Laureen Lindstadt, 48, of Jamestown, N.D., is in her final semester at Valley City State University. She works full time, has two daughters and a grandson and is taking seven classes this semester. The North Dakota University System is working to do more to serve older-than-average students like Lindstadt.

Amy Dalrymple / The Forum

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Learning never stops: North Dakota universities aim to better recruit, serve older students

By: Amy Dalrymple, INFORUM

Valley City, N.D. - Laureen Lindstadt faced a list of obstacles when she decided to become a college student in her 40s.

The Jamestown woman didn’t do well in high school and had no college experience.

She works full time but couldn’t afford to pay tuition without student loans.

And she is the single mother of two girls, both teenagers in 2004 when she enrolled at Valley City State University.

Now at 48, Lindstadt expects to graduate in December, but not before she completes this semester of juggling seven college courses, working full time and baby-sitting her 16-month-old grandson on weekends.

Lindstadt shared her story Thursday with more than 50 employees from North Dakota colleges and universities who are working to remove barriers for older-than-average students.

The North Dakota University System is part of an effort to recruit more students age 25 and older, called “Non-traditional No More.”

Financial barriers are common for adult students because they typically have jobs and don’t qualify for financial aid, yet they don’t have discretionary income to spend on tuition, said Michel Hillman, vice chancellor for academic and student affairs.

That population of students also tends to have family needs, such as requiring child care in order to attend classes.

Getting comfortable on campus is another hurdle Lindstadt experienced.
“I thought all these young kids were looking at me like, ‘What are you doing here?’ ” Lindstadt said. “It was very, very scary.”

Recruiting more “non-traditional” students is a national topic right now as states work to increase the level of educational attainment of their populations, Hillman said.

The initiative that North Dakota is part of, which is facilitated by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, particularly aims to recruit adults who have college credits but are just shy of earning a degree.

According to 2009 Census data, 24.8 percent of North Dakota’s population 25 and older has some college but no degree. The national average that year was 22.3 percent.

A funding request that will go before the North Dakota Legislature this session aims to address the needs of older students.

The 11 campuses in the system have 12,750 students age 25 and older this fall, representing about one-quarter of the entire system enrollment.

Cheryl Kurki, a 54-year-old student taking online classes from Valley City State, said she’s glad officials are working to improve access for adults.

“I would think it would be certainly something that the Legislature would want to think about, at the very least,” said Kurki, who lives near Fort Ransom. “An educated work force is what everybody’s looking for.”

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Readers can reach Forum reporter Amy Dalrymple at (701) 241-5590