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College degrees on UPS' dime

By Jim Hook
Staff writer

James Hawthorne has spent the past 25 years toiling in low-paying and dead-end jobs. Now, a part-time job loading packages is changing his life.

A partnership between his employer, United Parcel Service, and two area colleges is helping pay for his dream -- a college education.

"I always wanted to go to college, but I just couldn't afford it," the 42-year-old father of two said. "I never gave up ... Deep down, I knew how important having an education was."

The Chicagoland Regional College Program allows students to attend Chicago State University or Moraine Valley Community College for free while earning money working part-time at the UPS facility in Hodgkins.

Shortly after a friend suggested the program last summer, Hawthorne enrolled and was ready to attend Chicago State University.

UPS pays for tuition, books and fees, and provides transportation and housing allowances along with financial incentives to students who successfully complete their courses.

Students must have a high school diploma or GED and must be hired by the company. Hawthorne, who lives in Chicago's South Shore community, recently completed the first year of the program, earning 24 credits along the way.

"It wasn't easy, but it's well worth it," he said. "I've got my sights set on the big picture. "I know how valuable an education is. And this is a free education."

His grades — a B, C and two Ds — earned him another \$500 bonus that he'll use to travel to Tennessee next week to visit friends.

The hardest part of balancing work and school is getting there, said Hawthorne, who doesn't drive. Five-days-a-week, he takes a train and bus to the Hodgkins facility by 4 a.m. to start his \$9-per-hour job as a package handler.

"For what (UPS) is offering me, getting up in the morning is the least of my worries," he said. "This has been great."

And that is the program's goal.

"It really is a win-win situation," said Mike Colky, who created the CRCP.

Colky said the program motivates high school students to graduate so they qualify to receive tuition reimbursement. Colleges win because they get dedicated students who return each semester. Students win because they receive a "virtually debt-free education."

And, he said, UPS wins because these students help stabilize their workforce. Colky said the students work shifts between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m. or 4 and 9 a.m.

"The company has a really hard time filling those time slots," he said. "Normally it takes six or seven people to fill one of those time slots.

"It's late hours and it's hard work," Colky said. "And they're loading and unloading trucks by hand. It's hard work, but the benefits are pretty amazing."

Hawthorne said he likes setting an example for his 10-year-old daughter. He also has a 22-year-old son.

"We do our homework together," he said. "And by going to college now, I'm setting an example for her."

Hawthorne said he receives a \$75-a-month bus pass and \$333.33 each month as a housing allowance that helps pay his \$600-a-month rent.

He said he hopes to earn a bachelor's degree and pursue a management career, perhaps with UPS.

"I feel a certain level of loyalty to the company for what they have given me," Hawthorne said. "We'll see what happens."

Jennifer Zima, 19, of Palos Hills, said she has saved \$3,000 in two semesters attending Moraine Valley Community College.

"It's an awesome program," said Zima, who recently completed her freshman year. "The job pays well, and I get free tuition and books. And I get additional money by doing well in school. And that's what it's all about."

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