

# Career student avoids humdrum life

By Alison Paine  
for The Free Press

Brian Cook gazes out a window at hundreds of other students streaming to and from classes on the University of Western Ontario campus.

For some it is a social and educational experience in a new community. For others it is a pathway to a job.

For Brian it is a little different. He has three degrees and is working on his fourth. He is 35. Going to school has become a lifestyle. Brian is a professional student.

"The term 'professional student' is humorous," he says, "My friends and I have used it for years as a joke. It's a term of self-mockery."

"Other students look down on professional students," he says, but still, "many of them wish they could have done it my way. This is a way not to become a drag or to settle. It's a way not to take responsibility for yourself."

UWO registrar David Chambers supports students like Cook, who are continuing their education and broadening their knowledge.

"Perpetual students, like professors who take courses outside their disciplines, or those who are upgrading, or maybe who are in school just for the interest of it — that is to be valued and encouraged."

Cook has been in university on and off since 1966, when he began his undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Saskatchewan. After getting his bachelor of arts degree he went to England, where he obtained a master's degree at the London School of Economics.

Cook married three years ago. His wife, Chris, got a teaching position at UWO's nursing school and Brian decided to do another master's degree at Western, this time in journalism.

This year he completed that de-

## INTERESTING PEOPLE IN INTERESTING JOBS

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gree. Now he is starting work on a PhD in political science.

"I would not be so presumptuous as to call myself an academic," he says, describing his university career. "I'm somebody who likes studying and reading, and who didn't want to get a job."

Cook does have a job, but like most students, professional or otherwise, he works at it only in the summer. He is in the naval reserve.

Last May, on Canada's west coast, he was Lt.-Cdr. Brian Arthur Cook, Canadian Forces (R), B.A., M.Sc. (economics), M.A., and a

captain in command of his first ship, the 450-ton minesweeper *Porte Quebec*. Being in the armed forces enables him to combine his two favorite pastimes — travelling and studying.

He looks more like an officer than a student. He is tall, with erect posture and a greying, neatly trimmed beard.

The money he makes during the summer months, supplemented by scholarships he has won, have supported his winter sojourns at university. He says his university tuition costs about \$1,000 a year.

Cook's reasons for staying in

school range from the flippant to the serious.

"All this flopping around is just until I write the *Great Canadian Novel*," he says lightly.

Reactions from his friends and those of his parents, he says, are a mixture of envy and disapproval.

"Many of my friends are restless now. They're leaving marriages and careers, and returning to school. I just never had the first career. Now we'll have all evened out."

Cook's father wanted a university education but demands of the post-war years forced him into a job he did not enjoy. For this reason, he says, his father accepts his continuing education.

Professional students are difficult to find at Western — surprisingly, since most graduate students claim to know one and all students have an opinion about the breed.

Belle Puri, a 27-year-old graduate student, agrees that professional students are afraid of taking on responsibilities.

"The ones I know are afraid of getting old, and think that being in school will keep them young," she said. She added thoughtfully, "They're almost flower child leftovers."

Cook says he may eventually be forced to get a job, but he says it with tongue in cheek. When he does leave school he hopes to write, either as a reporter or in political research.

In discussing his goals, the serious side of his personality emerges, the thinking man.

"I'm really seeking to prove something to myself — to prove I can write both fiction and plays. A way to avoid sitting at the typewriter and actually doing it is to go to school."

But if you try to pin him down on his plans after this degree, he brushes off the question.

"I'm not even thinking that far ahead."

## PROFILE OF A PROFESSIONAL STUDENT

**Categories:** The common perception of a professional student is a jolly sort of perpetual academic layabout — the college equivalent of the 45-year-old, California-beach lifeguard.

But the ones interviewed at the University of Western Ontario generally seem to be working toward a goal, upgrading marks to get into professional schools such as medicine or law.

One special category, however, is the senior citizen student who has retired from a formal career and pursues the academic life with vigor. Maurice Jones, 69, fits this mould and studying has become his career. He has two degrees in history from Western, and is working on a third.

And then there is the once-upon-a-time professional student. He used to go to school years ago, but somehow never broke away from the safe confines of university life. Now we're closer to that aging lifeguard.

One such student is widely known by only by his first name. At one time, but no longer, he took enough course work to qualify for the label "student."

Everyone who has been at Western for any length of time seems to know of him, but no one knows anything specific.

Turning down much comment, he said vaguely, "I am an artist, and you are trying to put me into a box."



Morris Lamont of The Free Press

Brian Cook: Many hours at the library