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Colleges Woo Adults Who Have Some Credits but No Degree

By LIBBY SANDER

There are 11,000 or so people in Kentucky who came within a course or two of earning a college degree, but never did. Almost half a million more took a few college courses but then dropped out.

Now educators are trying to lure back those erstwhile students to finish what they started.

Over the next 12 years, Kentucky wants to double the number of adults in its work force who hold college degrees. Officials say that goal is impossible unless they can persuade thousands of adults with some college credits to re-enroll at one of the state's public four-year institutions.

And so the state is making a huge push to bring adults back to college. This month educators and state officials met in Lexington to kick off the Kentucky Adult Learner Initiative and discuss how to make the state's higher-education system friendlier to older students.

It is the beginning of a multiyear effort that will focus on financial aid, professional development for faculty members who teach adults, and student-support services, among other areas.

The immediate goal is to bring back those 11,000 adults who completed 90 or more credit hours. If that program, called Project Graduate, succeeds, officials say they will ask the State Legislature in 2010 for permanent changes in higher-education policy. Later the scope could broaden to include the thousands more Kentuckians who have varying amounts of course work under their belts.

The challenge of persuading busy adults to make time for college will be twofold, says Bradford L. Cowgill, interim director of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. "First, to make them believe that the value of pursuing the end goal is worth the effort," he says, "and secondly, to be as accommodating as possible to their lifestyles."

The reaction has been overwhelming among those adults who have caught wind of the plan through news reports and word of mouth, Mr. Cowgill says.

"We've absolutely tweaked a nerve," he says. "We had no idea how positive the response would be."

'Human Capital'

The attention to older students comes at a time when Kentucky, like many states, is grappling with an aging population and a shifting economy in which an increasing number of jobs require college degrees.

Nationally about 54 million people in the labor force have no college degree, and of those, 34 million have no college experience at all, according to a 2007 survey by the Lumina Foundation for Education.

The new focus on prospective students who fall roughly between the ages of 25 and 50 reflects a feeling among some educators that adult learners — long viewed as the "nontraditional" counterparts to their 18- to 22-year-old classmates — may offer a way to inject new vigor into sagging regional economies.

"We are a state with a mature population, an aging population, and the people in the work force that are going to have to drive economic development in our part of the state will require more education," says Patricia Book, vice president for regional development at Kent State University, in Ohio. Along with Ohio University, Kent State operates a joint program for adult students in eastern Ohio called Complete to Compete. Officials in the state estimate that 450,000 Ohioans have some college credits but no degree.

"The adult learners," Ms. Book says, "are the ones where we see opportunities for growth."

Institutions of varying sizes and missions in several states have embraced this philosophy, though their programs differ in scope and approach. Some target adult students for certain high-demand industries, such as nursing or teaching, while others help people go back to school part time or provide incentives for job-skills training.

But at institutions where the immediate goal is to convert the all-but-degree adult into a college graduate, the thinking goes something like this: Persuade adults with some college credits to come back, make the admissions process a smooth and friendly one, provide detailed academic advising, and, if possible, offer financial assistance. Then watch the graduation numbers rise.

"Governors and state policy makers recognize that higher education is their economic future," says Kay J. Kohl, chief executive of the University Continuing Education Association. "Whereas natural resources may have been the path to a rich and vibrant economy in the past, human resources and human capital is today's future."

Kentucky is ahead of the curve in its comprehensive approach to luring back adult students, experts say. All eight of the state's public universities are part of the new program, as are its community and technical colleges.

At least a handful of other states operate similar programs, but on a smaller scale.

At the University of New Mexico, the Graduation Project has been helping adult learners return to and graduate from college for more than a decade. Last spring the University of Utah started the Returning to the U program, and recently received private funds to offer \$50,000 in scholarships to the state's estimated 3,000 adults who have completed 90 or more credit hours.

Philadelphia opened a new higher-education center for adults this month as part of its Graduate! Philadelphia program, in which nine area colleges are participating. The program seeks to bring back the 80,000 or so Philadelphians between the ages of 25 and 45 who have completed at least one year of college.

Later this month, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education will select three of its 15 member states to participate in a new project called Nontraditional No More. The two-year program, financed by a \$755,100 grant from the Lumina Foundation, will help states identify adults who are just shy of earning their degrees and help them take the final steps toward the diploma.

A Difficult Task

But luring back adults who are knee-deep in life responsibilities is no small task, educators say.

The key is "going the extra mile," says Sandy McLelland, who coordinates Returning to the U at the University of Utah.

Ms. McLelland was 35 when a friend coaxed her back to the university, where she went on to earn a bachelor's and then a master's degree. She is eager to help adult students despite the nightmarish technicalities of locating thousands of people, one by one, who attended the university years ago.

"If I can share what someone did for me with someone else, that's my goal," Ms. McLelland says.

In Kentucky officials have created a Web site that beckons would-be students with the promise of such "exclusive incentives" as priority enrollment, financial assistance, individual advising, and a free application process.

Visitors may use a pull-down menu to select which of Kentucky's eight four-year institutions they attended. Then a new page shows them a list of the incentives offered at

that particular institution, as well as the name, telephone number, and e-mail address of an on-campus "advocate" who assists returning adult students.

'A Steep Hill'

Despite the good will behind the wooing, Kentucky and other states face cultural, financial, and legislative challenges. In regions where college degrees have not traditionally been part of the social fabric, persuading adults to go back to school is especially challenging.

Before the automotive and steel industries faded in eastern Ohio, a high-school diploma was the standard. "Higher education hasn't necessarily been valued," Ms. Book says. "People have been able to earn high wages and participate in the middle-class lifestyle without a college education."

Many adults may hesitate to seek a degree their parents never had. Ms. Book quotes a popular saying in the region: Don't get above your raisin'.

The cost of college is perhaps the biggest hurdle for adult learners. In a 2007 survey of adult students, the National Survey of Students in Continuing Education, 60 percent were in single-income households.

At Morehead State University, in Kentucky, officials created a scholarship fund exclusively for nontraditional students, which includes adult and transfer students, says Jeffrey Liles, assistant vice president for enrollment services.

The fund, which can provide a minimum award of \$600 and a maximum of \$2,640, is designed to help students who do not qualify for federal financial aid because they are attending classes part time. (Federal aid is linked to the credit hour, and noncredit courses generally are not eligible for subsidies.)

And finally, colleges wanting to increase their rolls of adult students must face state legislatures. Lawmakers responsible for allocating funds to higher education and shaping broad policies must be persuaded — in an economic downturn, no less — to devote scarce resources to adult-friendly programs.

But for now, a piecemeal approach will suffice, educators say, until more sweeping policies become feasible.

"We do see economic development as regional, and increased education is an absolutely essential ingredient of that," says Ms. Book. "But it's a big challenge to get adult learners back into higher education. This is a steep hill we have to climb."

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