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WKU reaching out to transfer students

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Western Kentucky University has found a niche demographic to target in its quest to help fulfill the state's goal to double its number of working-age people with bachelor's degrees.

The university has reached out to a population it had overlooked - community college transfers. Using the popularity of Web-based college courses, Western's University College has been able to tap into this market, making it easy for nontraditional and traditional students to gain a degree that spans a spectrum of disciplines.

About 50 percent of students taking courses at the community college level are seeking technical or professional degrees, said Jeff Butterfield, chair of the Computer Information Technology department. He said there are 110,000 community college students in Indiana's community college system, 300,000 in Tennessee's and 86,000 in Kentucky's.

Through special program agreements with the majority of the state's colleges and universities, including Western, students seeking technical or professional degrees from community colleges have a smoother transition.

"Those taking specialty courses have a hard path getting to WKU," Butterfield said.

Butterfield said typically students entering college take their general education courses first and focus on their specialty courses during their junior and senior years. He said this format has made it difficult for the nontraditional student garnering an associate's degree from a community college to transfer to a four-year school.

One way to counteract this would be to invert that format, allowing transfer students who've taken their specialty courses first to take their general education courses last, he said.

The university, through the University College, has partnerships with community college systems in five states, including Kentucky, that allow students to transfer to WKU after completing the associate's degree program. Through collaboration with these state's community college, WKU is getting the word out - like Bryan's story on the Somerset Community College Web site illustrates.

"This is Bryan. He's a junior at Western Kentucky University, but he started at SCC," the ad explains. "Bryan had a nearly seamless transition from SCC to WKU."

The students are considered dual enrollment students, where they are enrolled both at WKU and their hometown community college, said Barbara Burch, provost of WKU.

"Once finished, they'll be an auto-admit at WKU," she said.

These students will take their courses online, which means they never have to leave their hometowns, Butterfield said, which was also emphasized in SCC's ad - "and because he is able to take all of his classes online, he didn't have to move away from London." "WKU is really leading the field in this," he said.

"One of the fastest-growing segments of higher education is nontraditional adult learners," Butterfield said in a previous interview. "Typically, working professionals can't afford to quit their jobs, relocate to Bowling Green and

move into a dorm.”

During the current school year, University College has been transitioning into a cohesive academic unit that supports and enables interdisciplinary programs. In the College are Leadership Studies, Women’s Studies, Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies, University Experience, the ALIVE Center for Community Partnerships, Master’s of Administrative Dynamics and Computer Information Technology & Systems Management.

Under systems management, Butterfield said students can enter into fields such as technical writing, military systems and professional sales. He said the university will be taking the interdisciplinary program under Computer Information Technology to regional campuses, including Owensboro, Glasgow and South Campus.

The state, Burch said, has mandated a study to assess the needs of nontraditional students. A lot of community college students go to work, she said.

“We have to go to them,” she said.

Board of Regents academic affairs chair Ladonna Rogers said there had been a lack of cooperation between four-year institutions and the community colleges. She said the cooperation needs to be between all parties.

“This is a huge step for us. Stories get out ... pegged for resisting community college credits, and over years there’s some validity to those stories,” said WKU President Gary Ransdell. “Perceptions have shelf life. This is a great step forward that we stand to do well in ... allowing us to tailor and meet needs.”