

Students

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Blue-Collar Boomers Take Work Ethic to College

By LIBBY SANDER

For 16 years, Russell Kearney awoke at 1:30 a.m. to hoist boxes of Wonder bread and Hostess cakes onto a truck and deliver them along a 120-mile route through eastern North Carolina.

After a decade, lifting and pushing thousands of pounds of bread — sometimes as much 10 tons a day — ruptured a disk in his back, making it feel "like my spine was cut in half," Mr. Kearney says. But he continued to work for five more years, until finally, "I just couldn't get out of the chair," he says. "I just couldn't do it any more."

And so, at age 53, after a lifetime of working in heavy-labor jobs, Mr. Kearney took an unexpected detour from the delivery route he figured he'd be driving until retirement. This new road led straight to the classroom, a setting he hadn't seen since graduating from high school in 1968. At nearby Lenoir Community College, he trained for a new kind of job, one that did not involve such strain on his body — a job, he hoped, that would give him a steady paycheck through the rest of his 50s and well into his 60s.

Mr. Kearney's journey to college is becoming a common one among workers in the baby-boomer generation who are old enough to feel the strain of decades of physical labor, but too young to retire.

With the help of community colleges, some baby boomers are changing gears and retraining for new jobs that are less physically taxing. In doing so, these workers are among those who are redefining the traditional notion of retirement by working much later in life. And they are also leaving their mark on community colleges, many of which are fine-tuning their programs and making them more accessible to older adults.

"There's this image that older students are only coming to college for life enrichment, to take this and that course for their own personal enjoyment," says Jan Abushakrah, a sociology professor at Portland Community College, in Oregon, and director of its gerontology program. But in a recent survey of older students at her college, Ms. Abushakrah says, more than three-quarters said they came back to school to find a job or a new skill to keep a current job. "The older students are serious about using the college experience to get the skills that they need."

Mr. Kearney's days of loading the bread truck may be over, but his desire to work is not. Now 57, he spends his days in the operating room at Wayne Memorial Hospital, in his hometown of Goldsboro, N.C., where he is a surgical technologist. He assists surgeons in everything from routine procedures to 2 a.m. Caesarean sections, which he says he finds exciting.

"A lot of older people think they're not as useful, as productive as they used to be," Mr. Kearney says. "But I see older people who could work rings around younger people. Just because you got a few years on you, you can do it."

Working Longer

The image of aging boomers as prosperous preretirees eager to repair to the golf course belies a much more complicated portrait. A sizable demographic of people will require some sort of retraining in order to keep working and keep the paychecks coming in.

"It is a story that's just unfolding," says Susan Porter Robinson, vice president for lifelong learning at the American

Council on Education. "It's really a mosaic. If you look at them proportionately, yes, baby boomers are very well educated in terms of their predecessors. ... But you have to then dig deeper to look at those who've been disenfranchised from those opportunities."

Of the nearly 80 million baby boomers born between 1946 and 1965 who will reach retirement age over the next 20 years, many are expected to keep working well into their 60s or even their 70s.

By 2014, 41 percent of adults aged 55 and older will still be in the workplace, according to recent estimates by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And in a 2005 survey of adults between the ages of 50 and 59 by the MetLife Foundation and Civic Ventures, 66 percent said they planned to keep working in some fashion during their retirement years. Of that 66 percent, 15 percent said they would never retire.

David Cox, an electrician in Soap Lake, Wash., expects to work into his 60s. He spent years crawling on his stomach to run wires through confined spaces before deciding, at age 53, that he much preferred the idea of young electricians doing the crawling while he ran the business.

"I'm getting old for this kind of stuff," says Mr. Cox, who suffered a back injury last spring that brought his wire-running days to an abrupt end. But, he says, "I refuse to sit around the house and do nothing because I can't work." So Mr. Cox, who is now 54, enrolled in the industrial electrical-technology program at Big Bend Community College, in nearby Moses Lake. There, he is studying toward an associate degree that would give him the credentials he says he needs to start such a business.

The wave of baby boomers returning to school is expected to crest in coming years, and administrators say it will do more than just alter the typical notion of retirement. Those boomer students will further challenge the outdated notion of what constitutes a "traditional" student.

That traditional student — fresh out of high school and able to take four years or more to complete a bachelor's degree — "just doesn't exist any more," says Ms. Abushakrah. "Many colleges still assume that that's the typical student and all other people are exceptions. But the exceptions are becoming the rule."

For those workers who never finished college or skipped it altogether, the transition to a second or third career can be difficult, especially if their previous jobs involved little or no interaction with the technology that is the bedrock of many occupations. Community colleges play a key role in reaching out to these kinds of students, determining their needs, helping them decide which new career path to pursue, and giving them the proper schooling to do it.

But even community colleges, which, by definition, serve their communities, are finding that they need to revamp some of their policies to fulfill this mission.

"The colleges are going to have to adapt to serve this population," says George Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges. "Community colleges have been the most adaptable institutions around. They offer classes on the weekends, in the evenings, in shopping centers and churches. They're very flexible in trying to meet the needs of students, so I think they're going to be very flexible in reaching these students as well."

Ready for a Change

As colleges adapt to older students, they must consider the needs of those like Dannie Hill. Mr. Hill gave college a try decades ago after graduating from high school in Brooklyn. But taking classes while working full time at a fast-food restaurant to support his mother and two younger siblings proved to be too much, he says. So he dropped out. After a few years working as a messenger on Wall Street and in the purchasing department of a major financial-services company, he went into construction.

For the 20 or so years that Mr. Hill worked in construction, in New York City and Pennsylvania, he grew accustomed to wearing seven layers of clothing in the winter, lifting lumber or Sheetrock, framing walls, and lugging heavy materials around a work site. And though he took pride in working with his hands and seeing the buildings he helped construct, it exhausted him, and he didn't want to do it forever.

"It's hard on your back, hard on your joints, especially in the wintertime," says Mr. Hill, of Bethlehem, Pa. "It's four months of you against Mother Nature, just trying to get the job done."

Mr. Hill, who is 46, decided last year that he wanted a change — and that he needed a college education to make it happen.

"Unless I have certain training, I'm not going to be able to walk into an office," Mr. Hill says. "I want a job sitting down, at the computer, in the cubicle. Show me what papers to push. After being out in the field for so many years, I would like a sit-down job."

A single parent of a 14-year-old son, Mr. Hill recently completed his first semester at Northampton Community College, in Pennsylvania, where he took courses in philosophy and psychology two nights a week. He attends Northampton as part of Act 101, a state-funded program that assists lower-income adults going back to school.

The most difficult part of being back in school, Mr. Hill says, is the technology. "Kids are saying, 'Just download it here and put it on your MP3 player to your iPod to your flash drive.' ... Oh, my goodness," he laughs, "there's just so much stuff you don't get into unless you're a student."

Despite the challenges that computers present, Mr. Hill says his most important tool still works just fine. "The most rewarding thing, I have to admit, was actually realizing that the brain has not stopped working and that you can obtain new knowledge even in this modern, technical world," he says. "And when I got my first A, that really said to me, wow, I can do this."

But the joy of high marks is tempered by a certain sense of urgency, he adds: "I don't have time to fail the class, because I don't have time to make it up. I have to get it right the first time."

Changes Ahead

Older students like Mr. Kearney, Mr. Hill, and Mr. Cox are emblematic of the no-nonsense approach that many adult students bring to their college experience, says Bernie Ronan, acting president of Mesa Community College, in Mesa, Ariz.

"They do not have the luxury nor the interest in going back to college for two or three or four years," Mr. Ronan says. "They need something they can get quick. So what that says to institutions like mine is that the traditional 16-week semester needs to be modified significantly so that individuals can come in and maximize learning in blocks that are more intense and more tailored."

Older students ask for flexible class schedules, credit for prior learning or work experience, and thorough career-placement counseling when the time comes to look for a job. They want the learning experience to create a seamless transition into a new career.

To achieve that, degree programs have to be a fair reflection of the job opportunities in a region, making partnerships between institutions, industry groups, and local economic-development agencies essential, says Mr. Ronan, whose college near Phoenix is one of the largest in the country.

Although community colleges are relatively nimble and responsive to the regions they serve, Mr. Ronan says, they have still been slow to react. But that is changing.

The sheer size of the baby-boomer cohort, Mr. Ronan says, means that changes in curriculum and support services are mandatory. Simply tweaking a course offering here or there is not going to satisfy the demands of older students.

"The buzz that's created around this population is growing," Mr. Ronan says. "These people are just flowing out of one kind of employment and into another every day. The more that happens, the more you have to pay attention to it."

Many educators predict that the changes in curriculum and support services triggered by the baby boomers' arrival will benefit all students, regardless of their age. By responding to the needs of baby boomers now, they say,

community colleges will have the opportunity to engage in institutionwide makeovers that will help them educate future generations more efficiently.

For Mr. Hill, the "honest concern" that administrators at his college have shown him makes all the difference, he says. "A person at my age has a lot of different boundaries when they start making decisions and changes in their lives," he says. "You really kind of need a program that's going to open their arms and roll out the red carpet and show them the way.

"Nobody is spoon-feeding me," he hastens to add. "But they make it accessible."

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