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Free college tuition boosts future outlook for 40 unemployed students

University president urges other colleges to follow suit

Lisle, Illinois - Brimming with new confidence, 40 nontraditional students began their journey toward earning academic degrees aimed at ending years of unemployment.

Participating in Benedictine University's "Illinois Back to Work" free tuition program, the students, many who are parents, listened attentively to important information provided during their new student orientation recently.

By the time these 40 students graduate, assuming all applicable financial aid remains constant, the University will have given away nearly \$1 million in free tuition.

Benedictine President William J. Carroll welcomed the students, encouraging them to believe in their ability to successfully complete their respective degrees and assuring them that all the resources of the University are available in this challenging endeavor.

"It has given me hope that everything is going to be OK," new student Cynthia Prewitt said. "It's wonderful that they are giving us this opportunity to excel."

Ten years have passed since Prewitt, 48, last attended college. At that time, she had one year remaining before circumstances forced her to abandon her degree pursuit. Now, she enthusiastically states she will not only complete her degree, but also complete it at a university she never thought she could afford to attend.

"I had heard about Benedictine being a great place to learn," Prewitt said. "As far as me being able to afford to go here (before the free tuition grant), it was not an option."

That option changed when Prewitt learned of Benedictine's Illinois Back to Work program. Benedictine University launched the program earlier this year to offer free tuition to the long-term unemployed who had not earned a bachelor's degree.

Benedictine is the first university in the country to lead in helping the unemployed pay tuition. Although the program is for unemployed Illinois residents, Carroll hopes

universities nationwide will offer similar programs aimed at re-educating an experienced workforce.

“I throw out a challenge to every college in this country that there is no reason that they should not be doing the same thing,” Carroll said. “People are going to ask (grant recipients), ‘How are you affording it?’ They can say, ‘I got a scholarship,’ because they did,” Carroll told the thankful recipients.

“A program like this -- where you are actually going out helping the unemployed and the non-traditional student -- I think is just wonderful,” said Illinois state Rep. Rich Brauer (R-100th).

“Anytime you can take someone who is at a difficult point in their life – such as being laid off – and you give them some technical training or some additional skills, they are able to better themselves and be a lot more employable.”

Carroll emphasized that he went against the norm to build the Illinois Back to Work Program because “it was the right thing to do” and a reflection of Benedictine values such as being concerned with the development of each person.

Donald Henschel, chair of the undergraduate Business Department at Benedictine, echoed Carroll’s sentiments, reflecting upon the quality of students accepted into the free tuition program.

“The students who I talked to were all good people with solid career track records,” Henschel said. “They had just fallen upon hard times in a difficult economy. They expressed a genuine interest in our programs and had backgrounds suitable for entry. They just needed someone to give them a chance for a comeback.”

Making a comeback is at the forefront of each day’s agenda for adult students like Ben Horbacz of Naperville.

“Today’s my birthday, and aside from winning the lottery, I could not ask for a better gift,” said Horbacz, 63, on his acceptance into Benedictine’s free tuition program.

Armed with an associate degree and years of experience in business management, Horbacz plans to add a Bachelor of Arts degree in Management toward increasing his marketability and returning to the workforce.

LeAnn DeFalco, a divorced mother of two young children, sees Benedictine’s Illinois Back to Work tuition-free program as the means to ending three long years of unemployment.

An experienced administrative assistant, DeFalco consistently faced hiring challenges by employers who demanded more than experience.

“I have been to many interviews and they would say that I have the experience but not the degree,” a frustrated DeFalco said.

DeFalco plans to earn an Associate of Arts degree in Business Administration and possibly pursue a career in human resources.

To view the Illinois Back to Work Orientation video and personal interviews, please visit <http://www.ben.edu/IBWvideo>