

Those first-day-of-school jitters Sep 1984

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Maybe it's because my father never learned to read that I turned into such a reverse snob. He was proof, though, that degrees are more useful in measuring temperature than in determining intelligence.

I'm also not a timid person. You can't make your living asking people about the way they vote or make love, if they believe in God or why they beat their wives, and remain shy.

That was pretty much my attitude recently as I went to the University of Western Ontario to enrol for my first credit course. It seemed simple enough from what the woman on the telephone said. Although classes would start in a week, I could still get in if I simply dropped by Western and applied.

The admitting office was easy to find. A form was handed me and I sat down to fill in the blanks.

The waiting area was filled with students, most of whom seemed to be transferring from other universities, with the exception of a woman seated across from me who was probably someone's mother. Something about her said she knew a lot about skinned knees and school lunches. She was definitely someone's wife and she was obviously delighted to be in this

waiting room.

She chatted to a man who was waiting with his student daughter, saying that after a 20-year absence she had decided to go back to school on a part-time basis.

But whatever confidence she had built in the outside world in those two decades disintegrated when a Western staff member came from behind the counter and asked this woman for her application form.

The trembling that began in her fingers spread to her voice as she apologized for not having the form handy. Watching her I felt worldly and vaguely superior. It was a feeling that would pass very quickly.

Despite the cordial nature of the staff, there is something formidable and intimidating about universities that seeps in and undermines normally capable people so that simple campus hallways turn into mazes, and phalanxes of frosh appear as menacing as foreign armies. The only ones who appear immune are those under 21 and faculty.

The ease it took to get admitted only gave me a false sense of security. A form showing proof of admittance, a student card and an appointment card to come back and register the next day provided

little protection for the bureaucratic gauntlet to follow.

There was the staff at the social sciences counselling department who weren't quite sure why I had been sent there, but did express some concern that one form, an appointment card and a student card wouldn't be enough paper work to prove my admittance to Western.

They were obviously right, because when I trudged back up to the university the next day at 3:30 p.m., as the card dictated, I was shown into an auditorium at Alumni Hall, handed more forms to complete and accorded a number.

When number 347 (yours truly) finally rounded, I plodded up to the front to where my forms were collected and a university employee told me to return the next day to sign up at the business school. The "biz" school, it seems, closed 90 minutes earlier.

I could, however, pay my fees. Collecting money is one area this university excels in. This provided just the opportunity to deliver one of those speeches about having to work so I can pay taxes to keep the university afloat — the kind of "employee responsibility" speech I expected to hear if my boss found out I had taken time off three days in a row to register at

the university for one course.

That effort earned me another nice but uninterested smile from a polite young woman who pointed a well-manicured finger toward where I was to pay for a course in which I still wasn't registered.

Done with fooling around, I drove up to the university for 9:30 a.m. and spent half an hour trying to find a spot to park. Hoping someone had fed the mobs, I pushed my way through what seemed like thousands of laughing and chanting frosh to the business school where a nice woman told me there was room in an 8:30 a.m. class, took a form I had been handed the day before, gave me a book list and said warmly "see you in class Monday."

First-year student, I figured, but I was grateful for her friendliness. She pointed me off to the social sciences building where I handed in yet another form from the bundle of papers I was still carting around.

It was over. I was IN.

Monday morning found my stomach flip-flopping in the same fashion it did the first day in Grade 1. The business school is as grey inside as it is on the outside but it matched my own coloring as I took a seat in the class feeling like an academic fossil.

There are about 1,500 mature students registered part-time at Western and none of them are in my course. Instead there are about 70 fresh-faced students who are all at least 10 years younger than I. A recent warning I read from former student radical Abby Hoffman "not to trust anyone under 30" seemed like sound advice.

That friendly face from the business school is there — standing at the front. She is the lecturer. Then came the final blow — my name wasn't on the class list. Scratching my name on the bottom of the computerized list, I told myself I should have done this in the first place and saved myself three trips.

It's not likely I'll ever feel at home in this university. But I came, like the 1,500 others because of certain goals I want to accomplish.

Learning is more than memorizing facts and figures. It's also adapting to new circumstances and people. Perhaps if I don't take myself too seriously I'll be able to learn a great deal from this university and its inhabitants.

I'd also like to find that woman who looked like someone's mother and someone's wife. I think I owe her at least a beer.