

Nonprofit goes after college dropouts to help them finish degree

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Diana Ramirez-McCormick mirrors 10 percent of Chicagoans.

The 39-year-old South Loop resident had attended college at some point in the past, leaving short of obtaining a degree.

For a year in the early 1990s, she went to DePaul University — moved, snagged lucrative sales jobs, and never made it back.

The economy's much different two decades later.

Her last employer went under last year. She's unemployed.

"I've regretted not finishing school. I'd attempted to go back a couple of times," she says. "It's time. My kids will both be in school soon. But I didn't know where to start."

McCormick and 300,000 other identified Chicagoans are now being targeted by a recently launched partnership that answers a national challenge to increase levels of college attainment in major metropolitan areas nationwide.

The nonprofit Complete The Degree, formed by groups long in the trenches of work force development — One Million Degrees, the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, Women Employed, and the Chicago Workforce Investment Council — established a center this summer at 35 E. Wacker.

It provides adults who have amassed some college credits with free one-on-one assistance to finish college. Help includes exploring college options, obtaining elusive financial aid, and support on the way to completion.

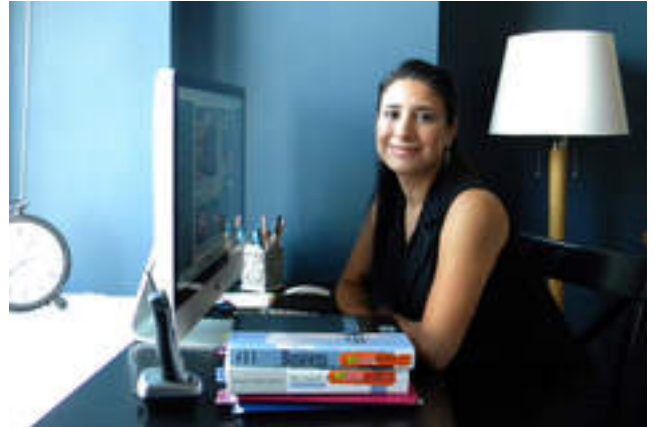
It's part of a national trend of public/private efforts tapping into the so-called "talent dividend" — a correlation between college attainment levels and per capita income.

Studies indicate 58 percent of a city's success, measured by per capita income, is tied to the percentage of its adult population with college degrees. Other studies showed that in the largest metropolitan areas, a percentage point rise in the aggregate adult four-year college attainment level was equal to a \$763 rise in the region's annual per capita income.

The new program hopes to impact both college and income data in the Chicago area by helping its targeted population in the city and extending its services to suburban Cook County.

"Our advisers can meet them at our center, over the phone or online," says Clifton Williams, director of the center, where prospective students often get help obtaining college credit for life experiences, and counseling regarding high demand careers, e.g., those in technology and health care.

"These are adults who work and/or have families, so we have advisers who can work with someone at midnight if that's what they need. It isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. We tailor to the individual. We don't just help them enroll. We follow them through graduation," Williams said.



Diana Ramirez-McCormick, 39, a mother of two small children who had attended a year of college in the early 90s before leaving for a lucrative job, recently returned to school with help from Complete The Degree. The program helps adults who have past college credits go back to school and finish their college degree.
Photo courtesy, Diana Ramirez-McCormick

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With a first-year operating budget of \$725,000, Complete The Degree got a \$300,000 startup grant from the city and a \$150,000 Illinois Student Assistance Commission grant. Its private grant support includes the Chicago Community Trust, Robert R. McCormick Foundation and Bank of America.

The nonprofit is competing among 51 major cities for a \$1 million “Talent Dividend Prize” launched by Chicago-based CEOs for Cities last year. Funded by the Kresge Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education, the prize is to be awarded in 2014 to a metropolitan area posting the greatest increase in college degrees per capita over three years.

“Complete The Degree is the first program of its kind in Chicago that will guide these Chicagoans and help them get their degrees and complete their education,” Mayor Rahm Emanuel said of the 300,000 Chicagoans targeted, when the program was being introduced. “[It] will help us in our mission to build a more prepared labor pool and give our city more competitive advantages in the global marketplace.” To date, the fledgling center has been accessed by a mere fraction of a target market that includes military vets. Some 300 adults are either enrolling or have started school.

Each prospective student gets his/her own personal adviser.

“My first conversation with an adviser was about two hours long. I had all these questions,” said Ramirez-McCormick, a married mother of two who got help applying to and was accepted at DePaul and Roosevelt universities. She’s taking classes at Harold Washington College to first raise her GPA.

“She gave me realistic advice and pointed me in the right direction. You need that. You don’t want to waste your time. She’s always available when I need her. And the service is free. I’m just grateful and excited to be back in school.”

The center can be reached at (312) 267-2580, or via email at info@completethedegree.org.