

## **Baby Boomers: Changing the Face of Retirement through Second Careers and Higher Education**

Members of the Baby Boom generation are now reaching retirement age—but they’re not letting that stop them. Many Boomers, finding themselves well-educated, financially well-off, and still healthy and strong in their 50s, 60s, and even 70s, have decided it’s too early to hit the bingo hall or the shuffleboard court. Instead, they’re going back to school, volunteering, and taking up second or “encore” careers—often with an eye to helping their communities and giving back to society. In fact, some pundits are saying, Boomers are creating a whole new stage of life: a “next chapter” between work and childrearing and true old age.

### **Boomers Contribute to Society through Encore Careers**

Some 5.3 million to 8.4 million Americans have now embraced encore careers, as a major MetLife/Civic Ventures study on the topic reports.<sup>1</sup> Between 6% and 9.5% of adults aged 44 to 70 have opted to return to the workforce in a different career path than the one they originally chose.<sup>2</sup> And most of these career changers are idealistic Boomers who hope to contribute to society in second jobs as nurses, teachers, workers for nonprofit organizations, or social entrepreneurs. Having experienced the social ferment of the 1960s firsthand, many Boomers find that, having worked for decades with the goal of making money, they now want to use their experience and education to benefit society as a whole.

### **Boomers Are Returning to College in Large Numbers**

Whether or not they’re seeking encore careers, Boomers are showing an increased interest in higher education. About 2 million of the 78 million Boomers are now taking classes—a 20% rise over the past decade. The Institute for Higher Education Policy has found that the number of students 40 and over has tripled since 1970.<sup>3</sup>

What exactly are these “new” students like? In many ways, Boomers resemble the nontraditional student population as a whole. Most work at least part-time and have family obligations such as

elder care and supporting adult children. They report the same kinds of time management issues that harry almost all nontraditional students: 80%, in one survey, claimed that “time constraints” were the single biggest obstacle to their academic success.<sup>4</sup> As a result, community colleges are popular with Boomers, who enjoy the flexible class schedules, online classes, and open access such schools provide. Over 1 million Boomers now attend community colleges.<sup>5</sup>

Although Boomers do report “personal enrichment” as a motivator for returning to school, most of them take classes with career goals in mind. A major study of returning older students conducted by Portland Community College (PCC) in Oregon found that over 75% of older students were studying in order to “upgrade or acquire new work-related skills” and that nearly as many were doing so to “prepare for a new career.”<sup>6</sup>

In general, Boomers thrive in the classroom. As Harry R. Moody, Director of Academic Affairs at the American Association of Retired Persons, puts it, “The idea that older people can’t see or can’t hear—that’s an old stereotype. They are actually the most interesting students you can get. They are eager to participate and want to be there.”<sup>7</sup>

Moody adds, “[H]igher education could be missing a huge opportunity if it does not try to respond to the growing demand from older learners—not just in terms of lost revenue, which will be huge, but also missing the opportunity to teach a group of people who are hungry to learn and searching for higher meaning. . . . If colleges and universities don’t meet the demand, other players will step in.”<sup>8</sup>

## **How Colleges and Universities Can Make Their Programs Boomer-Friendly**

Boomers enjoy returning to college. But some do report age discrimination of various types, including professors who gear their entire classes towards traditional-aged college students and instructors who are not welcoming of older students. Two-fifths of respondents in the PCC survey said that faculty did not understand the needs of older learners. In addition, many of the students in the survey were disappointed with their college’s career and academic advisors, who did not seem prepared to help older students.<sup>9</sup>

The study suggests that higher education providers can do more to make campuses comfortable for returning students. In many ways, these students' needs are similar to those of the nontraditional student population as a whole. For instance, many Boomers, like other nontraditional students, require additional support services to help them acclimate to the campus community. Such services can include one-on-one mentoring, personalized assessments of their prior work and educational experience, and career exploration workshops and orientations designed for older students.

Boomers are exacting about what they do and do not want from higher education providers. Like other working learners, they want to “get in, get what they need, and get out quickly”—that is, they want to enroll quickly and easily, take only the purpose-driven courses required for their current or second careers, and graduate without having been burdened by requirements that aren't relevant to their lives.

Boomers also don't want to be shunted into “senior” courses or programs: They resent being marginalized and don't view themselves as “old.” Instead, Boomers insist on being seen as vital, productive members of whichever higher education community they enter. That said, many Boomers do admit to gaps in certain skill areas, especially computer literacy, and indicate they would prefer to fill those gaps through tutoring, “refresher” courses, and workshops rather than through traditional semester-long classes.<sup>10</sup>

### **Paving the Way for Productive Retirement**

Clearly, the current paradigm of retirement-as-leisure is not a good fit for many members of the Baby Boom generation. Having “paid their dues” by raising children and working to provide for their families, these older workers and students are now doing something for themselves and for society as well. They're proving that a person's 50s, 60s, and even 70s don't have to be a time of gentle relaxation: They can be an opportunity for a fresh start.

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1. MetLife Foundation and Civic Ventures, *Americans Seek Meaningful Work in the Second Half of Life. A MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures Encore Career Survey* (San Francisco: Civic Ventures, 2008), 5, [http://www.civicventures.org/publications/surveys/encore\\_career\\_survey/Encore\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.civicventures.org/publications/surveys/encore_career_survey/Encore_Survey.pdf).

2. Ibid.

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3. Michael Thompson, "More Baby Boomers Return to Classroom," *Life While*, January 5, 2009, <http://natl.ibsys.com/money/17505764/detail.html>.
  4. Ibid.
  5. Ibid.
  6. Portland Community College Taskforce on Aging, *Boomers Go To College: A Report on the Survey of Students 40 and Older Conducted by the Portland Community College Taskforce on Aging* (report presented at the Portland Community College Age Boom Conference, Portland, CO, February 28, 2007, February 28), 8, <http://www.civicventures.org/communitycolleges/PCCBoomerReport033007.pdf>.
  7. Becky Klein-Collins, "CAEL Profile: Harry R. Moody, Director of Academic Affairs at AARP," *CAEL Forum and News*, Spring 2006.
  8. Ibid.
  9. Ibid.
  10. Portland Community College Taskforce on Aging, *Boomers Go To College*, 25.