



N.J. program aims to turn work experience into a degree

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By Jonathan Lai (7/18/14)

July 18--Karen Murray had left Rowan University without a degree and gone back once before. When she left a second time, the lack of a bachelor's degree, just a few classes away, nagged at her.

"I had four courses left, and I thought, 'There's no way I could let this go,' " Murray said Thursday. "It was always, 'What am I going to do?' . . . It always played on my mind."

Several years later, she got a letter from Rowan announcing a pilot program for those who had left the university with credits but no degree.

"Where have you been? We have missed you," the 2012 letter read.

She called Rowan that Friday and was back in a classroom the following Tuesday.

"The timing was perfect," said Murray, now 49, of Runnemede.

Rowan has mailed out hundreds of letters to onetime students like Murray as part of a campaign to increase the number of college graduates in the region. On Thursday, a new option was unveiled: a statewide cooperative of five schools, including Rowan, that will work together to offer college credit for nonacademic learning outside the classroom.

Under that program, a student such as Murray, a sales manager for a magazine, might be able to receive, say, business or management college credit for skills she has learned at work.

Thomas Edison State College, the adult-centered college in Trenton, anchors the New Jersey Prior Learning Assessment Network pilot program announced Thursday. Also in the NJ PLAN consortium are Essex County College, New Jersey City University, and the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Thomas Edison has long offered credit for nonclassroom learning and will help administer the program to expand the options for the other schools, said Marc P. Singer, vice provost at the college, who will oversee the pilot. "It's basically assessing what students have learned from any place that's not a college, really," Singer said.

"Why privilege the stuff that happens just in the ivory tower?" Singer added. "As long as you can demonstrate that what you know is equivalent to what you would have learned in the classroom, then we should give you credit for that."

Thomas Edison State College will evaluate students, who can submit portfolios based on their experiences. Someone who has long played the violin, for example, could send a video, Singer said, and the school would determine whether the violinist demonstrated the skills that would be taught in a music class. The number and allocation of credits will ultimately be up to the school where the student enrolls.

Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno announced the NJ PLAN program Thursday, alongside Rochelle Hendricks, the state secretary of higher education. New Jersey has more than 863,000 adults who have some college experience but no degree, said George Pruitt, Thomas Edison's president.

New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware fare better than many states in the percentage of adults with some college coursework.

Still, in South Jersey, including Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester Counties, nearly 1 in 5 adults over 25 have attended college but lack a degree, according to Census Bureau data.

A few years ago, Rowan University began to analyze its population of students who left before graduating; it found that 2,600 students had dropped out between 2006 and 2012.

"The idea was how do we get where they have accomplished, where they are today, and bring them back to finish a degree, especially when they are so close to it?" said Ali A. Houshmand, Rowan University president. "If Thomas Edison can get them additional credit, if we can get them to their degree with the least amount of cost, this is the plan."

With the addition of the "prior learning assessment" program, Houshmand sees the potential for Rowan to bring in large numbers of former students to complete bachelor's degrees, even those who began at other universities -- "an endless inventory of such students."

Rowan's Project Graduation Quest, the homegrown program that helped Murray, began in 2011 with mailings to 410 students who had dropped out between 1986 and 2006. Ten wrote back that they had completed their degrees elsewhere; 41 took Rowan up on its offer, and 10 have since graduated. None has left the program altogether.

"It may be OK to do something at a certain point in your life, but as time progresses and people want to get promoted or they want advancement, having that degree can be the tiebreaker between them and the person they're competing with," said Karen T. Siefring, an academic adviser in the business school, who helped create and run Project Graduation Quest.

For Murray, the Rowan program came at just the right time. She graduated, with honors, in May 2013. The long road through Triton High School (Class of 1983) and Camden County College to Rowan, while balancing a job and raising a son, was finally over. Two months later, Murray was

promoted to a management job where a bachelor's degree wasn't necessarily a prerequisite, she said, but every other person at that level has a degree.

She's now pursuing a master's degree at Rowan's business school.

"I really worked hard at it. It was amazing. Lot of hard work, but I've never felt such a sense of accomplishment," Murray said. "It took so long, and I just kept persevering. It worked."

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