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STATES AIM TO LURE COLLEGE DROPOUTS BACK TO SCHOOL

By Melissa Korn
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Adults across Tennessee are being blasted with a message on television, radio and highway billboards: Finish what you started.

State education officials have spent \$1 million in the past year to advertise their Tennessee Reconnect program, an initiative aimed at bringing college dropouts back to school. Public and private institutions are mining student records and reaching out to people who have made it more than halfway to graduation. Churches and job centers are also promoting the program.

"We're doing everything, all at once," said Mike Krause, executive director of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, which aims to boost the share of Tennessee adults with college degrees to 55% by 2025 from 38% today. "It takes a very diverse approach to move the needle." Mr. Krause added that the state should start seeing enrollment results in the spring.

Tennessee is among a number of states seeking to boost the ranks of college graduates and improve local economies. After enticing more people through the high-school-to-college pipeline with better counseling and financial aid, they're now turning to former students as the best bet for prospective students.

Last month, Mississippi's public universities announced plans for Complete 2 Compete, a program encouraging adults to return to school for a degree. Iowa, North and South Dakota and cities including Albuquerque, N.M., and Louisville, Ky., also have been pursuing so-called comeback programs, and often include financial incentives like grants and credit for work experience to minimize the financial sting of tuition.

The stakes for failing to produce an educated workforce are getting higher. Nearly 37 million working adults nationwide have some college credits but no associate or bachelor's degree, according to a Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of census data. Yet by 2020, the center projects, 35% of job openings will require at least a bachelor's degree, up from 32% in 2010. States are desperate to lure those employers that need high-skilled—and well-paid—workers.

A 2013 report from the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute found that median wages hovered around \$15 an hour in states where 30% or less of working adults had bachelor's degrees. For states where more than 40% had bachelor's degrees, median hourly wages were \$19 to \$20, an annual difference of \$10,000 for full-time employees.

Bryan McBride, a 39-year-old insurance-account manager from the Nashville area, took the college plunge again with help from Tennessee Reconnect after finding information about the program online.

Guided by phone calls with an adviser, he signed up for online classes at Columbia State Community College this fall and is close to earning an associate degree in business administration. His tuition costs are fully covered by state grants and scholarships.

Mr. McBride spent about two years at Middle Tennessee State University in the mid-1990s, had a family, switched from working part time to full time at an insurance office, and just never found time to go back, he says.

But now "I've tapped out what I can do" at work, he says, estimating that three-quarters of his colleagues with the same title have degrees.

Mr. McBride says giving up his nights and weekends hasn't been easy. "But free education? I can't believe anyone would turn that down," he said.

Yet many are, especially as nontraditional educational programs gain steam.

Since February, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education has sent 270,000 emails and 125,000 postcards—and made 30,000 phone calls—to adults who left school without a degree in the past 10 years and now reside in the state. It aims for 60% of adult residents to have postsecondary credentials by 2025.

By early December, 9,000 of those targeted by Indiana's You Can. Go Back. campaign have re-enrolled in school, and about 22,000 people—10 times the typical number—have applied for a \$1,000 grant earmarked for adult students. The state hopes to get 200,000 adults back to college through the \$300,000 campaign.

There is a chance that state officials aren't factoring in the large numbers of adults who hold vocational certificates or alternative credentials, which often lead to jobs that pay better than those for associate-degree holders, earnings data show.

Caleb Francis left Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis after three semesters. Now 23 and working as a software developer at a startup in Indianapolis, he isn't sure returning to campus would help his career.

Mr. Francis landed a job soon after completing a three-month coding boot camp at Iron Yard, a chain of coding schools, earning a starting salary in the \$40,000-to-\$50,000 range. "That's definitely something you can live on here," he said, adding that he was employed six months before his original college graduation date.

Mr. Francis' experience underlines that going back to college can be a hard sell.

"It's a tough population. Their lives are complicated," said Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education Teresa Lubbers. "We have to keep our foot on the pedal, keep reminding people, keep contacting them."