

THE CHANGING CAMPUS



Boris Minkevich/The London Free Press

When Grade 9 drop-out Bill Huitema decided to pursue a university education, he joined a growing number of adults who are giving a new look to Canadian campuses.

BILL HUITEMA is the voice of a new generation — a generation of older students.

The 42-year-old, who left high school in Grade 9, is renegotiating his mortgage and taking a hefty termination package from his former employer, Lafarge Canada. This summer, he's back to school full-time at the University of Western Ontario with a view to becoming a teacher.

With jobs as a laborer and production supervisor behind him, he's also a veteran of part-time studies, in which he has maintained an A-average.

Today, he helps counsel the tide of older, adult learners — some of them graduating this week and next — who are gradually changing the look of Canadian campuses.

It's not quite a revolution, but data on university enrolment shows a clear trend of increasing participation in post-secondary education by students who fall outside the traditional 18-to-22-year-old set that still accounts for the bulk of undergraduates. Many of the new breed are women.

The need to serve this growing group and respond to

the forces — primarily economic — that are bringing them to campus, is challenging some of the much-cherished assumptions universities have made about themselves in the past.

From 1978 to 1992, the rate of growth of students older than 25 was twice the rate for students 18 to 22 years old. The number of students older than 25 grew from 72,635 to 136,015 in Canadian universities in that period.

"One rarely hears the term 'non-traditional student' with regards to adult students any more," says Tom Guinsburg, dean of part-time and continuing education at the University of Western Ontario.

"They are now part of the recent tradition and, for the foreseeable future, they will be part of that, and there is no way the universities will be able to turn their backs on that."

But these learners come with their own needs, for re-training to deal with the real-life vagaries of the job market, for example.

As convocation ceremonies continue today and next week at the University of Western Ontario, some changes are evident: Today's students are more likely to have both greying hair and experience in the working world. They're also more likely to be women than men.

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WEEKEND
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See **CHANGING CAMPUS** page **A4** ▶

THEY'RE ALSO THERE for a different type of learning experience than that expected by younger students, and for a curriculum that takes account of their experiences.

"The response in universities (to the new demands) has been uneven," says Western education professor Rebecca Coulter. "I suspect that most adult students would say that the universities have been very slow to respond to their needs, to recognize that their lives are different from 18-to-20-year-olds that live in residences."

Huitema, for instance, remembers how awkward he felt when he first returned to a campus crowded with 18-year-olds. "My first class had 325 freshman-aged students in it. I thought, my god, what am I doing here? I didn't know how to act at university."

More mature students, in fact, turn to the community college system than universities in Ontario. (Federal and provincial governments pump retraining dollars almost exclusively into college programs.)

Colleges are receiving an unprecedented number of applicants this year. Of the 125,000 people seeking 70,000 to 75,000 places, about 50,000 are mature students or students who have already graduated from high school, says the Ontario College Application Service in Guelph.

To date 30,000 mature students — about the same number as last year — have applied to Ontario universities. Continuing uncertainty about the economy means programs oriented toward the practical — science, architecture, social work and agriculture, for example — are showing the strongest growth.

"They feel that if they are going to pay for three or four years at a university, they want to get a good solid degree that they feel will get them a job," says Greg Marcotte, director of the Ontario University Application Centre in Guelph.

Guinsburg identifies three main parts of the "new constituency" of adult learners:

□ The largest segment is adult women, returning to school to complete or pursue degrees.

□ People who entered a profession when university education wasn't required, who now find a degree would help their careers. Police, nurses and some teachers fall into this category.

□ The economic refugees: laid-off, downsized, forced out or scared they will be, this group is returning to university to make a new beginning or as insurance in uncertain times. "Certain jobs are disappearing . . . it's becoming more and more apparent that people are going to change careers during their lifetime, some quite significantly," says Western education professor David Radcliffe.

At the heart of the trend is a new way of looking at education, as a necessarily continuous process, rather than a single event that will sustain a person for a lifetime, says Radcliffe.

It's members of this new constituency who are forcing universities to change the way they do business.

Western got the jump on most schools, becoming one of the first to create a faculty of part-time and continuing education in 1977 to serve the needs of mature students. The faculty offers general interest, non-degree courses, as well as degree courses toward a bachelor's degree.

The faculty has grown by leaps and bounds. Part-time degree registrants have increased 40 per cent. In 1977, the faculty had about 250 students registered in simple correspondence courses. It now has 2,200 in a variety of programs ranging from correspondence to an interactive computer format which links students in a "class" across Southwestern Ontario. The non-degree courses have grown three-fold, with more than 7,000 students enrolled last year.

Universities have always resisted the notion they are mere degree factories, doling out skills to prepare another generation to enter the economy. Making the schools more consumer-oriented — a skill community colleges have long since recognized — grates against the traditional notion of university.

"I don't think the two visions are that far apart," says Guinsburg. "I think it's a healthy tension. It's wrong to believe that programs are immutable and should not change, but also wrong to think that programs should be reeds in the wind and bend to every short cross-current that emerges."

Universities, humbled by government cutbacks and sensitive to the mood of grumpy taxpayers, see the writing on the wall.

They're doing things unthinkable 10 years ago. The faculty has sought the views of focus groups about their programs. They've been working directly with employment centre officials to seek ways of helping victims of the recession. One result is that the university is opening up any empty seats in computer courses to employment centre clients at a nominal fee.

Increasingly, Guinsburg's staff has been working with corporations that are cutting staff, working educational opportunities into severance programs, trying to ease the fallout of downsizing. They've also been working with professionals in the immigrant community, seeking ways to use the rich and varied skills that are being wasted in Canada because of problems getting professional accreditation here.

Universities recognize they've got to make a better case to governments about their role in retraining. The federal government only funds training seats in community colleges, a long-time bugbear for universities and one that has taken on increasing significance as other sources of government funding dry up.

The challenge is to sell a liberal arts education as a legitimate form of retraining, an idea both provincial and federal governments appear to be warming to.

"While it's a different kind of training, it's still training and there is no reason to exclude universities from training dollars . . . I think we didn't do a good job of explaining it in the past," says Sally Brown, vice-president external for the Association of Universities

There's no turning back the clock for universities. With an aging population the 25-and-older crowd will take on increasing significance.

"We're moving into the direction of recognizing that we can't do the same old thing in the same group of people that don't exist in the same numbers and we can't turn our back on these people who are coming in in larger numbers," says Guinsburg.

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freshman-aged students in it. I thought, my god, what am I doing here? — mature student Bill Huitema