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FEATURED

Helping the Paper Chase: Adult learners have opportunities to complete degrees with Project Graduate

By Bobbie Hayse Messenger-Inquirer Nov 12, 2017

Photo by Bobbie Hayse, bhayse@messenger-inquirer.com. Erin Neal describes her first semester ever at college 22 years ago. Neal, 40, of Owensboro, completed her bachelor's degree this year at Western Kentucky University, and is an advocate for adult-learners earning higher education degrees and credentials, something the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education is pushing for this fall with its initiative Project Graduate.

Aside from raising her four children to become productive and helpful citizens, one of the most important things Erin Neal said she has done is complete her bachelor's degree at Western Kentucky University.

Neal, a 40-year-old Kansas native, moved to Owensboro 13 years ago with her then-husband and their children. Before that, she began several degree programs, from training to become a legal assistant to cosmetology, none of which she was able to finish for various reasons.

Neal said having her children watch her graduate last May, ending what was a 22-year college journey, was one of the most rewarding experiences of her life.

"I just wanted to give myself the tools to be successful," she said. "I think every tool that you have in your tool chest makes you a better person. Just to have that degree is such a huge thing."

Neal is one of thousands of adults the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education has been targeting for 10 years with Project Graduate, an initiative to recruit previous students with a high number of college credit hours to come back to school and complete their bachelor's degrees.

Neal graduated with an interdisciplinary studies degree with an emphasis in organization and communication of ideas, something she said has assisted in her full-time job at Ohio Valley Ag and in raising her children.

Degree attainment has also helped to boost her confidence.

"You really learn about who you are as a person," she said, "and evolving as a person helped me be a better parent."

Aaron Thompson, executive vice president and chief academic officer of the Kentucky CPE, said Project Graduate is a 10-year-old program that the council has been rejuvenating this year.

There have been 2,500 adults who have completed their college degrees since its inception, but the council wants to encourage more adults to take advantage of the opportunities it offers. Members of the council also know that if they hope to reach their goal of 60 percent of the "working-age population" to obtain a credential or degree by 2030, they have to focus efforts on more than traditional high school students, Thompson said.

"We have to grab these adult learners," he said.

Some qualifications for Project Graduate are that students must be looking to complete their first bachelor's degree, have 80 or more credit hours already earned from a regionally accredited college or university toward that degree and must be out of college for at least two years.

There are options for students seeking their first associate degree as well, and they include having at least 30 or more credit hours from a regionally accredited college or university and be out of college for at least two years.

Kentucky's four-year universities participating in Project Graduate are WKU, Eastern Kentucky University, Kentucky State University, Morehead State University, Murray State University, Northern Kentucky University, the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville.

To "sweeten the deal," these schools have increased their "adult-friendly incentives and services," according to the CPE.

Bradley Kissell, WKU director of the adult and regional campus enrollment, said since Project Graduate's beginning, the university has participated in all it has to offer nontraditional students. He said it is more than a program and has been very influential in changing the lives of many people.

Some advantages of WKU's Project Graduate are: students' application fees being waived; what universities are calling a "single point of contact" service where students can have all their needs met; personal academic advising and degree audit summaries; academic amnesty on a case-by-case basis; continued student support services; assistance with prior learning assessments; and Tier II priority registration status, according to WKU's website.

Kissell said he and his team want to be as available as possible for adult learners because it can be a difficult transition for them to make the decision to go back to school.

"We are here throughout their entire academic experience," he said. "If they have any questions, this becomes their one-stop center where we will be here to support them and help them find exactly what they need to move them through the system."

Jason Luedke, a Daviess County Sheriff's Department deputy, is another adult learner who will be graduating in December from WKU with an interdisciplinary studies degree. He used his GI Bill to go to school for four years when he got out of the Marine Corps in 2006 but said he stopped when he ran out of money.

He's among a "healthy market" of adults who are wanting to finish their degrees, if given the opportunity, he said.

"This has been a goal of mine since I got out of the Marines," he said. "Especially since I took advantage of the GI Bill."

It feels good that he will finally be completing a longtime goal, he said.

"(The sheriff's office) is trying to be a professional organization, and if you are going to state that, you should always be moving forward in your education in some way," he said. "You just need to be a well-rounded officer."

For more information about Project Graduate, visit cpe.ky.gov or knowhow2goky.org/pg/.

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