

NEWS ▼ OPINION ▼ ARTS & CULTURE ▼ SPORTS ▼ SPECIAL SECTIONS ▼ EVENTS

MULTIMEDIA ▼ MORE ▼

SEARCH...

# It's never too late

## THE AVERAGE AGE OF PSU STUDENTS IS ON THE RISE

WRITTEN BY [BREANA HARRIS](#) | APRIL 8, 2014



*(Left to right) Tyler and Kenji playing next to their mother, Yoko Sakurauchi, Education Graduate, as she grades exams in the Resource Center for Students with Children. Photo by: Corinna Scott*

Something heavy has been weighing on me since I transferred to Portland State, and I've decided it's time to finally put it out there.

My name is Breana, and I graduated high school in the 20th century.



**PSU SUSTAINABILITY CELEBRATION**  
 THURSDAY • MAY 29 • 4-6PM  
 SMITH STUDENT UNION BALLROOM  
 PROJECT SHOWCASE | FREE FOOD | MUSIC

**SAYBROOK UNIVERSITY**  
 INSPIRE TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE  
 Seattle MA Programs  
 Counseling & Leadership  
 Online/Onsite Learning

### EVENTS

04/04/2014 -  
 06/06/2014  
[Spring '14 Critical Writing Workshop Series](#)

04/21/2014 -  
 04/25/2014  
[SHAC Anniversary Week 4/21-4/25](#)

04/21/2014 -  
 04/24/2014  
[PSU Blood Drive 4/21-](#)

Many of my friends from the class of 1999 are in the midst of amazing careers. I have younger siblings and cousins who earned their bachelor's degrees years ago and are now pursuing master's or doctorate's. At 33, I am just now on the cusp of finishing an undergraduate program. And yet I know I'm not alone. According to the Women's Resource Center, 66 percent of PSU students are over the age of 23. Whether you graduated in 1965 or 2005, you have probably experienced the conflicting emotions that come with being an older college student.

While feeling out of place has always been considered natural for non-traditional students, times are definitely changing. PSU is well known for its average student age of 26, and seeing a range of age groups around campus is not unusual. But our campus reflects a national shift that has been happening since the Great Recession of 2008.

Left with a decreasing number of options, working adults have returned to college in droves. The American Council on Education published a report in 2013 entitled "Post-traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education: A Manifesto for College Leaders." It stated that only 15 percent of college students in the U.S. begin school at age 18, and that student populations made up of diverse working adults from 25 to 64 are "the new normal." The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education declares us "non-traditional no more."

But as you might expect, having the statistics on your side doesn't necessarily eliminate the personal and practical struggles that non-traditional or returning students go through.

Virginia Martin, assistant director of the WRC, and Anna Vetter, coordinator of the Empowerment Program, work with many female students who are older than the

4/24

04/24/2014

[Allen Institute Brain Atlas lecture](#)

04/24/2014

[Allen Institute Brain Atlas free workshops](#)

[all events](#)

## Tweets

Fol



**The Vanguard** 16 Apr

@psuvangua

Ready for ASPSU elections? Deadline is April 25 for students who are interested in running.

[psuvangua pic.twitter.com](http://psuvangua.pic.twitter.com)



Expand



**The Vanguard** 15 Apr

@psuvangua

Tweet to @psuvangua

traditional college age, which constitutes 58 percent of the women at PSU.

“We have found that one of the major issues that returning students come to see us about is navigation—getting around campus, finding resources and figuring out the best way to do things,” Martin and Vetter said in an email. “Financial aid and D2L are referenced quite a bit as points of frustration. Isolation can also be an issue for many returning women students. They feel as if they don’t belong here because of their age. Part of the mission of the Empowerment Program is to help build community and connect these women with one another. We do this by offering a returning women’s college success class, a Women’s Mentorship Project and a [Returning Women Students Peer Support Group].”

The WRC offers the Women’s Mentorship Project and returning women college success class to help students feel welcomed and empowered at PSU no matter what their age. Through working with students from all walks of life, Martin and Vetter have discovered a commonality—the search for community.

“They [students] are looking to see themselves represented in groups, in classrooms, in administration and leadership, and in campus activities. They are looking for a place to feel at home and to be understood. That community and representation is vital to connection and completion.”

Martin and Vetter also view PSU as an important example of the shift toward a new definition of what it means to attend a four-year university. “Portland State, as an urban campus, is in a unique position. Its accessibility is attractive to commuter students, including many adult and professional students. As these students become more visible in classrooms, in activities, and in leadership,

CLASSIFIEDS

[Santa Clara, Calif., April 22, 2014 - Years of hard work have led to this moment...](#)

04/23/2014

[Pregnant and not ready to parent? Secure, loving, and joyful Oregon family of 3...](#)

04/19/2014

[Douglas Lima Faces Rick Hawn for the Wel...](#)

04/17/2014

[See All Classifieds](#)

CURRENT ISSUE

Select Month ▼

it helps to change what the public perception of what a college student is.”

As it turns out, a college student can be anyone. We all have our own reasons for missing out on the traditional secondary education experience. Mine were mostly financial, though they also had a great deal to do with my inability to make such important life choices at the age of 18. It is hard for high school seniors to have a realistic understanding of how much higher education costs, the commitment involved in pursuing a degree and the importance of finding the right university and the right program for you. How many people truly know what they want to do with their lives as teenagers?

English major Karla Farr certainly didn't. “I missed out on the whole college-after-high-school experience,” she said in an email. “In my thirties, I began taking a class here or there.” In her fifties, Farr was inspired to finally “just do it and get a degree. It wasn't until I took WR 121 that I realized I had an ability to put my thoughts on paper. I will graduate this June with a BA in English and a writing minor, three weeks before my 60th birthday.”

For Farr, the college experience has been overwhelmingly positive, and she insists that she makes a much better student now than she would have at age 18. “It has been so enriching, not only because of the studies but the other students, the teachers and the overall experiences.” Working as a tutor at the Mount Hood Community College Writing Center, she has found herself relating to the journey of students who are not native English speakers. She too experienced the feeling of being in an environment where she is not considered the norm. “Their courage and motivation to succeed inspires me.” Ryan Ritchie, 40, is another returning student who identifies with taking time to really understand your path in life, and in school. After high school, he spent a decade

---

[VIEW ALL PDF ARCHIVES](#)

---

[ONLINE ARCHIVES](#)

---

[SUBSCRIBE AND FOLLOW ONLINE](#)

[FOLLOW NEWS](#)

[FOLLOW ARTS & CULTURE](#)

[FOLLOW OPINION](#)

[FOLLOW SPORTS](#)

[SUBSCRIBE TO ALL](#)

in the Navy.

“I got out, and I didn’t really know what to do with my life,” he said. “I just jumped around from job to job and place to place.”

Ritchie, like myself and countless others, was laid off during the recession and struggled to find another job with only a high school diploma and scattered work experience. Going back to school was the solution to advancement and exploration, and he studied Japanese, film and English at Columbia Gorge Community College, followed by PSU.

He is definitely no stranger to feeling out of place or awkward in a room filled with younger students, especially when he experienced being mentored by a much younger student in his sophomore inquiry classes. He describes the weird feeling of being the oldest person in a class, and the relief that comes when he isn’t—which I am sure most non-traditional students can understand.

And yet interacting with younger students isn’t necessarily a negative aspect of college—usually, quite the opposite. “I can let those things go pretty easily because that’s the way it is. They can bring things to me that I don’t have, and I can bring things to them that they don’t have,” Ritchie said. Still, he can laugh about advising a librarian that she should give lessons to the students on using microfilm, or how he once spoke up in class to tell the other students what it was like when the Berlin Wall fell.

Professors also welcome the idea of a varied student population in their classes. Associate professor Maude Hines of the English department said, “While it’s also true of some younger students, returning students, with their extra life experience, have a clear idea of what they want to get out of the class. They bring rich and varied

perspectives to texts.”

While there is a perception that older students are more dedicated and serious about their work, it is hard to make a sweeping statement. I’m pretty much the same sort of student now as I was 15 years ago.

Despite a plethora of opportunities and warm welcomes, I don’t think the stigma attached to being a returning student has entirely dissipated. But research clearly shows that most major universities in the U.S. are learning to tailor their recruitment efforts more toward working adults. Online colleges and online classes, which are designed specifically for working adults and students with families, are more popular now than ever before. The costs of higher education and the staggering burden of student debt have reached unsustainable heights, but more accommodation for a diverse range of students to have access to degree programs may be something positive that comes out of it. We might feel like we’re different now, but the time where nobody thinks twice about a student’s age is fast approaching.

Still, this is all a conundrum. There will always be people like me, Farr and Ritchie who don’t know exactly where they belong after high school graduation. In my eight years out of school, I traveled to many U.S. cities, went to Europe twice, slogged around music festivals and worked some awful retail jobs that I don’t regret. I was also frighteningly poor most of the time and probably lucky to have emerged unscathed. College is changing, but it is also becoming more necessary. Maybe the real lesson is that every student needs room to find themselves, and higher education needs to respect that. It’s never too late to begin, but it’s also never too early to start.



Like { 102 }

Tweet { 1 }



---

MORE IN OPINION

[L-Train's return calms nerves](#)

---

[NWFC tracks Northwest filmmakers](#)

---