

Daily Herald, June 16, 2011 (Page 1 of 2)

Benedictine offers free tuition for unemployed

By Elisabeth Mistretta

William Carroll says there is just one reason why Benedictine University in Lisle is offering free tuition to unemployed adults.

"It's simply the right thing to do," said Carroll, the university's president. "I can't say it enough. People are hurting and it's time for Benedictine to get in the game."

University officials announced the new Illinois Back to Work Program this week. The program is open to adults 25 and older who have been unemployed for at least 18 months and who do not already hold a bachelor's degree.

Benedictine will cover any remaining tuition for students in the program after all state and federal student aid is applied. Students must pay only for their books.

With national unemployment hovering around 9 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, Benedictine officials think the time is right for their program.

"Even people with college degrees are unemployed, but for college grads that number is closer to 4.5 percent," Carroll said. "I want those who never had a chance or never even thought of it to come in and embrace this program."

The program will be offered at Benedictine's Lisle campus, Springfield branch, and its Moser Center for Adult and Professional Studies in Naperville. Only specific degrees are offered, but they focus in areas projected for growth by the labor department, such as business administration, management, finance and accounting.

At first, only 100 students will be accepted to the campuses in DuPage County, while the limit will be capped at 50 in Springfield.

But Carroll said the numbers could grow.

"I have no idea what the response will be like," he said. "I don't want to overwhelm the admissions office. But that doesn't mean we are not going to serve others."

Funding for the program will come completely from Benedictine's coffers. But the university is no stranger to administering similar benevolent programs.

Benedictine previously launched its ongoing First Responders program that offers business and management degrees to police and firefighters. By 2008, that program was expanded to include tuition-free education for veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So far, that program has graduated close to 1,000 students, Carroll said. He said he doesn't know of other universities offering similar programs in a completely tuition-free format.

But he urges other schools to follow Benedictine's lead.

Daily Herald, June 16, 2011 (Page 2 of 2)

"I think every college in the country should be doing this," Carroll said.

Such programs might ease criticism from those who say for-profit schools are inaccessible due to tuition raises or unwieldy student loans, he said.

He said the real motivation is simply to help families who are suffering the effects of the recession, and society at large.

"Maybe this will offer some hope," he said. "The cure for cancer could be out there with one of these people sitting on the sidelines and not in college. That's pretty phenomenal and scary."