

Older students cause new academic trend

By DONNA NELESON
For the Emerald

Changes in social and economic conditions in today's society are producing a new trend in higher education — an influx of older students.

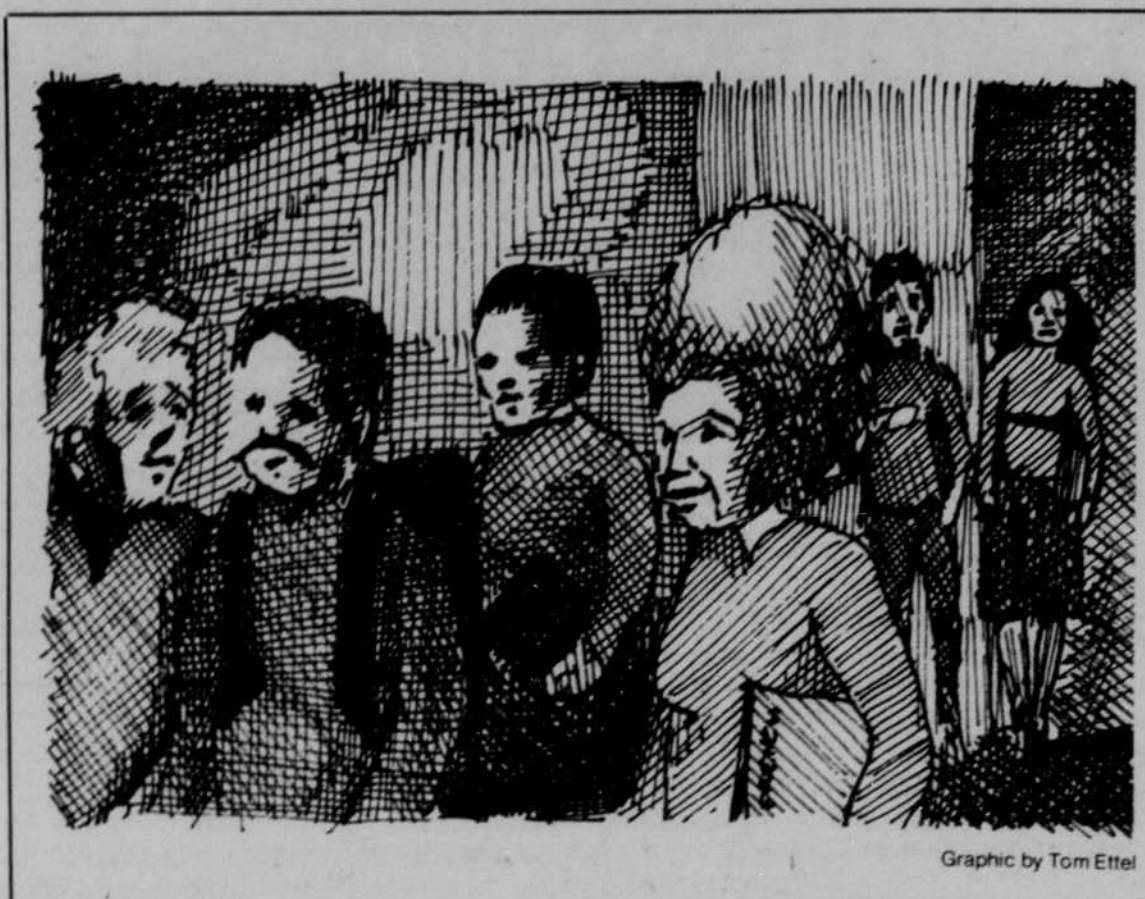
University Pres. William Boyd says the trend will be "the most important development in education over the next quarter of a century."

"It will break a lot of traditional patterns," he says. "We are so accustomed to dealing with the 18-to-22 age block that we will have to learn to be responsive to the somewhat different needs and objectives of older students."

"Non-traditional" students returning to school after homemaking or occupational pursuits are having a major effect on University curriculum and enrollment, says Jim Bernau, executive director of the Oregon Student Lobby.

"With the non-traditional students, there's an increasing demand for higher quality education and a greater emphasis on skills that are marketable," Bernau says. "Interest is moving away from liberal arts programs and into more specialized, technical areas."

Because the non-traditional learner is typically a part-time student, this will be a factor in the financial considerations of the University, Bernau says. "It will increase the demands for institutional ser-



Graphic by Tom Ettel

vices while reducing the money received from the state based on Full Time Equivalency (15 credit hours)," he adds.

Another issue universities face is the greater demand for child-care facilities due to an increase in the number of single parents coming back to school,

Bernau says.

Bernau cites social changes and an "explosion" in federal and state financial aid as the main reasons why older students return to school. Bernau says he's working to remove financial aid bias toward older students.

Bernau says the current thinking is "Why not change the focus of programs giving aid to graduating high school seniors to include financially dependant and scholastically achieving non-traditional student as well?"

University enrollment statistics show that 15 percent of undergraduates are over 25. In 1976 the figure was 13 percent. Currently, 39 percent of the students in graduate programs are over 30 — a 9 percent increase in three years.

State enrollment trends, calculated by the Oregon Education Coordinating Commission, show "the number of students 28 years or older more than doubled from 1969 to 1976 and is expected to continue increasing."

The University is offering more courses in a wider time range to give people the maximum opportunity to pursue career and homemaking along with traditional educational goals, Boyd says.

The University also offers the Community Education Program for part-time, non-degree students. Because the program doesn't require formal admission procedure, older students can more easily fit classes into their schedules.

A new CEP class is offered this term for non-traditional learners. Called "Returning to University Studies for Lifelong Learners," the course is aimed at helping adult students learn to use University resources.

'Grandma': real world good preparation for school

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When Mildred Wray returned to school after 35 years as a housewife, she was the only grandmother in a Physical Education class of freshmen and sophomores.

"They were a little surprised to see someone my age in there, but I pretty much kept up with them," she says. "I often kidded them about having a grandmother in the class."

Like Wray, older students returning to school face a variety of new experiences, challenges, and problems in their transition back into the University community.

One of Wray's initial fears was competition with younger students. But she says she found that other-life experiences helped her feel at ease in the classroom.

"You can't live a long time without learning how to handle all types of situations," she says. "I watched my daughters go through school, and I figured if they could do it, I should have even an easier time since I've been around longer."

Clare Reeves, an English and

psychology major, says that in her return to school, she discovered that some instructors have prejudices against older learners.

"At first they felt that returning students lacked the continuity and study habits needed to do well," she says. "But later, one of my instructors noticed that after an adjustment period, the returning learners usually became the best students."

Reeves says older students take school more seriously than younger learners.

"We work harder and organize ourselves better because we have less time to devote to school due to other responsibilities," she says.

Another student, Jan Holland, found child-care obligations an added pressure when she returned to the University.

"How do you explain to a young child what a final exam is?" she asks. "It's as much of an adjustment for my daughter as it is for me, but my primary concern is that she doesn't feel neglected."

These students, like many others, have turned to campus organizations to seek relief from the academic, social and per-

sonal pressure of returning to school.

"I remember feeling hesitant about asking for simple directions," says Holland. "In class, I hardly said a word. It took a year before I felt comfortable in a college environment," she adds. "If I joined a group like this right from the start, it would have made the adjustment so much easier."

One group, Women in Transition, helps students to "fit in" by providing support groups, social hours, workshops, and referral information for academic and personal concerns.

A number of factors complicate an older woman's return to school, says Julie Koerner, a member of the transition group. Some of the problems include divorce, widowhood, single parenthood, the lack of family understanding and appreciation, and the need to create a new self image.

A returning student herself, Koerner joined the group when it was formed in 1977. Group members often handle crisis situations, she says.

"Sometimes someone comes in who is at a crisis point," she

says. "From having similar experiences myself, I know it's a time to drop everything and listen. Just showing interest in another person's problems will often carry them through," she adds.

The University's Lifelong Learning Services is another program designed to welcome returning students.

According to coordinator Jane DiGidio, the organization helps students explore careers, clarify goals, look into opportunities for credit by examination, and match abilities with an academic program. It also helps students register and find facul-

ty advisors.

The program's coordinators also plan events such as the "Older-than-average Students' Information Faire." Held at the beginning of fall term, the faire helped to orient about 250 returning students this year.

DiGidio says the older learners' main concern is the question of what they'll do after graduation.

"Older students are more concerned than 18-year-olds with having their major lead to a career," she says. "They have an intensity toward making the most out of the University experience."

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