

## A Matter of (College) Degrees

By Jane M. Von Bergen, The Philadelphia Inquirer

Feb. 3--In Philadelphia, unlike Boston, Chicago or Washington -- in fact, unlike most cities -- there are more college dropouts than citizens holding just a bachelor's degree.

Tyrone Mays, 52, an unemployed laborer from South Philadelphia with a back injury, is one of the dropouts.

He carries a lifetime of shattered dreams and one glorious memory -- of the few months he spent attending college in the early 1980s.

Besides a high rate of college dropouts -- 16.3 percent compared with 13.1 percent who have earned only a bachelor's degree -- the city's proportion of total college graduates among its residents is relatively low -- about 20 percent, when graduate degrees are added.

That is compared with a total of more than 50 percent in Seattle.

A new program -- being introduced officially this week -- intends to change this long-term Philadelphia problem by steering college dropouts back to the groves of academe.

"If we have 83 colleges and 300,000 students -- isn't this like modern-day Athens?" asked David Thornburgh, a Philadelphia economist. "We have this rich environment. Shouldn't we be at the top?"

To the contrary, Philadelphia's 1-5 ratio puts it in the bottom quarter of the nation's 100 largest cities, well behind Boston, Chicago and Washington, according to U.S. Census statistics for 2006.

And that makes life difficult for people such as Elizabeth Wasserman-Riley, a human resources executive at the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

This year, the health system plans to expand national recruiting efforts.

"Our demand is increasing for certain job categories, but the supply isn't there," she said. "If the supply doesn't increase regionally, that necessitates us going outside our marketplace."

It also makes life difficult for Thomas Morr, chief executive officer of Select Greater Philadelphia, an arm of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce charged with selling the region as a location for business.

"When we survey businesspeople about what is important about making a location decision, the first thing on the list is the business opportunity," he said. "But right after that is, 'Can we find the people we need to do what we need to do?'"

Morr finds it easier to sell the region than the city when it comes to workforce education levels.

With about one-third of residents aged 25 to 64 holding bachelor's degrees or more, the region ranks close to the top quarter among the nation's 100 largest metro areas -- on par with greater Chicago and Seattle.

But college graduates make up an even bigger group -- about 45 percent -- in the Boston and Washington regions.

"If they are just looking at Philadelphia County, they may not even call us," Morr said.

Morr and Wasserman-Riley have their problems, but people like Mays face the biggest challenge.

They are not earning what they could. They are not upgrading their cars, their televisions, or their homes -- all drivers of the economy. And they are not paying the taxes they would in higher-paying jobs.

"There's a total ripple effect for disposable income," said the city's acting commerce director Duane Bumb.

Because Mays injured his back, he cannot work again at the best-paying job he ever had -- as a union laborer in construction. He is living off a disability settlement and he is not getting any younger. "I felt like I was running into a dead end."

So on Tuesday, Mays plans to show up at the grand opening of Graduate! Philadelphia, a center in the Gallery for adult college dropouts who, like him, want to go back to school. Mayor Nutter is expected to show up as well.

"I'm real excited," Mays said.

When Mays read about the Graduate! Philadelphia center in a newspaper, he arrived at the Gallery looking for help even as boxes were being unpacked and computers plugged in.

"When I left," he said, "I felt like the dead end was gone, and I could see a path in front of me. Now I have the fire and the desire" to return to college.

Graduate! Philadelphia is a culmination of three years of work and research by its director, Hadass Sheffer; the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board, headed by Sallie Glickman; and the Pennsylvania Economy League, then headed by Thornburgh. The Knight Foundation and the city have contributed \$750,000, and the Workforce Investment Board provides many administrative services.

Graduate! Philadelphia's approach is different from other college initiatives, which focus on plugging brain drain -- trying to raise the number of city graduates by keeping the 300,000 college students enrolled here from leaving Philadelphia after they earned their diplomas.

Glickman and Thornburgh took their inspiration from a depressing U.S. Census statistic -- 88,000 college dropouts ages 25 to 64 live in the city.

There would be no brain drain to plug if Glickman and Thornburgh could get some of the dropouts back to school, they realized.

These people were not leaving. They were already home.

Nor was Graduate! Philadelphia starting from scratch. These people wanted to go to college.

So Thornburgh and Glickman hired Sheffer, who had made a career in adult education, to figure out why students left college and how to get them back.

Mays is a case study.

No one in his family had ever gone to college. His mother died when he was 10. "I just ran on the streets," Mays said. "I came up in the projects, and I was stuck there."

He dropped out of high school, but earned his GED in 1980, taking classes at Philadelphia Community College.

He loved the college atmosphere and enrolled. "When I went to college, my horizons started broadening."

He loved the new ideas, the new people, and the camaraderie of his classmates, but he was not used to studying. A housing crisis forced him to quit. A series of low-end jobs to support himself and his children followed.

"Days," he said, "turned into months. Months turned into years. You feel like you are running in place."

Sheffer said it was not easy for people like Mays to return. The application and financial-aid process is geared to 18-year-olds marching in lockstep from high school. College offices keep hours during the day -- inconvenient for working adults.

Graduate! Philadelphia partners with nine area colleges that have agreed to set up special hours, to dedicate special counselors, and to evaluate past course credits and life experience.

At Graduate! Philadelphia, Kimberly Stephens, director of higher-education partnerships, helped Mays with his application and financial-aid forms.

Once Mays starts back at Community College, Stephens will stay in touch to help him through any rough patches.

But she is betting on him.

"People who drop out and return to school after having gone through life, they tend to make it," she said. "They see they really need that opportunity, and they want to open those doors."

Sheffer said Graduate! Philadelphia wanted to influence employers to pay up-front for tuition.

For example, the University of Pennsylvania Health System foots the bill -- before the class begins -- for any course an employee takes that leads to a degree, Wasserman-Riley said.

Glickman said she felt a sense of urgency about the program: "Our issue isn't a shortage of labor or a shortage of jobs," she said. "What we have is a fundamental mismatch. At some point, we're going to get to a critical juncture.

"The employers will either get the human capital they need or they'll leave. If we don't have the people to fill these jobs, if we don't get this right, we're going to lose these jobs for good."

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