

Center aims to boost degrees in Philly

PHILADELPHIA (AP) - The mayor's goal of boosting the percentage of Philadelphia residents with bachelor's degrees got help Tuesday with the opening of an outpost at a downtown mall to help working adults return to college.

Graduate! Philadelphia will help evaluate transcripts, plan programs of study, give advice on financial aid and offer other support, organizers said.

'This center represents our belief in the future of Philadelphia's economy and the power of our people to take us there,' said Sallie Glickman, co-founder of the nonprofit initiative.

As Philadelphia seeks to replace manufacturing jobs lost over the past half-century, officials hope a more educated populace will attract employers that pay better wages for skilled workers.

Only about 21 percent of Philadelphia residents have bachelor's degrees, below the national average of 27 percent and less than half the rate in other major cities. More than 50 percent of residents in Seattle and San Francisco hold such degrees, according to the U.S. Census.

Mayor Michael Nutter has set a goal of doubling the bachelor's degree rate in five to seven years. That would put Philadelphia on equal footing with Boston, where nearly 42 percent of residents have degrees.

Many adults who never finished their degrees are discouraged from returning to school because the college process is geared toward 18-year-olds, said Graduate! Philadelphia executive director Hadass Sheffer.

But would-be older students need to know that much has changed in the college world, including the many online, night and weekend classes, Sheffer said.

Tyrone Mays, 52, of Philadelphia, is one of an estimated 70,000 city residents who never finished a degree. After attending community college in the 1980s, Mays said he got derailed by housing issues and other personal problems.

Graduate! Philadelphia is helping him re-enroll in community college, where he wants to earn an associate's degree in criminal justice and then transfer to nearby Temple University through a joint admission program.

'The more they told me, the more they showed me, the more excited I got,' Mays said. 'I didn't have a real good vision before I got here.'

The mayor hopes to achieve his goal by also improving the financially and academically troubled public schools to ensure that students are college-bound when they graduate. Nutter also wants to examine ways to stop the 'brain drain' -- people who come to Philadelphia for college, but then take their degrees elsewhere, a representative for the mayor said.

Nutter has talked of creating an office of colleges and universities to enhance the partnership between the city and its educational institutions, which are also among Philadelphia's biggest employers.

Graduate! Philadelphia is an initiative of the nonprofit Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania. It is being funded by a \$250,000 grant from the city and a \$535,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

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