



The older student—variety of reasons

By Therese Forsman

"Some people think of it as basket weaving or a community college yoga course," said Quentin Gessner, referring to adult education. Gessner is dean of the College of Continuing Studies.

Older adults have legitimate educational needs, he said. Both older students and educational institutions are becoming aware of the non-traditional student's need to be educated.

Since non-traditional education programs are open to all students, and the returning student cannot be defined by age, no statistics are available to indicate the number of adult or returning students receiving continuing education.

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Enrollment is up in all areas of non-traditional education, said Harold Allen, information officer for UNL's Extension Division.

This estimate follows national trends. Authorities say that one of every four Americans undertook some form of adult education in the past year.

W.C. Meierhenry, chairman of UNL's adult and continuing education dept., said older adults are coming back to school for a variety of reasons. Some are working on bachelor's or master's degrees, he said. Others want to develop skills which will make them more proficient in their work. Others simply want to improve their general knowledge. For some, Meierhenry noted, returning to school provides a worthwhile social outlet.

He said that coming back to school is not easy for many older students. They find themselves facing situations similar to those they left behind of 15 or 20 years ago.

"Adults who have had unsuccessful classroom experiences in the past have some less than positive feelings about placing themselves back in the classroom," Meierhenry pointed out.

"Many adults believe coming back to school is an admission that they have failed," he said.

Also, older students have a fear of competing with younger students, said Irene Johnson, UNL counselor for non-traditional students. Many have doubts about their ability to handle college material, she said.

Society and education are youth-oriented, said Meierhenry. The older students can feel alienated on traditional college campuses.

Special instruction methods are needed to teach the older, non-traditional student, Meierhenry said. That student should be much more involved in planning his own courses, he said. The teacher needs to make the instruction pertinent.

For the same reason, more discussion is needed when teaching adults, Meierhenry said.

Most older students are interested in satisfying some sort of immediate goal, he said, rather than in storing up knowledge in hopes of using it someday.

Besides needing special instruction methods, many older students face other problems when they come back to school, he said.

Adults with families to support often must limit their attendance to evening classes. Many have little time for classes and those who work all day are tired when they attend class.

Transportation to the campus at night is a problem for some, especially women, Meierhenry noted.

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The cost of returning to school also is a hurdle for many with families to support, Johnson said. This is especially true for the single parent.

Meierhenry said many students complain that university offices are not accessible to the student enrolled in night school.

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