Senior citizen students in South Florida earning degrees into their 70s, 80s

By Diane C. Lade, Sun Sentinel

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"Graduating senior" is taking on a whole new meaning at South Florida's colleges.

Both Florida Atlantic University and Broward College presented diplomas this month to students in their 80s. As the local 70-plus population has grown, graduation ceremonies now often include an older scholar picking up a bachelor's or master's degree.

Some hit the books for different reasons than younger students: Instead of wanting a better job, they're chasing a long-held dream. Many are women from a generation when girls were told to forget about college, that their husbands would support them, then watched their brothers go off to school.

Earning her diploma "expanded my life, so I feel like I can do anything now," said Elizabeth "Betty" Reilly, an 85-year-old Sunrise resident who donned cap and gown to receive her Broward College associate degree in English on Wednesday.

Reilly dropped out of high school in 11th grade to help support her family after her father broke his hand, making 42 cents an hour. In her 50s, she earned her high school equivalency degree to be more employable. Reilly now plans to continue studying at FAU just for the love of learning.

But at FAU's School of Social Work director Michele Hawkins has seen people in their 60s and 70s go after their master's to go into the workforce. One was a retired postal worker; another was a 75-year-old woman whose daughter had just earned the same degree, Hawkins said.

"What I see is people who are coming back for second degrees or who want second careers," Hawkins said. While she does not believe there has been a big increase in their numbers recently, Hawkins said there definitely are more elder degree seekers in South Florida than she saw at her previous university job in Washington, D.C.

There were 20 students older than 70 enrolled in Broward College this fall, with eight of them seeking degrees in the arts, sciences or nursing. Nova Southeastern University granted nine degrees to people older than 65 in the first six months of this year, and had 40 graduates over 60.

FAU had 19 people over age 70 enrolled in degree programs over the last year, excluding the fall 2011 graduating class.
Those over age 65 enrolled in degree programs remain a small portion of the South Florida student body, however, usually about 1 percent or less of the total.

Linda Maurice, director of the Lifelong Learning Institute at Nova, is earning her own master's in cross-disciplinary studies there. She's been surprised how many women in their 50s through their 70s are in her graduate program, and one student is 81 years old. "My feeling is they never had the time or the money in their earlier years," she said.

But Maurice said that while many retirees love being on campus, the vast majority don't want the pressure – or expense – of getting a degree.

Annual enrollment in Maurice's institute, for example, is $500 and allows seniors to take multiple no-credit classes taught by Nova professors. Nova tuition for one three-credit graduate class is $1,800.

The University of South Florida in Tampa has the largest number of 65-plus degree students among the state's universities, with 175 enrolled in 2010. FAU had 90 and Florida International University in Miami had 74, with one-fourth in graduate school.

Mark Kantrowitz, a national expert on student loans and publisher of FinAid.org, said more colleges are allowing seniors to take non-credit classes at reduced fees or for free. But most states, including Florida, do not have age-based tuition waivers toward degrees.

Kantrowitz advises against senior citizens taking on debt to get a degree – although if they do, it's probably better to take out a federal student loan. Those are discharged after the borrower dies, while private loans are charged against the borrower's estate, he said. One octogenerarian told Kantrowitz she figured her debt would outlive her.

Lois Voron, of Tamarac, considered her FAU bachelors degree in interdisciplinary studies an investment in herself and paid for it out of savings. When she graduated this month at 82, she said the young students around her "went bananas" when the school president mentioned her age and asked Voron to stand.

"You would have thought I was a rock star," said Voron, who hated school when she was a teenager. "I just got caught up in going to college and had a wonderful time."