

Non-traditional students return to increase opportunities, enjoy

By Joan Morrison

"There's a guy in my class who looks just like my dad," said the young freshman to her friend, loudly enough to be overheard.

"Wouldn't it be weird to be going to school with your dad?"

People used to think the average non-traditional student was an 84-year-old grandmother sitting in the front of class wearing a pair of tennis shoes. Today, UNL's classification of non-traditional students includes parents or heads of households who are 18 or older and students who are 25 or older.

This year more than 5,000, or 20 percent, of the students at UNL are classified as non-traditionals, according to figures from the university's Institutional Research and Planning Office. Most have returned to school to improve their career opportunities.

"I worked for 12 years before coming back to school," said Greg Miller, 28. "I knew if I had a degree in engineering, I'd go further toward the top; I'd be more satisfied with myself."

He said non-traditional students are under different pressures than the traditional (18 to 24-year-old) student.

"The older you are, the less you want to go into debt... for a student who is 22, taking out a loan is not nearly as threatening as it is to someone who's 45," he said.

Different attitudes

Non-traditional students soon discover that some of their 'traditional' classmates have different attitudes.

"I see 20-year-olds that are here just to party," said Susan Perk Rohan, a mother and sociology major. "Or they're looking for a husband. They're here because daddy is footing the bill. I'm here because I want an education."

Perk Rohan, who has been on the board of the Non-Traditional Students Association for a year, said she knows most traditional students are here for an education.

"You can spot them right away," she said. "They show responsibility in class, they ask good questions."

Older students probably do talk a little more though, she said.

"We talk easier because we've just been around people more," she said. "I've had professors ask me to come sit in front of class so I could get a conversation going. They've even thanked me for discussions in class." (laughs) "I've also been called a troublemaker by a professor because I question more."

Many non-traditional students were brought up in the '60s and find today's campus politics hopelessly docile.

Elizabeth Rhodes, a 29-year-old electrical engineering student who calls herself an "aging hippie"

said "During the Vietnam and post-Vietnam period, a lot more people were making decisions about values. Nowadays, it's nothing but a media blitz. A lot of kids are here for bucks — material values."

But values change with the times, said 33-year-old Diane Caporaso, a senior in university studies and co-founder of the Non-Traditional Students Association.

"I don't see my values any differently," she said. "I've changed too. I think that before, everyone was involved with sit-ins. Now they're involved with jobs."

Experiences astound traditional

A few non-traditionals said they found that their '60s experiences astound a traditional student. They tell how they started talking about "the good old days" of radicalism and demonstrations at the John Lennon memorial service and somebody came up with the nostalgic idea of picketing the administration building.

"The kids were just watching us with their mouths open," said Mary Jarzynka, a senior in geology and engineering. "The issues just aren't there now."

But respect for the experience of older students is, Jarzynka said.

Ro Mundy, who is studying consumer affairs, said younger students treat her just like any other student but sometimes come to her for advice.

Who knows? Going to school with a parent just might be fun. Certainly many non-traditional students are enjoying themselves. As one traditional student told Ruth Harper, college and adult counselor, Division of Continuing Studies, "I've always wondered why my mother went back to school and now I know why — she's just having a good time."

Association started with table, sign

The Non-Traditional Students Association was founded three years ago by Diane Caporaso, a senior university studies major, and Irene Johnson, adult counselor for the Division of Continuing Studies, now retired.

Caporaso said she and Johnson put advertisements in the Daily Nebraskan to invite older students to meet in the Harvest Room in the Nebraska Union on Friday afternoons.

"Irene and I put a sign on a big table and sat there," she said. "I can't believe now we did that. But everytime we'd see someone who was an older student wander by we'd say 'Hi, we're older students,' and start talking to them. That's how it got started."

NTSA now has 160 members and has representatives in the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska on the Health Board and the Nebraska State Students Association.

NTSA meets every Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. in a room in the Nebraska Union (the location is posted on the bulletin board) for a carry-in lunch and meeting. They also schedule speakers and social events.

This week Frank Hallgren, director of the Career Planning and Placement office will speak to the members about searching for jobs. The meeting is open to all students, but especially to non-traditionals, Caporaso said.

Laboratory...

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There are many interest areas inside the lab such as books, housekeeping and music and the children also have free periods of play.

"The lab instructors make an effort not to teach what the children will learn in school, but prepare them for school," Sulek said.

Besides the Ruth Staples Laboratory, the university also has an off-campus nursery school program at the Salvation Army Community Center.

"These two centers handle around 140 to 150 children, ages 6 weeks to 6 years," Sulek said. The staff/child ratio is sufficient to plan many extra creative activities for the children, she said.

The lab has many children that are handicapped and some that come from different ethnic and cultural areas, she said.

"The lab is nationally known," Sulek said, "and serves as a model for others."

Visitors are welcome to tour the lab.

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