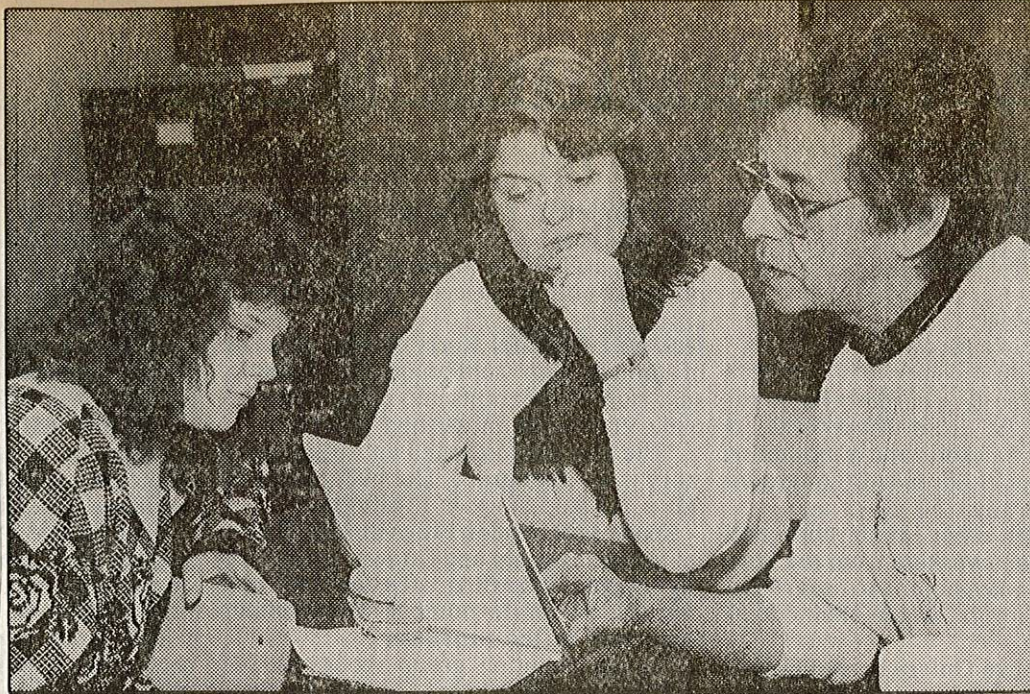


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Elin Paxton/The London Free Press

Mature students Elaine Bond, 21, Shannon Rosborough, 42, and Bill Elm, 50, look over a study assignment at London's Fanshawe College. Rosborough and Elm are in their final year of a social service workers program. Bond is studying office administration.

Lifelong learning likely

In the future, adults may need to learn new skills and new ways of thinking and may switch careers several times in their lives.

By Alan Bass
The London Free Press

Bill Elm is 50 and had been a hairstylist all his working life. He got fed up and went back to school.

Shannon Rosborough is 42. She used to work in a factory. Then she contracted an illness that forced her to quit. She went back to school, too.

Elaine Bond is 21. She graduated from high school a few years ago and worked briefly in Windsor as an office clerk. Then she moved with her husband to London and found she didn't have the skills to get another job. She also went back to school.

Elm, Rosborough and Bond — students at Fanshawe College — represent what some experts say will be the future of the Canadian education system — the "lifelong learner" or "mature student."

CHANGES EXPECTED: With the population aging and technology constantly changing, adults in the future will need to learn new skills and new ways of thinking and may even have to switch careers at several points in their working lives, says University of Western Ontario continuing education counsellor Sandy Reid.

For a growing number of adults, that future is already here.

At Fanshawe College, which has declared

today Mature Student Day, about a third of all post-secondary students fall into that category, says college counsellor Frank Green.

The reasons for returning to school vary widely. Some do it by choice, others are forced to by illness or loss of a job. But whatever the reason, going back to school is not easy.

CASH CRUNCH: Usually it requires great financial sacrifice. Some mature students can get student grants and loans, but the most even a student with children can get is \$5,500 a year.

Rosborough, who is studying to be a social service worker, says her annual income has dropped by at least \$15,000, even though she cashed in retirement savings to help pay her way. Elm, who's getting help from a program for native students, says he gets about \$800 a month to pay all his expenses.

Adjusting to the school environment is also hard, especially when many students are so much younger.

"Some of them think I need a walker," Elm says with a chuckle.

MARKS A SURPRISE: Ironically, the biggest fear among adult students — that they're too stupid to flourish in school — is usually the least of their problems.

"I was surprised at the kind of marks I was getting," says Rosborough. "It's almost a feeling of disbelief."

Despite the practical difficulties, Elm, Rosborough and Bond all say that going back to school is one of the best things they've ever done.

When it comes to learning, Elm says, "it's never too late."