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New program to help residents finish college degrees

By Susan Snyder

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Community College of Philadelphia and Mayor Nutter yesterday announced a plan to pick up the tab for tuition, fees, and some of the cost of textbooks for Philadelphia residents who have completed 30 or more credit hours toward an associate degree and who have been out of school for at least two years.

Starting this fall, the pilot plan will be funded by a \$100,000 donation from an anonymous person, officials announced yesterday at a news conference at the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce headquarters in Center City.

Launched by Community College, the effort is aimed at helping Nutter achieve his goal of raising the city's college-degree attainment rate by bringing students who are halfway or more toward their degree back into the classroom.

Nutter lauded the program, called My Degree Now.

"This is an incredibly important moment and gives us a platform to talk to the other 91 colleges and universities in our region," he said.

At his inauguration, Nutter pledged to double the rate in the next five to 10 years and cut the high school dropout rate in half. About 18 percent of city residents have college degrees, ranking Philadelphia 92d among 100 cities.

Among the more than 80 percent without a degree are 80,000 adults, ages 25 to 45, with at least one year of college to their credit, college officials said, citing a report by the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board.

"Because they've already gone a certain way along the path, we think we can expedite the rest of that pathway and make a difference in response to the mayor's challenge," college president Stephen M. Curtis said.

The current tuition for a full-time student taking 24 credits a year is \$3,528. An associate degree is 62 credits.

Curtis estimated that 100 to 300 students would opt for the plan in the first year. He said there would be enough funding to cover all costs for those students for the next three years. The college will seek to raise funds to continue the program after that, he said.

To be eligible, residents must apply for financial-aid grants, have been out of college for at least two years, and agree to complete their associate-degree requirements in three years or less, college officials said. They also must not be in default of student loans.

"The program is going to be a great help to get me where I need to go," said Tricia Avey, 26, of South Philadelphia.

She has between 30 and 40 credits from the University of Cincinnati and Community College but hasn't been in school for four years, largely for financial reasons. She paints houses and works as a carpenter.

The program also will offer up to \$200 toward textbooks for students who are attending free degree programs at their work sites. For example, Stephen Hart, an assistant vice president for human resources at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, said he was pleased that students in degree programs offered at the bank would be eligible.

Employers and individuals interested in participating in the program may call 215-751-8254, e-mail Mydegreenow@ccp.edu, or visit the Web site at www.ccp.edu/site/mydegreenow.