VCSU’s nontraditional population grows
Older-than-norm students go back to school for better pay, self-fulfillment

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It’s more common to see older students at Valley City State University today than in the past. Around 31 percent of the university’s 1,019 students are 25 years or older, a 4 percent increase from last year.

The university’s communications director, Doug Anderson, was surprised by the numbers.

“It’s an important group of students and one we’re glad to serve,” he said, “but we have not been focusing our marketing efforts on that group.”

This group of students is generally called nontraditional because they did not pursue or finish a college education straight out of high school.

Local nontraditional students say they returned to college for more pay, job opportunities, self-improvement and enjoyment.

Jamestown resident Mark Watne left North Dakota State University in 1982 after attending for two years.

“My intent was to farm, and I didn’t need to continue,” he said.

He’s currently a North Dakota Farmers Union agricultural strategist and said he wanted a four-year degree for a promotion and personal satisfaction.

Watne chose VCSU because it was the only school at which he could take every class online.

“I didn’t have time in the evening to do classes because of my job schedule,” he said.

He said he found another perk at VCSU in the university’s Prior Learning Assessment program. It allowed him to receive college credit for past experiences such as conferences, volunteer services and work.

Watne said the program was useful, but he found its difficulty similar to regular classes because he had to document the knowledge he’d learned from past experiences.
“You have to prove you’re already beyond classes in your knowledge,” he said. “Preparing and having an instructor sign off on your portfolio is not simple.”

VCSU’s Prior Learning Assessment coordinator, Marcia Foss, said faculty members determine how many credits students receive for their documentation.

Foss said some students have used the program to pass one class while others have used it to receive credit for more than 25.

“It’s not a short-cut degree,” Foss said, “but it could be a shortcut to getting your degree because it’s going to decrease the number of classes you have to take.”

She said all non-teaching degrees are available through the program. She said she hopes the university will soon be allowed to offer secondary business teaching because of North Dakota’s shortage in business teachers.

**Some seek master’s**

A popular program for VCSU students older than 25 is the online master’s program in education. “It’s geared specifically toward working teachers that want to complete a master’s program without taking time off from work,” Anderson said.