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Nevada colleges looking for a few good dropouts

By Lenita Powers
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Now in her 40s, Antoinette Brandt is close to earning her bachelor's degree after learning about a program that helps Nevada residents who dropped out of college in their youth return to get the few remaining credits they need to graduate.

The statewide program is an effort to increase the number of Nevadans who have college degrees and provide a more skilled work force. It is open to adults ages 25 to 62 who attended a college or university but left before earning their diplomas.

Brandt was attending the graduation of a friend last year at the University of Nevada, Reno when its president, Milt Glick, mentioned the program in his commencement address.

"Dr. Glick gave his speech, and I swear I thought he was talking just to me," said Brandt, 42.

"He said they were launching a program for anybody over the age of 25 who had 90 credits or more," she recalled. "That was like my Oprah 'ah-hah!' moment."

Brandt had attended Chico State and Butte Community College in California before deciding in 1989 she could no longer afford to stay in school. She moved to Reno and eventually got a job as a liability claims adjuster with AAA, but her position was eliminated in 2005.

"When my job ended with AAA, I thought, 'Wow, I can't go over to this other company because they require a college degree,' so I definitely felt it limited by job opportunities," Brandt said.

Married with two young sons, she is completing a summer class and will be 21 credits away from earning her general studies degree with a minor in speech communication.

"It's very different going back to school at my age, but I have world experience I can draw from now and I'm more focused," said Brandt, who's an A student and qualified for a scholarship.

Nevada is one of five states that rank at the bottom of the nation for percentage of college graduates, qualifying it to receive a \$65,000 grant for the project, "Non-Traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners."

"The only way Nevada can get an adult skilled work force quickly is to go after both traditional and nontraditional students," said Jane Nichols, vice chancellor of academic and student affairs for the Nevada System of Higher Education.

The startup money to reach the adult students was provided by the Lumina Foundation for Education.

The United States once led the world as the best-educated country but now ranks 10th among the industrialized nations in the percentage of young adults ages 24-34 with college degrees, according to the foundation.

About 39 percent of Americas hold two- or four-year degrees compared with 55 percent in Canada

and 54 percent in Japan.

In Nevada, 29 percent of the state's working adults ages 25-64 held at least a two-year degree in 2008, putting the state 46th in the nation for the number of residents per capita who hold associate degrees and 47th for the number with bachelor's degrees.

To improve that, Nevada's public colleges and universities are targeting adults who are just shy of earning enough credits and encouraging them to earn their degrees.

About 21,300 Nevadans who qualify already have been identified and a statewide effort has begun to locate them and others, said Nichols.

"I think in the first year or so, we could reach about 1,000 Nevadans who could earn their degrees," she said. "We're finding so many students who want to do this."

Each institution is putting together a program to guide them through the process and enroll them in courses taught online or on campus, including many offered at night, Nichols said.

"We've also been looking at policies that have been unfriendly to returning adult students," she said.

A statewide campaign is being launched to locate and convince older former college students to graduate.

"We guarantee these students that if they have 45 credits toward an associate degree or 90 credits toward a bachelor's, we will have a person there who will help you overcome the obstacles and get you through quickly and successfully to earn your degree," she said.

That been the case for Chad Peters, who was a senior when he became tired of school and left UNR to return to Winnemucca to help run the family bowling alley in 1997.

Last March, he was sitting in his backyard when he decided to telephone the university.

"I have a 5-year-old now, and I had been home for 12 years, and the business is going well," said Peters, co-owner of Spare Time Bowl. "I had some free time on my hands, and it kind of killed me to be sitting here thinking I could have finished college, but I felt I was too far removed. I was under the ... impression that after so many years, you lose those credits."

Peters' call was transferred to Nancy Markee, director of UNR's Academic Advising Center.

"And what a wonderful person she is," Peters said. "As soon as I started talking to her, she was so enthusiastic that I wanted to come back and that I was so close to earning enough credits, that she really motivated me. As soon as I got off the phone with her, I knew it was going to happen and that I would do it."

Peters said he realized earning his degree would set a good example for his own child and for the boys on the basketball team he coaches at Winnemucca Junior High School.

"I always felt guilty pushing the importance of a college education to them when I had bailed out on it. And my wife has two degrees," he said of Dana Muckel Peters, a former sports editor at KTVN-TV in Reno. "I had to have some reason to speak at the dinner table."

Peters said he's hoping to earn his degree in general studies with minors in business and secondary education next spring.

"It's exciting to know I'm going to complete this after all those years I spent at UNR," he said.

"If you had talked to me about six months ago, I would have said, 'No way,' but that one phone call changed my outlook completely."

Additional Facts

Program guidelines

Nevada colleges and universities will help college dropouts return to earn their degrees. Under the guidelines, an applicant must be 25 to 62 years old; have been a student at a university within the last 10 years or at a community college within the last five years, but not currently enrolled; have earned at least 45 credits toward (30 credits for TMCC) an associate degree or at least 90 credits toward a bachelor's; had a minimum 2.0 grade-point average in college; not have a postsecondary degree; have no institutional financial, disciplinary or academic problems.

For more information

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