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National

Adults Are Flocking to College That Paved Way for Flexibility

By TAMAR LEWIN

In September, Jennifer Hunt of Brown County, Ind., was awarded a bachelor's degree from Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey without ever taking a Thomas Edison course. She was one of about 300 of last year's 3,200 graduates who managed to patch together their degree requirements with a mix of credits — from other institutions, standardized exams, online courses, workplace or military training programs and portfolio assessments.

Years ago, fresh out of high school, Ms. Hunt had finished enough advanced work to enter the University of Texas at Austin with sophomore standing. But after a year, homesick, she returned to Virginia. Then she married and eventually moved to Indiana. She had 10 children, whom she home-schools, and worked in her husband's business.

About a year ago, at 39, she resolved to complete a degree. In a kind of a higher-education sprint, she took a number of college equivalency exams, earning 54 credits in 14 weeks.

"I tried to do an exam a week at the University of Indianapolis test center," where the exams could be proctored, she said. "Each test cost about \$80."

Ms. Hunt estimated that her degree in business administration, plus a simultaneous associate degree in applied science, had cost her \$5,300, including books and fees. There are almost as many routes to a Thomas Edison degree as there are students. In a way, that is the whole point of the college, a fully accredited, largely online public institution in Trenton founded in 1972 to provide a flexible way for adults to further their education.

"We don't care how or where the student learned, whether it was from spending three years in a monastery," said George A. Pruitt, the college's president, "as long as that learning is documented by some reliable assessment technique."

"Learning takes place continuously throughout our lives," he said. "If you're



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Pilar Mercedes Foy of New Jersey earned a Thomas Edison State College degree mainly through classes at her job.

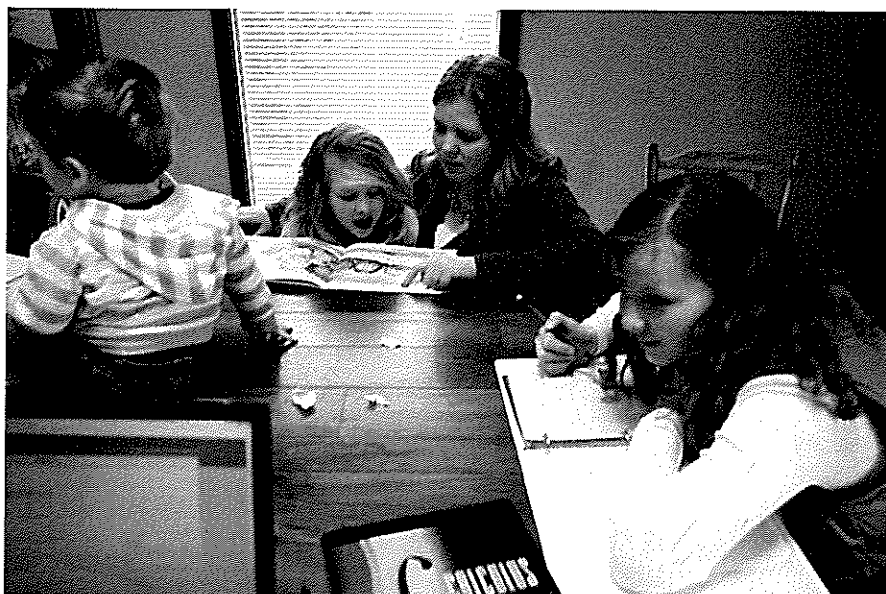
a success in the insurance industry, and you're in the million-dollar round table, what difference does it make if you learned your skills at Prudential or at Wharton?"

At a time when student debt has passed \$1 trillion, such institutions seem to have, at the very least, impeccable timing. Thomas Edison, New Jersey's second-largest public college, and two like-minded institutions — Charter Oak State College in Connecticut and the private, nonprofit Excelsior College in New York — are all growing. Thomas Edison's graduating class last fall was a third bigger than the class five years earlier. And the idea of measuring students' competency, not classroom hours, has become the cornerstone of newer institutions like Western

Governors University in Utah.

At Thomas Edison and the other such colleges, almost all students are over 21, many are in the military, and few have taken a direct path to higher education.

Pilar Mercedes Foy, 31, a Thomas Edison graduate whose parents did not go to college, said after she got an entry-level job at PSEG, the New Jersey energy company, she realized that she would need a degree to advance. She earned the bulk of her credits through heavily subsidized evening classes offered at work, supplemented by classes at Union County College and 12 credits from the CLEP Spanish exam. For her, earning a degree without taking on a penny of student debt was enough of a milestone that she invited her husband, parents, siblings, in-laws



AARON P. BERNSTEIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jennifer Hunt of Indiana took equivalency exams.

and nieces to the September graduation ceremony.

Thirty years ago, when Dr. Pruitt became president, the Thomas Edison approach was controversial. Some academics, in particular, were skeptical, he said, almost believing that "if we didn't teach it to you, you couldn't have learned it."

Results have quieted most naysayers, Dr. Pruitt said. For example, Thomas Edison graduates had the highest pass rate on the exam for certified public accountants in New Jersey, in the latest national accounting-boards report. Still, the approach raises real questions about the meaning of a college degree.

"If I'm giving you a degree, I'm vouching for you, testifying to your competence," said Clifford Adelman, a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington. "With these nomad students in higher educa-

tion, whose students are they? There are questions of ownership and ethical responsibility."

Most Thomas Edison students arrive with some credits, at times earned many years earlier. Others get credits by submitting a portfolio of their work or passing standardized exams like the College Level Examination Program, administered by the College Board. Many complete online college courses from Thomas Edison or "open courseware" sources like the Saylor Foundation. Many bring transcripts from the American Council on Education's credit recommendation program, certifying their nontraditional programs.

Arthur C. Brooks, a former economics professor at Syracuse who heads the American Enterprise Institute, earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Thomas Edison in 1994, at age 30, after a

decade as a musician. He took correspondence courses, he said, "at the cheapest places I could find."

Mr. Brooks believes he did the same homework, wrote the same papers and took the same tests as on-campus students at other colleges, without meeting a single professor. To get his degree, he had to prove mastery of economics in a two-hour telephone conversation with a professor at Pace University.

"It was like a field exam," said Mr. Brooks, now 48. "He asked about Adam Smith, John Keynes, supply and demand, macro and micro — everything an economics major at any university would be expected to know."

David Esterson, 45, of Whittier, Calif., started taking college classes while in high school, attended the University of Washington for a year, was a photographer in Los Angeles, then started a music business. About three years ago, when his nephews began talking about college, Mr. Esterson decided he should complete his degree.

He took online courses at the University of Minnesota and the University of Phoenix before trying a couple of California community colleges and an acupuncture school. He finally earned a bachelor's degree in liberal studies from Thomas Edison in September.

"It sounded like a scam, but the fact that it was a state school, and accredited, made it more real," Mr. Esterson said.

And it has been real, he said: "Nobody I contacted about graduate programs seemed to look down on the Edison degree, and I got into every grad school I applied to."

Now enrolled in two graduate programs — an online master's in leadership at Northeastern and a dual-degree executive M.B.A. program from Cornell University and Queen's University in Canada — Mr. Esterson is a booster for his alma mater. "I've never been there, but I did buy a sweatshirt," he said.