

Opinion: The Not-So Graduate

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When I was 18 years old and attending junior college in the Bay area, I had no idea I would be attending the University of Washington as an undergrad in my late twenties. But alas the cliché -- life is full of surprises.

While I enjoyed school back then, I was more interested in passing notes, giggling with my friends and cutting class to drive to Santa Cruz for a long weekend. Now that I'm almost 30, when I see younger students in class giggling and passing notes I view them with annoyance. They're wasting my time and my money. They're disrespecting the professor.

Where does my disdain come from? Has age earned me the right to be so smug? I must have evolved into -- gasp -- an adult.

Further evidence of my apparent adulthood lies in the generation gap of pop culture associations. I've met kids who were named after characters from films that came out in the 1980s. And I've met students who have not seen the original Star Wars film trilogy.

As the Star Wars phenomenon is a staple of my generation, I see such a transgression as nothing less than blasphemous. I'm comforted knowing at least some of you have seen 1984's made-for-television movie, *An Ewok Adventure*.

Other than occasionally feeling out of place, going into my senior year of college at 29 is better than I ever could have imagined. And I'm here to spread a little love to an unacknowledged population here at the UW -- the older undergrad.

The thing is, there are a lot of older undergrads. Most traditional students (and by "traditional," I mean students who fall into the 18 to 24 age range) assume that anyone older than 25 must be a grad student. Depending upon my sensitivity level of the moment, I either take the assumption to be a compliment to my hard work and intellect or as a naive commentary on my failure to adhere to age-defined societal standards.

Some of us have chosen untraditional paths -- various reasons such as lack of money, travel, disenchantment with high school, family obligations, romance or pregnancy. As university students we bring to the table "real world" experience and skills that aid not only our studies, but also enhance our relationships with students and professors.

Students who start or return to college as older adults tend to have a greater appreciation of their educational experiences. Many of us earned associate degrees while attending night classes at community college, exhausting ourselves in order to be here at university. For us, college is a reward rather than a chore. Older students are here because we want to be here -- not because we are "supposed" to be.

Middle-aged students obviously have different priorities than 18-year-olds, such as saving for retirement and paying for the college education of our own children. We spend our Saturdays much like Will Ferrell's character in the movie *Old School*.

"We're going to go to Home Depot," he says of his big weekend plans with his wife. "Maybe Bed, Bath & Beyond, if we have enough time."

Rather than going to keggers, we throw dinner parties. We spend our money on home furnishings and bed-and-breakfasts instead of beer.

Often I am shocked to hear myself as the voice of reason in a classroom discussion -- pointing out the same shades of grey that were once pointed out to a younger me.

For me, absolutes have become possibilities, and the only certainty is now. Unfortunately, there are a rare few older students who through either intimidation or exacerbated smugness condescend to the traditional student by adopting an I-know-better-than-you attitude.

Not recognizing and validating varying levels of experience is an impediment to understanding others and ourselves. Plus, it's just mean.

There may be two sides to every coin, but with a campus of more than 35,000 students, there are 35,000 ways to interpret any given issue. As older students, it is our job to help guide and nurture youth rather than mock or belittle it. Experience is personal, and varying levels of that experience can be teaching tools that transcend age.

I've found numerous advantages to being an older student. I have learned the delicate dance of time management -- I never stay up all night studying or writing a paper and yet my grades never suffer.

Through trial and error I am finally able to recognize an opportunity but also know how to avoid taking on too much responsibility. I have the perspective to be prepared for sudden life changes -- to have goals but not necessarily plans. Flexibility has become essential.

So this fall, when I'm asked what "year" I am in the traditional progression of my education, I'll wisely smile and reply, "senior," and I'll know that it means a lot more than simply being in my fourth year of college.