

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS FLOCK TO CCE

by Herbert P. Weiss, NHA

High tuition costs forcing high school students to delay college and an economic downturn that has forced companies to lay off thousands of employees are filling up America's classrooms with older, non-traditional students.

Education experts estimate that the older than average student will make up more than 50 percent of the college population in the 1990s. Older students represent a new growth market for colleges and universities when the pool of younger students is shrinking, they say.

The student population attending the University of Rhode Island's (URI) College of Continuing Education reflects this growing trend, says Carolyn Cole, Director of Admissions and Advisement. According to Cole, most of the students fall between ages 25 and 45. More than two thirds of the student population is female, about 40 years old.

Older students are juggling a lot of responsibility from raising families to working full-time jobs," Cole says. Because of this, it takes a student an average of seven years to complete their degree, she notes.

Cole notes that URI's Providence Campus does unusually well in catering to the special needs of the older student population. "We offer special tutorial assistance, a writing center, a library and a computer lab on site," she says, all services to help the nontraditional student to successfully get through school.

Searching for a second career

Edward J. Boutin, 40, a Cranston resident who retired from the Navy after 20 years of service,

enrolled at URI's Providence campus to retool his skills. Two years earlier, Boutin wanted to return to school to get ready for another career.

"I wanted to enter a new field that would be compatible with my personality, something I would enjoy doing," Boutin remembered.

Boutin, a senior majoring in Human Development, says he is a little bit more at ease with going to classes with people close to his own age. "Instructors treat me as an adult instead of just a student out of high school," he adds.

Most college textbooks aren't written for older students, but for younger ones, Boutin quips. However, most of his instructors do a good job in drawing their own mid-life experiences and that of their students to use as examples to reinforce textbook concepts, he notes.

Once Boutin get his bachelors degree in May, he plans to seek a graduate degree in social work.

Seniors flocking to college

Anita M. Simmons, 65, of Warwick, was one of 320,000 Americans over age 50 who enrolled in college classes in 1989.

"I came to school because it was a life long goal to get a college degree," Simmons says. "I came from a very well educated family and I didn't like being the least educated one," she noted.

Simmons raised eight children in a 34 year marriage before divorcing and returning to work. Now employed as a Retired Senior Volunteer Coordinator at the Apponaug West Bay Community Action Center, Simmons believes a college degree is necessary to advance in a career. "Once you have a degree it places you

on a different plane at your job," she says.

Rhode Island's policy of waiving tuition fees for seniors age 60 enabled Simmons to seek a bachelors degree from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies Program.

Being an older student didn't keep Simmons from finishing her course work -- she plans to graduate in May. Reflecting on her four years at URI, the grandmother says that being an older student makes it harder to perform well on timed examinations and to take class notes, especially if the instructor is talking fast. But being older allows an individual to skip two or three steps to complete projects, she says.

Intergeneration Benefits

According to Cole, it is a win-win situation when you mix younger and older students. "Older students seem to get a rejuvenation from being around younger people while younger students get a sense of acceptance and stability and support that they do not find with their age peers," she says.

"There is a good interplay of the generations here," she adds.

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