

LOCAL/STATE

College center helps Philadelphians return to school

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PHILADELPHIA (AP) - February 5, 2008 -- The mayor's goal of raising the lowly percentage of residents with bachelor's degrees received a boost Tuesday when a nonprofit initiative opened an outpost at a downtown mall to help working adults return to college.

Right next to a dollar store and across from a nail salon, Graduate! Philadelphia will help evaluate transcripts, plan programs of study, give advice on financial aid and offer other support, organizers said.

"This center represents our belief in the future of Philadelphia's economy and the power of our people to take us there," said initiative co-founder Sallie Glickman.

As Philadelphia seeks to replace manufacturing jobs lost over the past half-century, officials hope a more educated populace will attract employers that pay better wages for skilled workers.

Only about 21 percent of Philadelphia residents have bachelor's degrees, below the national average of 27 percent and less than half the rate in other major cities. More than 50 percent of residents in Seattle and San Francisco hold such degrees, according to the U.S. Census.

Mayor Michael Nutter drew gasps from the audience during his inauguration speech last month when he spoke of Philadelphia's low rate, considered especially jarring in a region with more than 80 colleges and universities.

Nutter then set a goal of doubling the bachelor's degree rate in five to seven years. That would put Philadelphia on equal footing with Boston, where nearly 42 percent of residents have degrees.

The College Access Center at the Gallery mall is a linchpin of the mayor's effort, said Lori Shorr, the city's chief education officer.

"There's nothing more important to him than getting this right," Shorr said Tuesday at the center's grand opening.

Many adults who never finished their degrees are discouraged from returning to school because the college process is geared toward 18-year-olds, said Graduate! Philadelphia executive director Hadass Sheffer.

But would-be older students need to know that much has changed in

classes, Sheffer said.

"It's not the same old college. Colleges have moved forward to meet the needs of working adults," she said.

Tyrone Mays, 52, of Philadelphia, is one of an estimated 70,000 city residents who started, but never finished, a degree. After attending community college in the 1980s, Mays said he got derailed by housing issues and other personal problems.

Graduate! Philadelphia is helping him re-enroll in community college, where he wants to earn an associate's degree in criminal justice and then transfer to nearby Temple University through a joint admission program.

"The more they told me, the more they showed me, the more excited I got," Mays said. "I didn't have a real good vision before I got here."

Temple President Ann Weaver Hart said the university is proud of its record of embracing nontraditional students like Mays. If more students follow suit, she said, the city as a whole will benefit.

"For us to be a place where people can come and know that they'll have the educated work force that they need to be successful, we absolutely have to do this," said Hart. "It's really a part of all of us doing better, not just the individual who gets the college degree."

The mayor also hopes to achieve his goal by improving the financially and academically troubled public schools to ensure that students are college-bound when they graduate, Shorr said. He also wants to examine ways to stop the "brain drain" - people who come to Philadelphia for college, but then take their degrees elsewhere, Shorr said.

Nutter has talked of creating an office of colleges and universities to enhance the partnership between the city and its educational institutions, which are also among Philadelphia's biggest employers.

Graduate! Philadelphia is an initiative of the nonprofit Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania. It is being funded by a \$250,000 grant from the city and a \$535,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

On the Net: www.graduatephiladelphia.org

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