stress Arc is based on five pivotal psychological strengths — analysis, efficacy, resilience, locus of control and adaptability — and it can be used to empower leaders as well as employees.

Consider, for example, the pandemic. Using the Stress Arc, a leader might explore the potential impact of the event (analysis) and determine what was necessary to prepare (efficacy). Then the leader might empower employees to make choices about how they could best complete their work while mitigating exposure (resilience). From there, a leader could offer feedback and training (locus of control) and implement new standards, like a work-at-home policy or teaching coping skills (adaptability).

By leveraging the Stress Arc and training employees on how to maintain situational awareness, leaders can foster enhanced resilience and build greater confidence about their ability to respond to major and minor disruptions to business.

## Leading Generations

In the Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Research, Sandra Sessoms-Penny, EdD, and Joy Taylor, EdD, wanted to explore how millennials have shaped the workplace over the past decade. Specifically, how managers’ perceptions have evolved related to the emerging needs, roles, values, responsibilities and commitments of millennials in the multigenerational workplace and, perhaps more importantly, how managers can effectively recognize and use millennial contributions to enhance the organizational culture and infrastructure.

“We found a level of willingness from many of these managers to adapt their approach to connecting the generations and unifying the organization’s focus on growth and sustainability,” shares Kimberly Underwood, PhD, who serves as chair for the Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Research and who oversaw the symposium of this research.

“This may only be established by getting to know their employees and developing work relationships that are authentic.”

The effort of managers to connect and unify multiple generations of workers contributes to an inclusive environment. “Transformational leaders must intentionally take the initiative to provide opportunities for growth to employees by first determining how their needs align with the organization’s needs,” Underwood points out.

As Underwood and her colleagues follow the trajectory and growth of millennial workers, they are witnessing how the generation is both pursuing and growing into leadership roles. What workforce changes will occur under their leadership? This team will be ready to share more insights.

## Leading in the Virtual Workplace

The pandemic fundamentally changed the ways we work and learn. While the consequences of that shift are as numerous as they are far-reaching, the Center for Educational and Instructional Technology Research (CEITR) at UOPX is tackling one head-on: the need to develop new skills to effectively work, collaborate, teach and learn in an online environment.

The answer? According to CEITR’s chair, Mansureh Kebritchi, PhD, skills for successful remote work can be grouped into four categories: personal, people, organizational and strategic. Also known as soft skills, personal skills like discipline, enthusiasm, self-motivation or self-efficacy, and trustworthiness can be especially helpful in building interpersonal relationships.

People skills, including effective communication, are at the core of most work environments, but especially remote work. Empathy is one of the key components of effective communication.

“We found a level of willingness from many of these managers to adapt their approach to connecting the generations and unifying the organization’s focus on growth and sustainability.”

**A**  
Analysis of  
Impact Agent

**E**  
Efficacy

**R**  
Resilience

**L**  
Locus  
of Control

**A**  
Adaptability



As Kebritchi explains, “Empathy supports effective online teamwork as remote team members. [It also] encourages inclusivity and enhances leadership, accountability and connection.”

Furthermore, organizational skills such as time management and adaptability help remote workers organize and accomplish tasks, while strategic skills like critical thinking and problem-solving are vital for managing complex decisions and generating creative solutions. (Strategic skills also offer a means for planning ahead.)

“It may be that not all of these skills are part of an individual worker’s skill set. In that case, employers need to set up their workers and companies for a successful virtual workplace by providing ongoing opportunities to learn and obtain those skills,” Kebritchi says.

For example, instructors and trainers can assist remote workers and learners by leveraging strategies to enhance learning and engagement. They might use digital tools to create online content with learner choice, live discussion and video elements.

“Employers need to set up their workers and companies for a successful virtual workplace by providing ongoing opportunities to learn and obtain those skills.”

On the student side of things, remote workers need soft-skill training using multiple formats that include active learning, such as guest speakers, role-playing, training in real-life situations and practice in high-pressure simulations. Individuals working remotely can take the initiative to develop those skills, either through what their employers are offering or through networks such as LinkedIn®.

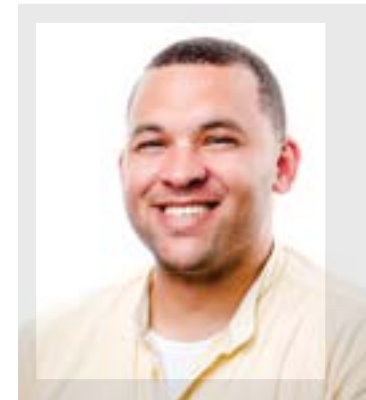
In the end, finding the best path forward in a constantly changing world doesn’t have to be as daunting as it seems if you have research to help lead the way. 🦋



# Alumni Why

By Elizabeth Exline

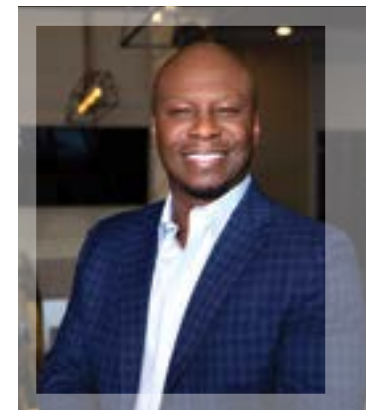
University of Phoenix alumni come from all walks of life to pursue a variety of career pathways — and UOPX is at the intersection of them all. Here, three alumni share their favorite University moments.



**Antonio Dates**

MS in Accounting (2017)

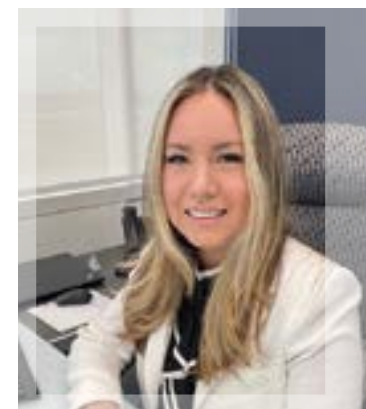
“I’m sure everyone says this, but my favorite moment was receiving my degree in the mail. Three years after enrolling, I came home to see my degree sitting on the porch! It was the highlight of my time and all the hard work!”



**Patrick Horton**

BSIT (2008), MBA (2009) and DM (2018)

“My academic journey at UOPX was amazing. Because of the University’s e-learning platform, I was able to experience living in locations around the world while obtaining my graduate degrees. UOPX allowed me to work on my schedule, which created an amazing work-life balance for me as a working professional.”



**Giselle Poveda**

PhD in Higher Education Administration (2018)

“I had many favorite moments during my time at UOPX: my fieldwork dissertation among the poorest of the poor; my [ongoing friendship] with my awesome dissertation chair, whom I love, respect and admire; and presenting my dissertation results to my committee. The moment when the committee called back and greeted me, ‘Congratulations, Dr. Poveda!’ is a memory that will live forever in my heart.”

The Master of Science in Accounting (MSA) and PhD program have been retired at University of Phoenix. The University offers a Bachelor of Science in Accounting and a variety of doctoral degree programs.

# Shaping the Future

By Sharla Hooper

Instructors are to education what bread is to peanut butter and jelly. They may not get all the glory, but they are instrumental to the success of the final product.

Here, we take a moment to do what should be done every day: recognize instructors at University of Phoenix who help define the academic experience. We'd like to introduce you to two of them.

**Raelene Brooks,  
PhD, RN**

## From Small-Town Roots to Big-Picture Dreams

Earlier this year, University of Phoenix announced the appointment of Raelene Brooks, PhD, RN, as the dean of the College of Nursing.

A registered nurse for more than 25 years, Brooks has practiced extensively in the areas of intensive care, trauma and critical care in the University of California Health System.

She traces her nursing career back to her family experiences as a child. She grew up in Monterey, California, near where her father was stationed with the U.S. Navy and where her large, close-knit family has history.

"It is still home to me," Brooks explains. "A majority of my family is still there — my aunt [even] opened one of the first Asian markets there."

Then there's the place itself: a small town with a strong sense of community. "There is nothing like Monterey air," she says. "It is so rich with salt and sea. It is a small town where everybody knew everybody, which I loved."

Brooks first became aware of nursing as a profession from an aunt who worked as a nursing assistant for many years. "We spent a lot of time with our aunts and uncles," Brooks recalls.

Brooks first became aware of nursing as a profession from an aunt who worked as a nursing assistant for many years. "We spent a lot of time with our aunts and uncles," Brooks recalls. "I was old enough to understand what she did, and I admired her [empathy] and how she helped people."

**"I had an affinity for helping the new students, and I always loved teaching them."**

Brooks followed her example. She earned her Certified Nursing Assistant license through the American Red Cross when she was just 17 and began working with elderly patients in a nursing home. After nursing school, she transitioned to trauma and critical care nursing. Her first night as a critical care nurse is a story Brooks still shares with her students.

"It's such a difficult but unavoidable part of nursing," Brooks says. "We touch patients during the most vulnerable times of their lives, from the first breath to the last. I lost my very first patient, who died of endocarditis related to food poisoning and aspiration at 21 years of age. I remember her so clearly, and the grief I felt."

Brooks worked in trauma and critical care for eight years. Along the way, she had opportunities to teach new nursing students and medical residents.

"My colleagues began to send me students, new graduate hires and newly hired traveling nurses for orientation when we were on the same shift," Brooks says. "I had an affinity for helping the new students, and I always loved teaching them."

Brooks completed a master's in nursing education in 2000 and then, in 2018, a doctorate in nursing science. Her love for direct patient care never left her, though. For years, she juggled a teaching schedule with one or two shifts a week caring for patients.



Today, it’s been more than five years since she practiced direct bedside care. While she misses it, she has found new purpose in her role as dean of the College of Nursing at University of Phoenix. Brooks is responsible for the college’s curriculum, resources and all other academic components, including faculty approval and oversight, student satisfaction and retention, academic policy and standards, and program evaluation.

Her responsibilities only underscore her commitment to making the College of Nursing an inclusive environment where diverse learners consider equity in their patients’ healthcare experiences. Her father served 30 years in the military when segregation was still practiced, and that experience impacted Brooks dramatically.

“This heavily influenced my need to integrate the values of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in nursing education,” she says. “As the dean, I aspire to recognize and welcome the differences in the knowledge and experiences of individuals. This creates conditions for people to thrive in an environment where high standards and deep devotion to the work we do is a requirement.”

The University of Phoenix culture provided a supportive environment for incorporating these changes. The College of Nursing recently and formally adopted diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) values as defined by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN); they have been woven into the college’s values and handbook.

“There continues to be healthcare inequality, and I am invested in preparing students to be innovative, inclusive and creative decision-makers,” Brooks shares. “Innovation, adaptation and transformation, in tandem with the traditional framework in nursing education, will help to prepare our graduates to be contributors to the solution and meet the healthcare challenges facing our nation today and in the future.”

Stephanie Benoit-Kurtz,  
MBA

# An Agent of Change in Cybersecurity



Born and raised in Las Vegas,  
Stephanie Benoit-Kurtz, MBA,  
knows firsthand what it means  
to weather the ups and downs  
of the economy.

Her once-small town of 150,000 has grown to over 2.5 million in the last 30 years. Along the way, she determined she wanted a career that could provide stability no matter the state of the economy. The solution? Information technology.

Today, Benoit-Kurtz is a lead cybersecurity faculty member at University of Phoenix and a principal security consultant at the IT services and solutions company Trace3, where she works with companies across the country to create strategies that improve security postures. She is also a frequent contributor to media and thought leadership on the subject of cybersecurity.

Benoit-Kurtz realized she had a penchant for cybersecurity challenges while serving as the manager of an academic computing company working on a project for joint-use facilities: Community college students would use the facilities at night, and high school students would use the lab during the day. Benoit-Kurtz and her team needed to merge two very different networks with different policies — and do so securely.

Although she discovered her affinity for cybersecurity early in her career, it was not without challenges. At 25 and as a single mother of a 2-year-old, Benoit-Kurtz was already a manager in IT operations, but organizational leadership informed her that, without a degree, she would not be promoted again.

“I had 150 credits, no degree and no pathway as a working mom,” she reflects. She turned to University of Phoenix, where she enrolled in a business degree program and found the flexibility she needed to be a working parent and student.

She immediately experienced the value of a degree program translating to improved and applicable skills, and she successfully completed her degree program. “In order to lead others and make change, you must have grit and the desire to get stuff done.”

“ I had 150 credits, no degree and no pathway as a working mom.”

Working in a male-dominated field, she became convinced she needed to do more to stand out, so she went back to school for an MBA.

“Being an agent of change is not an easy path, and as a woman in a male-dominated field, it is often met with resistance and frustration,” she says. Case in point: When a colleague told Benoit-Kurtz “to put down the broom,” she proudly hung a broom over her office door.

The challenges have made it clear to Benoit-Kurtz that mentorship is critical for the success of the next generation of cybersecurity professionals, and that is why she has chosen to teach as a practitioner faculty.

“There have been times when the seat at the table seems a bit daunting,” Benoit-Kurtz says. “Making sure that I actively share those stories and encourage diverse company to grab that seat at the table is so important. It is a diverse workforce in the future that will fill the skills gap in security.”

“ In order to lead others and make change, you must have grit and the desire to get stuff done.”

Benoit-Kurtz is currently working on her doctorate in information technology with an emphasis in cybersecurity and data assurance. As part of her passion for mentoring and teaching, she felt it was important to take the next step. “Lifelong learning,” she says, “is all part of the journey.” 🌱





PHOENIX

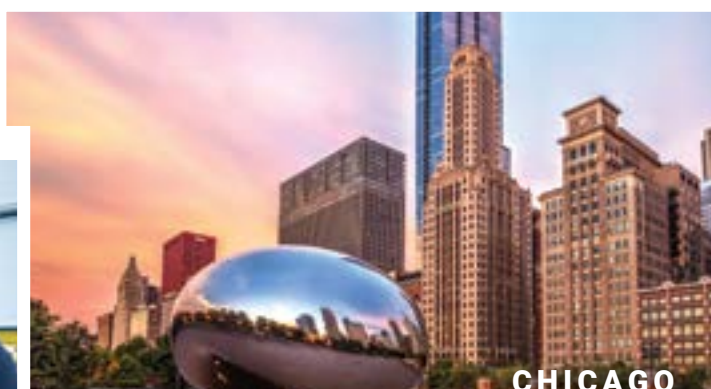
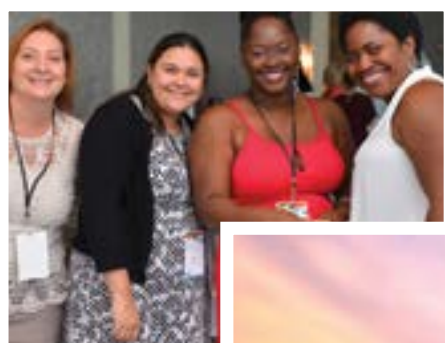
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local places



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RALEIGH



CHICAGO



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