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'Graduate! Philadelphia' Looks To Get Adults Back To College

By: Dan Hirschhorn, The Bulletin

Philadelphia - With 83 colleges and universities in the region, one might think Philadelphia could boast a healthy number of college graduates. But the city is woefully behind the rest of the country on that front.

Less than 20 percent of Philadelphians have a college degree, putting the city in the bottom quarter of the nation's 100 largest cities. Washington, Boston and Chicago all have more degreeed-workers - not to mention some of Philadelphia's newly-sheep-skinned graduates.

It's a situation clearly dismaying to new Mayor Michael Nutter, so much so he made reversing the trend one of his key inaugural pledges. Upon taking office last month, Mr. Nutter set an ambitious goal of doubling the number of residents with college degrees in 5-7 years.

Yesterday, he got some help.

With help from city taxpayers and a foundation grant, leading city educators launched "Graduate! Philadelphia," an organization that will encourage adults with some college credit to go back and finish what they started.

Co-founded by the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, the initiative is being billed as the first of its kind. Mr. Nutter has given his support to the project, which was already sending one adult back to school even before its official launch.

"The time is now, the place is here, the opportunities are real," Hadass Sheffer, the organization's executive director, said at a press conference in Center City.

The group will be housed with the Philadelphia Education Fund in The Gallery shopping Center near Market East Station. It is calling its home in the shopping complex the College Access Center, and has enough money to operate for two years, thanks to \$250,000 from the city and \$535,000 from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

"There's nothing more important to the mayor than getting [education] right," said Lori Shorr, the city's new chief education officer. She said Mr. Nutter sees "Graduate! Philadelphia" as a "key lynchpin" in his education efforts.

"If you started down the path of getting a college degree and for some reason you stopped, stop here next," Ms. Shorr said.

For years, business and education leaders have discussed how to plug the so-called "brain drain" - the flow of recent college graduates leaving the city for jobs elsewhere. But in trying to create a more educated populace, little attention has been paid to the vast number of resident adults lacking college degrees.

With the city's best manufacturing days behind it, a college diploma is increasingly essential to earning a middle class wage. "Graduate! Philadelphia" is hyping estimates that having a degree means \$1 million in extra earnings over a lifetime.

"We're in an economy where having that four-year degree makes the difference between having a family-sustaining wage and not being able to make ends meet," Ms. Shorr said.

In conjunction with the Mr. Nutter's goals of cutting in half the number of high school dropouts over five to seven years and better preparing high school students for college, Graduate! Philadelphia could serve to attack the problem from the other side of the spectrum. The group has the support of nine regional colleges and universities, which plan to send guidance counselors to the College Access Center to advise adults looking to get back into the classroom.

"No one organization is going to be able to move the numbers the way the mayor wants," Ms. Sheffer said after the press conference.

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