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Graduate! Philadelphia helps residents return to education

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There are more than 70,000 Philadelphia residents who have obtained college credits, but not a degree.

Within two months of opening, Graduate! Philadelphia has provided assistance to about 600 students who are preparing to return to college and get a degree, moving Philadelphia toward Mayor Michael Nutter's goal of doubling the number of people with a college degree in the city within the next five to 10 years.

"It's a critical and necessary component to have the mayor support this issue," said Kimberly Stephens, Graduate! Philadelphia's director of higher education partnerships and services.

The program is designed to target this group of potential "comebackers," or generally working adults 25 to 45 years old. Philadelphia ranks 92nd out of the 100 largest cities in the country in population with a college degree. Only about 18 percent of the city's population holds a bachelor's degree or higher, whereas another 14 percent of residents started college, but never received a diploma, according to the 2000 Census.

But these unfinished degrees are rarely a result of academic failure.

The main reasons for stopping short of a degree include financial troubles, lack of time and simply life itself, Stephens said.

"Many need that extra push, that, 'You can do it and we can help you,'" Stephens said.

Wireless Philadelphia has donated 100 laptops that the program will give to the first 100 students to re-enroll in college, Stephens said. The Knight Foundation and the City of Philadelphia collectively provided the program with grants worth \$780,000.

The center shares its space with the College Access Program, which provides support in 21 middle and high schools throughout the city. A member of that program in high school, Tiara Upshaw of North Philadelphia now utilizes Graduate! Philadelphia's services.

She began college in 2003 at Community College of Philadelphia, but couldn't continue for financial reasons. Now, Upshaw said she plans to return to CCP to obtain an associate's degree in business.

"Being a cashier is not a challenge anymore, and I'm looking for a challenge," she said.

In Philadelphia, 60 percent of students entering college graduate within six years, but 36 percent of graduating students soon leave Philadelphia. On the upside, 86 percent of people originally from Philadelphia remain in the city to live and work following graduation, according to Graduate! Philadelphia.

A college degree will raise an individual's income, in addition to increasing the city's tax revenue. With a bachelor's degree, a Philadelphian can double potential earnings and triple the tax revenue of a high school graduate, accumulating up to \$1 million more in lifetime earnings, according to Graduate! Philadelphia.

Marilyn Reid, 52, of South Philadelphia, has also started the process of returning to school with the help of Graduate! Philadelphia.

"It's always been a thought," Reid said of finishing her degree. "It was just a matter of doing it. Now I want to do it."

Attending CCP from 1972-1976, she earned 39 credits before opting for a full-time job. Reid applied to CCP again in 2003 but never enrolled. Now, she has plans to attend Peirce College to get her associate's degree in business administration with a concentration in management.

"Surprisingly, [Peirce College has] taken a lot of my credits from 30 years ago, so that's a blessing," she said.

While Graduate! Philadelphia was founded in 2005, its center at Ninth and Market streets opened its doors on Feb. 5, 2008. At the center, prospective students can interview the nine regional partner schools, including CCP, Widener University, Philadelphia University and Chestnut Hill College, which will also waive application fees. However, enrollment is not limited to these nine institutions, Stephens said.

Whether its admissions, orientation or registration, the center is a one-stop shop, said April Fowlkes, the off-site and transfer coordinator for Chestnut Hill College.

“Literally, they can do everything here with me up until starting classes,” Fowlkes said.

Projected numbers show that there will be a 31 percent increase in demand for workers holding an associate’s degree while there will be bachelor’s degree demand increases of a 22 percent increase by 2010, according to Graduate! Philadelphia.

“Philadelphia has a long way to go, but it is moving in the right direction with programs like Graduate! Philadelphia and institutions of higher learning that have programs that are adult-learner friendly.”

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