

# UW-Stout: Mom and son earn bachelor's degrees at same time

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Twenty-three years after leaving college to become a mom, Mara Harter shared a commencement stage with her first-born son, Jacob, as both graduated with their bachelor's degrees on Dec. 18 from University of Wisconsin-Stout.

"I am so excited," Mara, of Sauk City, said. "Jacob's and my journey has been a unique one. I had him during my fourth year of my first attempt at my undergraduate degree at UW-Eau Claire. I wholeheartedly took a break from college to be a full-time stay-at-home mom.

"To finally receive my bachelor's degree alongside him brings the last 23 years full circle. I am so proud to have navigated the challenges of college financial aid, registering, midterms and finals with him and having him walk me through so many things. I am so proud of him and cannot believe how fortunate I am to graduate right next to him."

Mara earned her degree in [special education](#) with a certification from kindergarten to age 21. Jacob graduated with a degree in [industrial design](#).

"It's really cool to have had the chance to graduate with my Mom," Jacob, 23, said. "Everyone graduates with their closest friends, roommates and sometimes siblings but getting to graduate with my Mom is super cool."



Jacob Harter celebrates with his mother Mara after they graduated from UW-Stout. / UW-Stout photo

Despite graduating with different majors, the two were given the opportunity to walk together at commencement.

Mara decided three years ago to return to college after being a stay-at-home mom for 21 years and raising five children, including Maggie, 21, Colden, 18, Gabe, 16,

and Sleigh, 13.

She decided to return after taking a full-time job at the middle school in Sauk Prairie where her husband, Ted, is the principal. She also picked up part-time work as a server at a local brewery.

She worked 60 hours a week and focused on her college education.

“I had to let my kids become a little more self-sufficient than I thought they could be. I allowed myself to cry, to become frustrated, but also to lean on others, use the resources I had to help and mostly allowed myself to recognize I was trying to do something amazing. My children were watching every move I was making and told me a million times how proud they were of me. My husband was so supportive of me every step of the way and wiped my tears and cheered me on.”

She chose UW-Stout because it was on the top of the list of schools that offered Wisconsin licensure and because her son was enrolled.

### **Taking semester off proved to be ‘great choice’**

Jacob started at UW-Stout in 2016 and chose the university because industrial design seemed like a good fit for him. He feels the university has prepared him for the workforce.

“Stout did a good job at preparing students for what they need to do after graduating,” Jacob said. “Having the ability to talk to your professors one on one helped make useful connections and gave the opportunity to get advice you might not get in class.”

Jacob took a semester off during his college career and is glad he returned to finish his degree.



Chancellor Katherine Frank hands Mara and Jacob Harter their diplomas during a commencement ceremony. / UW-Stout photo

“Returning to school after my semester off was a great choice,” Jacob said. “I met a lot more people and got closer to the friends I already had there. Finishing out my degree at a different school would have been a lot more challenging too as not everything would have transferred over. I think I wasn’t so sure of what I wanted to do when I started freshman year, and it took me that semester off to figure out that Stout was where I wanted to be.”

While at UW-Stout, Jacob completed an internship with JXB Performance, an aftermarket automotive company that designs and sells multiple different parts for a variety of performance cars. He helped create signs, apparel, an interactive parts display for use at car shows and a vinyl wrap design for the owner’s race car used to showcase parts.

[Career Services](#) oversees internships and co-op programs at UW-Stout.

### **Study abroad ‘life-changing experience’**

As part of her UW-Stout experience, Mara went to Cozumel, Mexico, with the [study](#)

[abroad](#) program.

“I had never been away more than a few days, did not speak Spanish and had never been out of the country,” she said. “I was able to teach in this beautiful area, learn about their culture and I made the conscious decision to say yes to every opportunity I had down there. I have since been there three more times, once solo, once with my husband and once with my youngest daughter,” she said.

“I formed a deep connection with the island,” she said. “I keep traveling with different people to share with them what I love about it.”

“I have made lifelong friends who live there. It was the cliché ‘life-changing experience’ and was something I never would have done if I had not gone back to school. It has been a strong force behind the person I am today. I am looking forward to my fifth trip in February. I formed a deep connection with the island. I keep traveling with different people to share with them what I love about it.”

Mara is very proud that she took the chance to return and finish her degree. “I have been able to identify with the challenges kids these days face with school, work, family, extracurricular activities and balancing them all. That I have finished is literally the most difficult thing I could have done,” she said.

“I feel prepared to help support my children and students in their academic journeys. I understand the challenges of being both an on-campus post-secondary student, the challenges of a distance learner and the needs of students in college. I am confident what I have learned will continue to enhance the relationships that I forge with students and help them to succeed,” she said.

UW-Stout offers online and on-campus [special education](#) programs.

The industrial design program provides a specialized education and is accredited by the [National Association for Schools of Art and Design](#).

Student success is one of the [FOCUS2030 strategic plan](#) goals for UW-Stout.