

# YOU (REALLY) CAN GO BACK

By Charlee Beasor

## College Initiative Seeks More Business Partners

A number of companies have joined with the Indiana Commission for Higher Education to encourage employees to go back and finish their degrees through the “You Can. Go Back.” initiative, which targets the 750,000 Hoosiers with some college and no degree.



The morning host of Soft Rock B105.7 in Indianapolis initially went to college to be a social studies teacher. But Sean Copeland knew as far back as high school that he wanted to be on the radio.

The “safe” move was to become a social studies teacher – until he was offered a full-time radio job about two years into his traditional four-year college pursuit.

“It paid just a little more than what a starting teacher made at the time, so I thought, you know what, this seems like a lot of fun. And much to the chagrin of my family, I dropped out of college and went to pursue the radio dream,” he recalls.

It didn’t end up like he hoped at the time.

“I was there four months and got fired,” he says with a chuckle. “So, I had to make that very humbling call home and say, ‘So, I’m an unemployed college dropout. Whatever you do, don’t say I told you so.’ My aunt, who helped raise me, she was very kind and did not do that.”

Copeland’s story of dropping out of college for other pursuits is not unique. He’s one of 750,000 Hoosier adults with some

college and no degree.

Those 750,000 Hoosiers make up 21% of Indiana’s working-age population, according to Teresa Lubbers, the Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education. Her aim is for those Hoosiers to get to a point where they can say: “I can do that. I can do it now. I couldn’t do it then, but I can do it now.

“We did focus groups to look at what are the reasons why people have not come back or dropped out. It was not surprising: the money, the time. A lot left not having met satisfactory academic student progress, or they left owing colleges money,” Lubbers offers.

The Commission for Higher Education’s (CHE) “You Can. Go Back.” statewide effort, now in its second year, is designed to remove

barriers for adult students to, as the name implies, go back.

Through targeted marketing, CHE reaches out to potential students and entices them to consider resuming their college career. There is \$300 million in need-based financial aid distributed annually and a \$1,000 grant to qualified applicants, funded from a \$7.5 million adult student grant fund.

An online matching tool ([www.youcangoback.com](http://www.youcangoback.com)) connects students with a higher education institution after the returning student answers a few simple questions. Public and private higher education

institutions around the state are charged with removing some of the barriers to adults returning to school (waiving application fees, providing scholarships, debt forgiveness, for example).

The other critical piece of “You Can. Go Back.” hits even closer to home for many adult students: CHE is seeking employers to encourage their employees to go back to school.

### Optimistic outcomes

The goal for CHE, the Indiana Chamber’s *Indiana Vision 2025* plan and others is for Indiana to have a 60% postsecondary

education attainment rate. Currently, that rate is about 41%.

“There is no way to get to that 60% goal without those adults (with some college and no degree),” Lubbers adds.

Results from the initiative so far are encouraging: over 9,000 students who have received the targeted outreach have re-enrolled in school; more than 5,360 adult student grants have been awarded; and over 4,900 students have been matched with participating colleges through the web site’s matching tool.

Others are taking notice.

Jason Bearce, CHE associate commissioner, says the Lumina Foundation recently brought representatives from several states to Indiana to learn about the CHE’s strategy. The state of Mississippi is modeling a program after “You Can. Go Back.”

Lubbers isn’t ready to relax though. Hundreds of thousands of Hoosiers still haven’t taken the steps to go back.

“This is not a campaign that is a one-time flashy campaign. We have to keep ourselves focused on this, all the way through,” she asserts. “In terms of the logistics, it’s a heck of a lot easier if your employer is saying ‘We want you to go back.’ The question is how can we bring more employers to the table?”

### (Business) help wanted

A number of organizations have signed on to participate, including Comcast, Cummins, Cook Group, Rolls Royce, Subaru, Toyota and the state of Indiana. Lubbers is hoping more small-to-medium employers sign on. While smaller companies might not be able to offer resources such as tuition reimbursement, there are other ways employers can assist.

Bearce adds it might be as simple as a communication change inside the company.

“Many times the employees don’t even know these programs are available, or (companies) don’t market it in a way employees would take advantage of,” he notes.

For some already zeroed in on the effort to create a skilled workforce, the “You Can. Go Back.” partnership seamlessly blends into an existing program. One example is the My Cook Pathway program at Bloomington-based Cook Group. As company executives were discussing how to tackle their own employee development strategies, “You Can. Go Back.” was being rolled out.

Cook Group President Pete Yonkman insists these efforts are not as daunting as they seem.

“It is far less expensive than we expected it to be – the (workforce) resources are there. The infrastructure is already in place,



Soft Rock B105.7 morning show host Sean Copeland dropped out of college for a full-time radio job, but is now on his way to a bachelor’s degree through WGU Indiana. Copeland says he is considering continuing on to earn a master’s degree.



The Indiana Commission for Higher Education’s goal – shared by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce and outlined in *Indiana Vision 2025* – is to have 60% postsecondary education attainment for Indiana. The current rate is about 41%.

you just have to plug into it,” he states.

Cook Group had a traditional tuition reimbursement program, which paid tuition costs after employees completed their courses. A redesigned program now offers employees the tuition up front.

“We’ve had an 800% participation increase in that program, from 50 to 450 (employees),” Yonkman says. “It’s been a tremendous success for us and for our employees and the community.”

Lubbers stresses that the “You Can. Go Back.” initiative isn’t just pursuing those seeking four-year degrees. Industry certificates and two-year degrees are also included.

“You don’t have to come back and get a four-year degree. We’re talking quality credentials,” she asserts.

Cook Group’s own program also applies to master’s and doctoral degree levels. Additionally, the company creates its own talent pipeline by hiring prospective employees on a part-time basis while they pursue a high school equivalency.

Once the equivalency is complete, those employees can work there full time. They can then enroll in qualified programs for a free two-year degree as part of Ivy Tech Community College’s Achieve Your Degree™ program.

Since the company launched the initiative about seven months ago, five employees have been hired into the company through the part-time equivalency program.

## Dual responsibility

Employers can offer plenty of solutions, but employees need to take the leap.

“We still need the individual to actually make the commitment. We can do all the wrap-around services and employers can provide tuition reimbursement, but individuals have to take advantage of this opportunity,” Lubbers adds.

“For a lot of people, this has been a monkey on their back for a long time and they want to send a signal to their families that they came back and completed, as well as accruing the advantages that come to them from a job standpoint.”

Now that Copeland has been settled into Indianapolis with Emmis Communications for five years, he decided it was time to tackle that higher education ghost from his past. Last year he enrolled in WGU (Western Governor’s University) Indiana and is now just eight classes away from a bachelor’s degree in business management. He is considering a master’s degree.

“When I dropped out, I thought, I will do this someday. And quite frankly, it was over 10 years between when I dropped out and started back again. I didn’t think it would be that long,” he says. “Finally being here and having the schedule that I have and the great resource at WGU, the excuses were pretty much removed. And now you’ve just got to do the work.”

**RESOURCES:** Theresa Lubbers and Jason Bearce, Indiana Commission for Higher Education, at [www.in.gov/che](http://www.in.gov/che) | Pete Yonkman, Cook Group, at [www.cookgroup.com](http://www.cookgroup.com) | Sean Copeland, B105.7, at [www.b1057.com](http://www.b1057.com)

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