Richard Zhao says he embraces lifelong learning. “I am where I am because I never stopped learning,” but adds traditional education wasn’t the best fit for him. He struggled in high school and only took a few community college classes, admittedly lacking in motivation at the time. Instead, he entered the workforce and was doing well until his ambitions came to a halt because he didn’t have a four-year degree.

After Zhao was passed over for a promotion, he decided to get serious about his education and make sure he was never caught lacking again. He enrolled at Sacramento State, where he saw many other immigrant students who were making it and getting ahead. “It made me confident that I could succeed in this environment,” said Zhao, whose family immigrated from China when he was 14.

Zhao earned his bachelor’s degree in management information systems and became the first college graduate in his family. Driven by this accomplishment, he became strategic about his career in information technology (IT) at Apple. He returned to Sacramento State to concentrate on professional development.

“I wanted to learn more than the technical side of the industry,” he said. “I wanted to learn the business end too in order to make more informed decisions,” said Zhao, who took courses in project management and Lean Six Sigma Green Belt at the College of Continuing Education.

Zhao learned from certified instructors who “live and breathe the trade,” he said. “They’re bringing real-life cases and encouraging the rest of the classroom to share their experiences.” He put his new skills to use on the job and improved the flow of his complex IT projects.

Zhao earned a master’s degree in business administration and continued with his professional development. His latest class prepared him for a big exam to earn an internationally recognized designation as a project management professional (PMP).

Zhao passed the test and with his industry-valued certification earned his latest promotion and raise at Apple as an engineering project manager. “Reading a book isn’t enough. Without the course, I would have struggled and might not have been able to pass the test.”