

BREAKING TRADITION

College: The Choice Of A New, Older Generation

In the evenings, they hand crayons and paper to Liv, and the rest of the family sits down together to do homework.

BY SHARON LA ROWE

PHOTO BY BRENT A. SMITH, UTAH STATE U.
'94-'95 U. PHOTO CONTEST WINNER

EXPECTING TO SEE A LOT OF FRESH young faces in your classes this year? Well, we've got news for you — the face of America's college student is changing. It's growing older, with more wrinkles and responsibilities than the traditional 18- to 21-year-old has.

Twenty-nine-year-old J.D. Burke should know. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 40 percent of today's students are over the age of 24. Burke is one of them, and his second time back, the U. of Wyoming has lost its charm. This time he's all business.

Getting serious

"I came to college right out of [high] school, like everybody else," he says. "Drank a lot of beer and chased a lot of girls. I just did what everybody else was doing, except the homework." His grades freshman year were so low that he was put on probation and eventually suspended.

After losing funding for college, then sowing his oats in the Navy, Burke is back to hitting the books as an electrical engineering major — with a lot more riding on his studies than just finding a fulfilling career. He has a wife and two (soon to be three) children to think about.

Katie Flynn, 52, of the U. of Utah, was in the same boat. She cheered at the graduations of her husband and daughter, then decided it was her turn. But before she could earn her anthropology degree, Flynn had serious hurdles to clear — like learning how to be a student again. "I hadn't taken a test in 30 years," she says.

Approximately one-third of the students attending the U. of Utah qualify as nontraditional, Flynn says. As former president of the Non-Traditional Student Organization, she made sure there were programs that addressed issues such as peer mentoring and what to do when studying and attention-craving 2-year-olds divide students' time.

Flynn, who sometimes took classes with her 30-year-old son, feels privileged to have had so much family support. Other nontraditional students aren't so lucky, she says.

Without a Mom-and-Dad scholarship, many older students — often alone, sometimes divorced and supporting children — have to tap other sources for tuition money and basic living expenses.

For the Burkes, both full-time students at the U. of Wyoming, other sources include Uncle Sam. Sure, J.D.'s GI bill helps out, but what really keeps them afloat is the government-provided food and

child care for their 4-year-old, Liv. Their third-grader, Simon, goes to school, which frees up Mom and Dad to take classes.

In the evenings, they hand crayons and paper to Liv, and the rest of the family sits down together to do homework.

It may be hard to survive on welfare now, but Burke sees it as the government's investment in his family's future.

"It is absolutely imperative that you get your degree," Burke says. "[Otherwise], you'll be an absolute drain on society, and you'll be behind the eight ball."

The statistics are on his side. The National Center for Education Statistics says that college-educated men earn a yearly average of \$17,000 more than those with only a high school education. College-educated women earn \$12,500 more.

Changing priorities

Thirty-year-old John Tyler can sympathize. He and his wife, Susan, are expecting their first baby, which makes his return to college even more necessary.

"It puts pressure on me to get good grades and get through school," says Tyler, who attends Austin Community College in Texas. "Making an 'A' in class was important to me [before]. Now I'm more interested in learning the material so I remember it after the class."

Because many draw an older clientele, community colleges often have more programs to ease nontraditional students into the workload.

"ACC really helps nontraditional students get acclimated," Tyler says. He plans to earn his associate's degree there and then transfer to a larger, four-year university nearby.

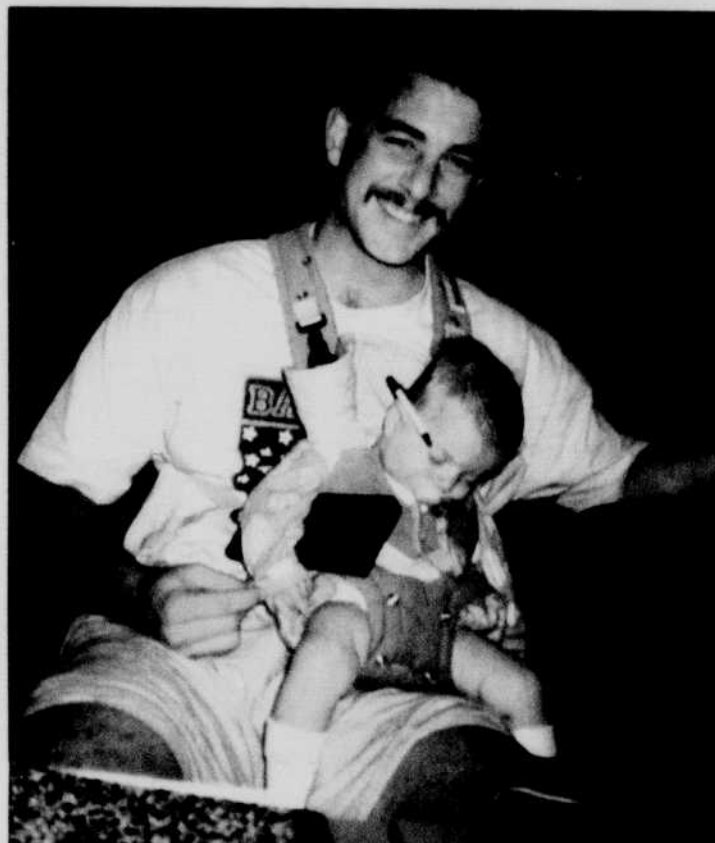
Lisa Gallico's story may very well be every student's worst nightmare. Sixteen years and five colleges after first entering the world of higher education, she has finally found the right school and program at James Madison U. in Virginia.

The twist is that the 34-year-old grad student is still living in undergraduate housing because the university doesn't set aside housing specifically for grad students.

For both Gallico and her sophomore roommate, Debra Jacob, this has been a trying semester. Gallico is frustrated that Jacob likes to watch TV and listen to the radio while she's trying to study. Jacob feels she must ask for permission to do those things.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm living with my mother," Jacob says.

"I feel like I am her mother sometimes,"



Nontraditional students balance a lot more than a full course load.

responds Gallico. But in the end, mothering isn't her goal; she just wants a quiet place to study.

"That's all she does," complains Jacob, who just wants to return from classes to dorm-sweet-home.

Despite her dorm room dilemma, Gallico says she deals with problems similar to those of most students — choosing a major and then getting the classes she needs.

But Gallico handles the social scene a little differently from traditional students. "I just want to center on the classes," she says. "Then maybe later I can meet more people."

Payoff time

Even though she's had her share of setbacks, Gallico expects to earn her master's in dietetics by fall and say goodbye to college once and for all.

"Lord have mercy, I've been in school half my life," she says. "People ask me why I'm still doing this. I've been in school this long. I may as well finish."

Tyler has a different reason for his return. "When you get to be 25 or 30 and you look around and everybody [your age] has their degrees or their own home, you want to settle down," he says. "We're going back to get some stability in our lives."

Whether you're under the legal drinking age or old enough to take calculus with your kid, college classrooms are a common ground. Soon there may be no such thing as a "nontraditional" student.

Sharon LaRowe is a "traditional" senior at James Madison U.