

Hope for Philadelphia in college dropouts

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It is an embarrassing spot for a city that prides itself on its many fine institutions of higher learning: sandwiched between the Rust-Belt wrecks of Akron and Toledo, 92d on a list of 100 communities ranked by the percentage of residents with college degrees.

But that's where Philadelphia languishes, according to a new report to be released today by two of the city's leading think tanks. Yet, there is hope for Philadelphia's abysmally educated workforce, the study said, and from a strange source: the city's all-too-abundant supply of college dropouts.

Only 14 percent of Philadelphians 25 or older have a college degree, but the study identified 80,000 more of prime working age with some college experience. If those dropouts can be persuaded to reenroll, they "promise the quickest and most effective way to increase our stock of college-educated workers," said the report, produced by the nonprofit Pennsylvania Economy League and the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board.

The report's novel findings and recommendations might mark the first concerted effort in the nation to upgrade a workforce by cultivating former dropouts, or "comebackers."

As a group, comebackers tend to be employed in lower-income jobs with little chance of advancing without more education, the report said. Many dropped out for nonacademic reasons, such as financial problems, child-care challenges, or health-care troubles, the study found.

"These are people who might have 20 or 40 years left in their careers, who have already demonstrated some interest in college," said David B. Thornburgh, executive director of the Pennsylvania Economy League. "You can make a substantial difference in someone's life and in the economic vitality of the city if you can get that 25-year-old back to school."

Getting working adults, many with family obligations, to reenroll is no easy feat, which Thornburgh and others who worked on the report concede.

But compared with other workforce-enhancement alternatives - such as massive improvement in Philadelphia's K-12 education or stanching the "brain drain" of college graduates - reaching out to comebackers could prove a relatively quick fix, said Sallie A. Glickman, executive director of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board.

The tentative goal, Glickman said, is to coax 12,000 dropouts back to school by 2010, which would fill a projected gap in Philadelphia's demand for college-educated workers.

"We want people to just zero in on that ranking: 92d out of 100," Thornburgh said. "I mean, this is all hands on deck. We're just not going to build a new economy with that kind of a labor force."

An initiative called Graduate! Philadelphia, led by the report's author, Hadass Sheffer, seeks to raise the alarm.

Sheffer's plans include a "reengagement center," where returning students can receive counseling and help in navigating red tape, and a "cohort" approach, where comebackers take courses together to provide positive peer pressure.

The report calls on schools and employers to do more as well. Comebackers need flexible schedules on the job and night and weekend courses from schools. Tuition and fee breaks, help with child care, and paid time off for classes were also recommended.

Sheffer also hopes to develop a mailing list with colleges to reach out to recent dropouts.

The economy league and investment board wrote the report with only modest assistance from local schools and companies, and it remains to be seen how they will react to its recommendations.

But Stephen M. Curtis, president of the Community College of Philadelphia, endorsed the report's findings after reading it last week. CCP has perhaps the greatest role to play, as most comebackers are expected to pursue a two-year associate degree instead of a bachelor's.

"The notion is right. There are residents in our community who made a conscious decision to start down the college path," Curtis said. Because many leave for nonacademic reasons, they are excellent candidates for degrees if schools or employers can offer a little extra help, he said.

The college already has a pilot program that reaches out to former students who are just a few classes shy of a degree, Curtis said. It targets the "low-hanging fruit," and he advises Graduate! Philadelphia to go after the same students.

That includes comebackers such as Kevin Shane McCall, 32, who dropped out of Ursinus College in Collegeville his freshman year and later took classes at CCP and Montgomery County Community College while working full time as a bartender.

Initially, he just wasn't ready for college, McCall said. And as he became more mature, family and financial obligations got in the way of the degree.

Now an apprentice electrician, McCall is back in school through a new union program with CCP that grants credit for work training, the sort of employer-school cooperation the report calls for.

McCall expects to graduate after one more semester. "It gives me flexibility for the future. You have to have a degree in this day and age," he said.

Thornburgh, of the economy league, said he couldn't agree more.

"Sometimes, we get locked into delusional thinking in Philadelphia, with all the talk of our strong higher-education community, 300,000 students, 80 colleges, blah, blah, blah," he said.

"But from an economic-development standpoint, the benchmark that matters is an educated workforce, and there we're falling real short."