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Erasing barriers to higher ed

Project aims to ease adult students' path

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Sara Ketcham, 23, was working full time at Citibank when her brother encouraged her to apply at the University Center over Thanksgiving in 2007.

She applied online that weekend, filed her financial aid papers the following week and, two short months later, was attending the University Center half time.

"I knew I always wanted to come back to school, but I needed the desire to go," Ketcham said. "I knew I wouldn't do as well if I did not have the desire to do it."

For Ketcham, the process was quick and easy, she said, but for some students, the transition isn't as smooth. That's why the South Dakota Board of Regents is participating in a grant-funded project that will seek to remove barriers for nontraditional students in post-secondary education.

"(We're looking at) do we inadvertently ... create policies or practices that simply don't meet their needs as well as they meet needs of traditional students," said Mark Lee, a committee member for the project.

The project, Non-Traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners, will focus primarily on making education more accessible for "ready adults" but should make it easier for all nontraditional students to come back, said Paul Turman of the South Dakota Board of Regents. Ready adults are students who already have completed 90 credit hours or more toward a degree, but they left school before graduation, he said.

"The unintended byproduct is that it makes it easier for nontraditional students in general to come back," he said. "A project focused on a small group of students can help all students in our state."

In the past five school years, 2,700 students with 90 or more credits have stopped school from South Dakota's public universities, Turman said. Of those, 228 obtained a degree somewhere else, he said.

One common barrier for these students is restriction holds, Turman said. When students left school, they might not have returned library books, paid a parking fee or sat for an exit interview. Now they have a restriction hold that doesn't allow them to register for classes, but if the violation is fairly minor, the school could waive some of those holds, he said.

Other ideas for removing barriers include creating a scholarship for adult learners, changing the current academic calendar or making it easier for credits to transfer. Students might even earn credits for learning obtained outside the classroom, said Lee, executive dean of the University Center.

"It will all focus on the unique needs of the nontraditional student," he said.

Ready adults are well positioned to finish up their degrees and then bring their knowledge to the work force, Turman said. Through advanced collaboration and technology skills, adults with degrees learn to be innovators and problem solvers, he said.

"The things we haven't thought about yet will change the nature of what we do 10 or 20 years from now," he said.

An additional 411 South Dakotans each year need to complete a postsecondary degree for the state to keep up globally. In Canada, about 55 percent of the 25- to 34-year-old population has a degree. Turman said by producing an average of 7,407 degrees each year the state will reach the 55 percent mark.

"A more educated population helps the state to be prepared to compete in this very intense global knowledge-based economy," Lee said.

The Non-Traditional No More project is sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. Universities in New Jersey, Arkansas, Colorado and Nevada also are participating.

In South Dakota, the first meetings for the project were in May.

Officials are tracking down the ready adults, and they hope to have attracted adult students back through marketing and policy changes by fall 2010.

"We see this as an important piece of how we continue to meet the needs of citizens in South Dakota," Turman said.

Reach Amy Poppinga at 605-331-2300.

Additional Facts

GETTING BACK INTO THE FLOW OF school

- Talk to your employer about tuition reimbursement or ask whether they are willing to work with you so you can attend classes.
- Use the resources available to you, such as admissions counselors and financial aid advisers.
- Create a support system to help you in going back to school.
- Ease into classes; don't take too much on your first semester. Your first semester can make or break your decision to be in school.

Source: Hillary Westerhuis, University Center academic adviser
