WHY SOME ADULTS DON'T GO BACK TO GET THEIR DEGREES

By Melissa Korn
December 24, 2016

As state officials try to lure adults with some academic credits but no degree back to college, they're getting a lesson on what works and what doesn't.

Programs that require dropouts to simply sign a form or pay a nominal graduation fee have had the most success, say individuals who run and fund the efforts.

Project Win-Win, a foundation-backed experiment that ran between 2009 and 2013, helped 61 schools in nine states mine their student data to find 6,733 people who had accumulated enough credits for a degree but never followed through to actually get the degree. They tracked down and awarded sheepskins to about 4,500 individuals.

States Aim to Lure College Dropouts Back to School
But once adults are asked to crack open books or spend money on tuition, completion rates plummet. Of the 20,105 individuals Project Win-Win identified as being "nearly" done with their degrees, just about 1,700 had returned to school by late 2013. Adults who were still short on math credits were the least likely to return.

"Life gets in the way for a lot of these individuals," says Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of Lumina Foundation, which supports increased educational attainment. "It is challenging to re-engage people."

Jon Dixon, director of quality for a manufacturing company in South Bend, Ind., knows he has hit a career ceiling without a degree.

Mr. Dixon, 43 years old, spent two years in college in the early 1990s. He dropped out after landing on academic probation at Indiana State University and jobs in the manufacturing sector were plentiful enough that he didn't feel any urgency to return.

Though his salary is solid for the area, in the $60,000 range, Mr. Dixon says he is "extremely concerned" about his prospects 10 or 20 years down the line, with most peers holding degrees.

But for now, he says, he would rather spend time with his family—including one child currently in college—than study for himself.