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COLLEGES: OLDER STUDENTS

The three groups of mature college student

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The Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Nov. 10, 2015 4:00PM EST

Last updated Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2015 8:15AM EST

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Rachelle Peters is exactly the kind of student colleges are hoping to attract more of.

She went back to school at 40, after years of boom then bust. Her career had been in art publishing in Vancouver, a niche business of finding artists whose artwork is then reproduced, say, 2,000 times. The company would frame and sell the prints with an eye to home decor trends. Think record company, but selling art reproductions instead of music.



"We did really, really well because of the housing boom. And then it crashed" in the 2008 global financial dip, Ms. Peters said.

Her highly specialized career didn't translate well in the job market. So she enrolled in business classes at the British Columbia Institute of Technology to gain more skills, to make herself "a much more attractive candidate across all industries," she said.

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And it is that kind of returning student, or career-changer, whom technical institutes and colleges say they are increasingly gearing toward.

As schools turn to catering to individual students' personal goals, administrators talk about more of an active dialogue between school and students about what classes are needed to get specific jobs. And most of this dialogue is happening with older students already in the midst of their working lives.

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"Increasingly what we're looking at are opportunities to assess the individual's prior learning from a holistic perspective," said Bill Dow, vice-president of academics at BCIT.

For instance, Ms. Peters enrolled in a full-time business diploma at BCIT in operations management. Using those credits, plus others she picked up in prior university classes, she gained advanced placement in the school's bachelor of business administration. By this summer, it will have taken her three years to get her degree, she said.

These advance-placement credits can come from a variety of sources. BCIT also has a program for giving credits for military training and experience. Or, as another example, nurses with emergency-room experience, but not formal emergency training, can receive credit for that prior experience when getting certification as an emergency-room nurse.

"We do a prior learning assessment on all of that time they've spent in nursing," Mr. Dow said.

The school is expanding this to credit for corporate training, too, such as its arrangement with McDonald's Corp. to grant credit for those who attended its managerial training. "We assessed them, and mapped their training and determined how much we could give recognition for," said Kevin Wainwright, BCIT's head of the business administration program and the military and mature students advanced placement programs.

Advanced credits work well with more uniform, clearly defined training programs, such as those at McDonald's or the military. The trick is how to keep expanding this to other companies' training programs. The school is also in talks with health provider Vancouver Coastal Health and retailer London Drugs.

Other colleges are similarly treating mature students and career-changers in a new light.

"As a business unit in the college, we're a little different from the academic side, in that we really do focus on that market of what is in demand and how we can move to meet it," said Daniel Thorpe, dean of continuing studies at Langara College in Vancouver. Langara has a large student body taking courses in order to transfer to university, but it also has one of the largest continuing studies departments in British Columbia.

"The area that is growing right now is health and health services. We have a registered massage therapy program that's a fairly new addition for us, and it's been very successful."

Often the program can be extremely specialized, and only intended for students already in their careers, such as the Strategic Resilience for First Responders, a program for firefighters, paramedics and other emergency service providers to deal with traumatic situations, and how to cope with that stress.

Given such diversity of specialized courses and advanced credits, students' ages vary widely in continuing studies, but there are three noticeable age clusters, Mr. Thorpe said. The first is among 21- to 24-year-olds, typically students with a degree or diploma, but returning to get a more marketable job skill. The next cluster are the career-changers or career upgraders around age 35. The last is around 55, with people getting ready to start

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new work or to consult in retirement.

Krista Ryan fell a little between those clusters. In her late 20s when she returned to school, she had had a passion for the arts, but chose to become an elementary school teacher. But then she quickly changed course.

"I think once I got my [teaching] credential, and I had my safety net of a job, and I was an adult and could make my own choices, I decided to follow my passion full time."

She enrolled in continuing-ed photography classes at Langara, which she felt was a different experience than what younger students likely got in the full-time day program. She found most students were thinking of making a career change and leaving their day jobs.

Most were around her age: late 20s to late 30s. "You are with other people who have the same mindset as you. They are very driven. We were all old enough and mature enough to start a business, and we weren't floundering, as maybe people out of high school are," she said.

It's that career focus that the colleges are increasingly adopting for older students. And it is changing the feel of a college education, as the schools provide an array of specialties and options.

"It's not just content. It's also delivery mode. It's also the length of the program, whether the industry needs a three-year program, or a four-year degree, or a one-year program, or a graduate program for somebody who is already out there working in the industry," said Joy McKinnon, vice-president academic at Seneca College in Toronto.

The question is whether a high degree of specialization sacrifices wider learning, the kind of wider perspective needed in today's workplace. Although she is specializing in project management and process improvement, Ms. Peters said, she has also sought a wide breadth of experience with her business degree.

Because even with specialization, or tailoring a program and advanced credits based on mature students' unique backgrounds, there is no 100-per-cent guarantee of a job.

"The world doesn't work that way," said BCIT's Mr. Dow. "And some of these technologies change quickly. But we do our best ... to keep up to date with what's needed."

Read the full [Report on Colleges](#) here.

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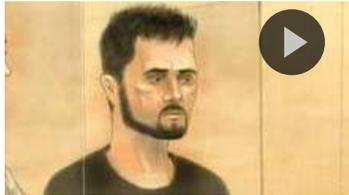
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