Amie Davie returned to college after being laid off with the help of UNI-CUE’s Educational Opportunity Center. Photographed Friday, Dec. 8, 2017, in Waterloo, Iowa.

MATTHEW PUTNEY, COURIER PHOTO EDITOR

WATERLOO — Two years ago, Amie Davie found herself unemployed at the holidays.

After working six years at Ocwen’s Waterloo mortgage office operation, the Fairbank woman learned she would be among 300 people laid off from the financial services holding company the day before Thanksgiving.

“We were kind of called into a meeting and ultimately told we were going to be let go,” Davie recalled. The company had multiple resources available to help
the workers sign up for unemployment benefits and figure out their next steps. “Which is great, but it’s a lot of information to process at the same time.”

Fortunately, she met Nickole Dillard, assistant director of the Educational Opportunity Center during the meeting. The federally funded EOC, based at the University of Northern Iowa Center for Urban Education in downtown Waterloo, helps nontraditional students overcome barriers to education. Among the services are assisting people with re-enrolling in college to complete a degree.

Davie had attended Hawkeye Community College full time from 2006 to 2008 before getting her job at GMAC Mortgage, the predecessor business to Ocwen. In 2010, she took part-time night classes to complete an associate’s degree that would fulfill general education requirements and transfer to a four-year institution.

“I knew at some time I wanted to go back and get my bachelor’s,” she said. “It just wasn’t feasible working full time.”

There were also questions about how she would fund more education. She and her husband, Justin, a Wapsie Valley High School teacher and coach, have five children ages 5 to 16 and felt they had little room in their budget for added expense.

Davie was in the U.S. Air Force stationed at Ramstein Air Base in Germany for 3-1/2 years, ending in 2003. When she enrolled at Hawkeye, military benefits through the G.I. Bill covered those tuition costs.

Now, Davie learned, she and the other laid-off workers would be eligible to access a number of services, including training for a new career, through the federal Trade Adjustment Act of 2011. Those benefits have covered her full-time tuition and costs for books. But before getting them, she had to fill out a big package of information.
That’s where Dillard came in.

“I can honestly say if it wasn’t for Nickole helping me with that package, I wouldn’t be back in school,” said Davie, who noted Dillard also helped with applications for financial aid and scholarships.

“The EOC has definitely been one of the main reasons I went back to school,” she added. “I think they’re an important asset to the community for people who need that help.”

UNI-CUE’s program serves people 19 and older who live in Black Hawk, Bremer, Buchanan, Butler, Chickasaw and Tama counties as one of two Educational Opportunity Centers in Iowa.

Staff at the center can assist with enrolling in high school equivalency degree programs or post secondary institutions. Career planning, filling out college and financial aid applications, finding scholarships, getting out of default, transferring to a new college or re-enrolling in college are among the services provided.

“Two-thirds of the people that we are to serve should be first-generation (college students) or low-income,” said Kathy Martin, director of UNI-CUE’s center. The remaining people can have parents with a college degree and not meet the income guidelines.

Davie was intimidated by the whole process — from applying for the benefits to applying at UNI, the university where she eventually chose to enroll.

But Dillard’s help “really made the situation a whole lot less intimidating.”

She had a similar set of fears about being a nontraditional college student. Those melted away when Davie started her first business administration classes in January 2016.
“Everything I thought it was going to be was wrong,” she said, noting that at 35 she doesn’t feel different from other students. “The campus is really accepting. The harder part is just being away from my kids, long hours studying.”

There are financial stresses, since Davie didn’t get a job when she started at UNI, and a greater child care burden for her husband. However, the past two years have gone well enough that she hopes to continue her education after graduating in May.

Davie plans on going to Hawkeye and completing the registered nursing program she originally started in 2006 before taking her education another direction. Having the business administration degree in addition will allow her to eventually transition into nursing administration.