



CURT HUDSON

Angelica Vidro (left) works with her Graduate! Philadelphia counselor Monique Gilchrist at the group's office in the Gallery at Market East.

Graduate! Phila. is helping students on road to degrees

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More than 300,000 people in the area, including more than 70,000 in Philadelphia alone, have enrolled in college but didn't graduate.

On the opening day of the Graduate! Philadelphia center in February, Angelica Vidro, a single mother of two from Kensington, entered the doors determined to remove herself from those ranks.

Graduate! Philadelphia, a joint initiative of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, is aimed at increasing the number of adults in the region with college degrees. Vidro is one of about 1,000 they've helped put into the pipeline to realizing that dream since opening the center at the Gallery at Market East. The program is operated in partnership with the Philadelphia Education Fund and funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and city of Philadelphia.

"There is a huge hunger out there for this kind of guidance on how to get to college," Hadass Sheffer, executive director of Graduate! Philadelphia, said. "We are just really floored by the progress, by how proactive people who are coming to the center are, how eager they are to get started and how fast they want to work through the issues."

Graduate! Philadelphia, which has nine local colleges and universities as partners, helps students sort through the multitude of barriers they face in returning to finish degrees, such as finding a school, fitting classes into schedules and finding money to pay for it.

"I think it's clear from the day they opened up their doors that there was real pent-up demand," said Matt Bergeiser, Philadelphia program director for the Knight Foundation, which provided a \$535,000 grant over two years.

Going it alone, Vidro found, was not only intimidating, but would have lengthened the time it took her to get her degree.

"I was doing it on my own, and I felt lost," said Vidro, who plans to enroll in Neumann College this fall, which serves as a partner in addition to Chestnut Hill College, Community College of Philadelphia, Holy Family University, Peirce College, Philadelphia University, Rutgers University-Camden, Thomas Edison State College and Widener University.

"Even though the gas is really high right now the distance may be worth it so I can finish my degree," said Vidro, who needed just more than 10 three-credit classes to complete a bachelor's degree in liberal arts at the college she first chose, compared to just five classes at Neumann, which offers six-credit courses.

Graduate! Philadelphia's partnership with Wireless Philadelphia makes laptops available to those students with a demonstrated financial need.

Within the next six-seven months, they hope to add more centers, including a mobile unit, Sheffer said.

"We want to go out to them at times and places that are convenient," Sheffer said.

Graduate! Philadelphia also has a Web site, which can be used to search area colleges by major, vicinity and other information, such as the availability of night and weekend classes, among other resources. Additional tools are planned in the next couple of months, Sheffer said.

"We have tools coming online where they can see who in their neighborhood or area is going back to college, to give them a social network," Sheffer said.

Wrapping up her degree, said Vidro, who works as a human resources analyst for the Pennsylvania State Civil Service Commission, will carry a dual meaning.

"I know that getting a degree would help me qualify for other positions higher than the one I have now," Vidro said. "It is also a personal goal because it is something I started and I didn't finish, and my daughters need to see [me complete my degree]. I need to show them what they can do."