

Written by Hadass Sheffer
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“My return to college was emotional and dramatic. I was amazed at the joy I felt just walking on campus again to my first class,” says Anthony Banks, a Philadelphia resident who returned to college in 2010 after dropping out many years earlier.

“I had recently told a co-worker that I would really like to go back to school. She highly recommended the Graduate! Philadelphia program, and so I gave them a call. That wasn’t an easy choice. There were very real factors to consider, including how to balance a full-time job with schoolwork, and how to deal with a lack of encouragement from those around me. Thankfully, my Graduate! Philadelphia advisor helped me to sort things out. With Graduate! Philadelphia’s help, I was on my way.

“But too soon unexpected challenges hit,” Anthony recalls. “Almost immediately I had a potentially major conflict with an instructor. I decided to call Graduate! Philadelphia, and immediately felt so relieved to be able to tell my advisor what had happened. So much can change when you know someone is on your side, and truly wants to see you succeed. My advisor coached me through the process of writing a tactful, yet forthright e-mail to my professor that would ultimately invite the professor’s reply, which I did receive. This could have easily gone in another direction – I could have simply decided to drop out again— but this was just one example of the many times that Graduate! Philadelphia has helped support me, in many ways.”

[Graduate! Philadelphia](#) coordinates a regional partnership for increasing the number of “[Comebackers](#)” completing college degrees

. These are adults with some college experience but no formal degree. Many stopped attending college years ago because of financial or other issues, yet never gave up hope of returning. The partnership advocates for investing in adult college completion as an economic development strategy for the region and for the communities in which Comebackers live. Indeed, with an immediate increase in earnings estimated at \$5,000 - \$10,000 in the first year after graduation (based on a 2007 report from the Community College of Philadelphia), the direct contribution of Graduate! Philadelphia to the local economy in 2013 is estimated to be between \$2 million and \$4 million. For employers, Graduate! Philadelphia is a talent strategy for developing and retaining entry- to mid-level employees. For the 70,000 Comebackers in Philadelphia, Graduate! Philadelphia offers free college success services at several locations in the area and by phone and e-mail, supporting Comebackers until they graduate with a four-year degree. Thousands of Comebackers like Anthony now understand their college options. They know how to find financial aid, how to translate life experience and training into college credit, hone rusty study skills, solidify social and logistical supports and prepare for successfully completing their degree in as short a duration as possible. Graduate! Philadelphia is not a recruiting tool for colleges;

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colleges are the core of the partnership, contributing programming support and removing some barriers by waiving application fees. Partner employers provide workplace support and tuition assistance. Close to 2,500 Comebackers have returned to college with help from Graduate! Philadelphia. Like Anthony, they all have to balance college with work and family commitments and also navigate the complex funding arrangements of government and private loans. Daunting as this seems, these students are persisting and graduating! Over 90 percent of those who have returned to school remain on track.

Creating a College-Going Culture

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In other parts of the country economic and workforce development leaders are also increasingly interested in adult college completers as part of a broader talent strategy. In Chicago, Memphis, Hartford, Connecticut, and Greensboro, North Carolina, Graduate! Philadelphia's parent organization, The Graduate! Network, Inc., is coordinating a peer-learning network of initiatives for adult college completion. Since the Graduate! approach requires and relies on multipartner collaboration, and since each region has different opportunities and structures, Graduate! has developed a replication approach that builds on the local strengths of each region and the shared resources of the entire network. The guiding principles are a steady focus on college completion for adults, the stakeholder partnership, adult-friendly policies and practices and a sufficiently long-term horizon to make a lasting impact.

While Graduate! Philadelphia was developed by a triumvirate from [workforce development](#), [higher education](#)

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and

[economic development](#)

, and seeded by the

[Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board](#)

, The

[Economy League of Southeastern PA](#)

and the

[United Way of Greater Philadelphia](#)

, Graduate! affiliates vary in their respective geneses, operations and governance structure, partnerships and unique strengths and challenges.

[Graduate! Connecticut](#)

began in 2010 as an economic development initiative of the MetroHartford Alliance

, a regional chamber of commerce in partnership with the

[Hartford Consortium for Higher Education](#)

, a collective of eleven higher education institutions in the region. The partnership committed leadership, staffing and three years of funding. The program envisioned itself from the beginning as a workforce development project open to clients who have at least a high school diploma. For those clients who need social services such as housing, the program makes referrals to other organizations. "It turns out that a lot of the clients who came through the door required [additional] social services before they could go back to college," explains Martin Estey, director of Graduate! Connecticut. Citing examples of default, debt or homelessness, he notes that Graduate! Connecticut specifically targeted its recruitment to people who were deemed to be more college ready, turning to local employers to deliver the potential clients who already have steady resources to return to college, and who may be seeking additional education for job promotion rather than personal exploration.

Graduate! Connecticut's approach is to serve as "the single contact point between corporations and higher education." Two partners, the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium and Charter Oaks State College, provide all the advising services. "We occupy unique space as a non-biased, client-centered program," says Estey. "Graduate! Connecticut does not exist to give clients to particular schools. It's a neutral meeting place between higher education and economic development." As such, Graduate! Connecticut sees itself delivering primarily the marketing and public relations, offering more choices to clients based on their individual needs, "We're market-driven and we're client-centered."

In Chicago, [Complete the Degree](#) was created in 2011 out of a broader initiative of the Chicago Workforce Investment Council (CWIC). Supported by a grant from Partnership for New Communities, a Chicago-based funders' collaborative that existed until May 2012, CWIC developed a human capital strategy to investigate the return on investment for all monies given to workforce development, resulting in a focus on two main campaigns, Literacy to Work and Back to College. Back to College focused on the 300,000 adults in the city of Chicago with

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some college and no degree, and who were not being served by any existing program or agency. Evelyn Diaz, CEO of CWIC at the time and current City Commissioner, brought a group of nonprofit, higher education and City leaders to visit Graduate! Philadelphia in 2011 to explore it as an adult education model. Complete the Degree Chicago eventually grew out of this campaign and it began offering services on April 1, 2012.

Like Graduate! Philadelphia and Graduate! Connecticut, Complete the Degree Chicago frames its mission in terms of workforce and economic development. “We relied very heavily on an economic development argument when talking to folks and when we talk to a broader audience,” said Amanda Cage, then-director of Human Capital Initiatives at CWIC, noting that the program was born out of the workforce development system. However, the program recruits clients from one-stops and affiliated community-based organizations, and sees itself using a direct service model with advisors at a physical center location. Given the “volatility of funding,” Complete the Degree too has benefited from partnerships to deliver advising services. In addition to one full-time advisor who is currently located in an office suite, there are also between eight and ten adjunct advisors provided by The [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning](#) (CAEL). The program has also run workshops on returning to the classroom and financial aid, with assistance from CAEL and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC).

Complete the Degree Chicago currently serves anyone with some college, but who still lack a degree, though it may change its requirements and target specific populations with limited resources. Already, it has reached out to veterans because they typically have improved resources for returning to school. There are severe limits on financial aid, notes Amanda Cage, so “some of the focus has to be on people with some kind of resources to go back to school, such as people who are currently employed and veterans.”

[Graduate Memphis](#) is an outgrowth of the Memphis Talent Dividend: College Attainment Initiative, a multi-stakeholder partnership in the Memphis metropolitan area that focuses on adult college completion. Led by community-based nonprofit [Leadership Memphis](#), and inspired by the [Talent Dividend report](#) issued by [CEOs for Cities](#), which documented the critical need for increasing college attainment in metro areas, the Memphis Talent Dividend has held several meetings including one for stakeholders in higher education. Fred Turverey, the director of Graduate Memphis reported: “One of the college presidents said one of the things we need is a place where people can go to get face-to-face advice on how to go back to college, because the process for all of them can be daunting and

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especially overwhelming for adults.” With start-up support from Graduate! Philadelphia and a grant from the Memphis-based Plough Foundation, Graduate Memphis was established in early 2012 and began offering services on July 2, 2012.

Graduate Memphis “is a one-stop shop for adults with some college and no degree who are ready to go back to school,” says Fred Turverey. In addition to advising and helping students gather their documents, pick the right schools and programs and apply for financial aid, Graduate Memphis holds workshops on returning to college. With employers, Graduate Memphis aims to provide onsite advising to employees, similar to Philadelphia, as well as develop and present career pathway analyses and reports. Graduate Memphis sees its program connecting workforce development with educational attainment.

[Degrees Matter!](#) in Greensboro, North Carolina, is the most recent Graduate! affiliate. In September 2011, Steve Roberson, dean of undergraduate studies at University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), attended a conference hosted by the Lumina Foundation where he connected with Graduate! Philadelphia. Degrees Matter is currently considering its structure and strategies, and aims to use and modify the Graduate! model combined with a citywide campaign model developed in Louisville, Kentucky, called [55,000](#)

[Degrees](#). “This work screams our region,” said Steve Moore, director of Transfer & Adult Student Academic Success at UNCG, and co-leader of the Degrees Matter! initiative.

Back in Philadelphia, Anthony Banks graduated from LaSalle University with his bachelor’s degree just one year after returning to college. He is one of nearly 400 adults who have newly graduated from college after returning to finish a degree with Graduate! Philadelphia’s help. Most went back to college to further their career goals. In February 2013, the local workforce investment board, [PhiladelphiaWorks](#), [reported](#) that 51 percent of 20,000 open jobs in Philadelphia required a bachelor’s degree or higher, and another 14 percent required an associate’s degree. According to a recent [Pe](#)

[w report](#), employment rates for those with a bachelor’s degree have not changed much through the recession and into 2013 but “the proportions of [job seekers with only a high school diploma or an Associate’s Degree] who found employment declined significantly with the recession—by approximately 10 percent for those with AA degrees and 8 percent for those with HS degrees.”

In early 2013, Anthony applied for and was hired as an advisor at Graduate! Philadelphia. Now he is helping others get back into and through college and ahead in life and co-training with colleague advisors across the country, embodying the Graduate! movement.

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To read more Comebacker stories and to join the movement, visit www.GraduatePhiladelphia.org

Hadass Sheffer is President of The Graduate! Network, Inc. and founding executive director of Graduate! Philadelphia, the program that inspired the Network and now helps build regional capacity across the country for encouraging more adults to finish college. Under Hadass' leadership, Graduate! has received national awards from the Association of Continuing Higher Education (twice), the Alliance for Regional Stewardship of the American Chamber of Commerce Executives, WebWonk, Innovation Philadelphia, and was a finalist in the Collaboration Prize competition.

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