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# Back to school

By [Tom Waring](#) 04/04/2012 4:04 pm



Peirce College student Christine Bergmark consults with school advisers. MARIA POUCHNIKOVA / TIMES PHOTO

— With guidance from Graduate! Philadelphia, students like Christine Bergmark are taking their seats in college classrooms.

Parkwood's Christine Bergmark has an associate's degree in accounting from Peirce College and worked for about two decades in the banking industry.

Last May, she was laid off from a Bala Cynwyd bank. Soon after, she was looking for work.

One day, she visited the Pennsylvania CareerLink office in the shopping center at Academy and Red Lion roads. There, she learned of a non-profit organization called

Graduate! Philadelphia.

The mission of the organization, which formed in 2005, is to increase the number of college graduates in the Philadelphia region, with a particular focus on adults, many of whom started college but never finished.

In the Philadelphia metropolitan area, more than 320,000 adults ages 24 to 60 started but never completed a college degree.

More than 3,200 so-called "Comebackers" are receiving ongoing individual support from a Graduate! adviser, and they have a 94-percent retention rate once back in college.

Bergmark, a married mother of four who is 39 "for a few more months," enrolled at Peirce College last October after consultation with Graduate! Philadelphia.

The new student plans to complete her bachelor's degree in accounting. So far, she's off to a good start. She has a 4.0 grade point average.

**TEACH THE CHILDREN WELL**

“It’s important to work hard,” she said of her perfect grades. “It’s a good example for my kids. I expect them to get As.”

Bergmark credits Graduate! Philadelphia manager Sarah Byker James with helping her in the decision-making process.

“She was very helpful and very positive, and had a lot of information,” she said. “She had answers to the questions I had.”

Graduate! Philadelphia is inviting the public to attend *Returning to Learning: A Free College Fair for Adults* on Tuesday, April 17 from 3 to 7 p.m., at Father Judge High School.

The fair will be offered in partnership with CareerLink, Catholic Social Services, PhillyGoes2College and Clarifi (formerly Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Delaware Valley).

There will be information on financial aid; college credit for life experience; accelerated, evening, weekend, online and hybrid courses; how to balance work, studies, family and other responsibilities; and time and money management.

The following schools will have representatives at the fair: Community College of Philadelphia; Chestnut Hill College; Cheyney University; Center for Urban Theological Studies; Drexel; East Stroudsburg; I-Lead/Harcum College; Peirce College; Penn State; Philadelphia University; Rosemont College; Rutgers-Camden; Springfield College; and Temple.

“We help people going back to school consider their options,” Byker James said. “It’s a nice, low-pressure opportunity to shop around and to stop and talk to college representatives.”

### **A NETWORK OF SUPPORT**

Some adults find that family and friends question why they’d want to return to school.

“Going back to school as an adult can be intimidating, and we’re there to be that positive support,” Byker James said.

Graduate! Philadelphia is largely funded by the city, foundations and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Advisers offer individualized advice on filing for financial aid, maximizing credit transfer and trying to have college application fees waived. The organization provides classes and workshops to refresh study skills, manage stress and balance work.

“It can be a nightmare for adults,” Byker James said. “We don’t want to just get people in college, we want them to have the tools to succeed.”

Bergmark said it was not a nightmare for her, thanks to the Graduate! Philadelphia team, which has its main office and college access center at two locations in Center City.

A couple of times a month, the organization also has hours at CareerLink offices and the Catholic Social

Services location on Jackson Street in Holmesburg.

A large percentage of returning students are choosing to study in fields with job growth. Those include health care and information technology.

The Graduate! Philadelphia staff tells prospective students that some employers use a four-year degree as a “sorting mechanism,” giving grads a better chance to land a job.

### **THE PRUDENT COURSE**

In general, the staff believes a return to school can only help people looking for a promotion, career change or employment of any kind.

“It’s a pretty smart option in a job market like this,” said adviser Kris Scott.

A 1990 Little Flower High School graduate, Bergmark attended the University of Pittsburgh for one semester before returning home and taking a job at the old CoreStates bank. She earned an associate’s degree from Peirce in 1994 with a 4.0 GPA.

For 14 years, until being displaced, she worked at the Federal Reserve Bank building near Independence Mall. While there, she enrolled in an on-site degree program with Philadelphia University. She was able to transfer the 18 credits she earned to Peirce.

At Peirce, she earned a scholarship based on grades, an interview and an essay. She studies online, rather than in a classroom, giving her more flexibility as a wife and mother and at her part-time job at Target.

“I enjoy the convenience,” she said.

Bergmark expects to graduate in December 2013, giving her a boost in her job search in the accounting industry. She might eventually pursue a certified public accounting degree.

“A lot of positions require a four-year degree,” she said. “They want that piece of paper.” ••

### **Free fair facts . . .**

Graduate! Philadelphia will hold *Returning to Learning: A Free College Fair for Adults* on Tuesday, April 17, from 3 to 7 p.m., at Father Judge High School, at 3301 Solly Ave.

For more information on the fair or the organization, call 215-574-1341, option 2; visit [www.graduatephiladelphia.org](http://www.graduatephiladelphia.org); or check out the Graduate! Philadelphia page on Facebook.