Career student avoids humdrum life

By Allison 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 25. 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-indulgence.

"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 drug 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 extra 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 1968, 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 UW O's first year school and Brian decided to do another master's degree at Western, this time in Journalism.

This year he completed that degree. Now he is starting work on a PhD in political science.

"I would not be so preoccupied as to call myself an academic," he says, describing his university career, "I'm somebody who likes studying and reading, 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 (B), 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 grey, neatly trimmed beard.

The money he makes during the summer months, supplemented by scholarships he has won, has 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 floating around is just until I write the Great Canadian Novel," he says lightly.

"I don't want my friends and those of his parents, he says, are a mixture of envy and disapproval.

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

Cook's father wanted an 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.

Seela Purl, 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. I am 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."