

## **A Changing Labor Market Puts More Adults on Campus : Thirtysomething U.S. Students**

**By Philip Crawford International Herald Tribune**

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The image of the typical U.S. college student as a fresh-faced, middle-class youth who has no job and enjoys parental financial support is apparently becoming as outdated as the notion of using a typewriter, not a personal computer, to write a term paper.

These days, say U.S. education experts, the average undergraduate is just as likely to be in his or her mid-thirties, hold down a full-time job, and have children who need to be picked up on the way home from the university.

The return to college by adults - or for many, the first foray into the world of course catalogs, campus center snack bars and all-nighters - is still on the rise after two decades of remarkable growth, according to recent statistics. Currently, people older than the traditional college-age bracket of 17 to 21 years make up 57 percent of the total number of U.S. students enrolled in higher education degree programs. Those in the 25 years and older group now represent 42 percent of the total, having grown from 2.6 million in 1970 to about 6 million today.

The fact that the 25 and older group grew 85 percent during the 1970s and another 25 percent during the 1980s, as opposed to 22 percent and 12 percent in those decades for those under 25 years of age, clearly reveals a demographic shift. The reasons for the turnabout, say experts, say much about life in the United States over the past generation.

"Adults go back to school because their lives are in transition," said Carol Aslanian, director of adult learning services for The College Board, a guidance and assessment firm in New York. "The fluctuations in the labor market have been putting a lot of people in that situation. When you lose a job, you often have to acquire new skills to find another one. Also, plenty of people are simply unhappy with their jobs and realize the only way to better their lot is to get some new credentials.

"And the job market has become increasingly technical - people simply won't hire you if you don't have certain qualifications."

THE demise of the notion that college is only for the upper socioeconomic classes, as well as the relative affordability of many state universities and community colleges, have helped make higher education accessible to those who want it, say other experts. But few students go straight through. According to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, only 15 percent of students entering college directly from high school earn degrees within four years. Moreover, almost half of all college students now attend classes on just a part-time basis.

The huge proportionate increase in adult students is also due to some elementary mathematics: There have been fewer people of traditional college age around. Following the postwar baby boom that lasted through the 1950s, the birth rate slowed, resulting in a marked decline in high school graduates by the late '70s.

"The number of high school graduates peaked in 1977 and the trend has been steadily downward ever since," said Vance Grant, a statistics specialist with the Department of Education in Washington. "The curve should continue its decline for the next two or three years and then level off and turn upward as the next large crop of 17- and 18-year-olds comes of age. But even though the proportion of adult students should start declining about 1995, their sheer numbers will continue to increase as the general population ages."

Aware of the declining numbers of their traditional clientele, college admissions officers have also been increasing their efforts to recruit older students. For some, attracting a sufficient crop of adults has been a crucial part of fiscal survival amid national recession and cuts in both federal and state

education funds. For others representing wealthier schools, creating programs for older students has been part of a conscious strategy to have a more heterogeneous campus population.

"We wanted to help diversify the student body," said Benson Lieber, dean of students at Amherst College, a selective liberal arts school in Massachusetts that actively seeks qualified adult students. "They [older students] add a lot to the campus because their background is typically much different than that of our traditional, just-out-of-high-school student. They've all had to support themselves financially and many have had to support families, which they continue to do while they're here."

Mr. Lieber said adult students typically do at least as well academically as their younger classmates, often excelling.

Another major factor in the rise of adult students has been the emergence of the working woman as another statistical norm. Since 1970, the number of women in the civilian labor force has risen 80 percent to about 57 million, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. And about 80 percent of those women are over 25.

"As more women have entered the work force, more have needed college-level training," said Mr. Grant.

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