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Graduate! Philadelphia Builds Movement,

Counsels Adults On How To Finish Degrees

Written by Paul Glader on Tuesday, June 5, 2012 6:00

PHILADELPHIA – At a store front in the Gallery Mall here, Hadass Sheffer tells her staff not to keep customer's waiting more than a minute.

Their customers, however, aren't buying clothes or stereos. They are considering how to start or finish their college degrees and want guidance to help them do that.

Ms. Sheffer's organization - [Graduate! Philadelphia](#) – is solely driven to increase the number of adults obtaining degrees in Philadelphia. She sees it as an important matter of social justice, economic growth and civic duty for Philadelphia to assist these “come backers.”

Her team of advisors occupy desks with comfortable chairs for clients, near the waiting room in the front of the office. Bright posters with inspirational quotes dot the walls and pillars of the space. The team has advised 3,000 residents to go back on a path to college, which is not always a simple choice.

“Coming back to college is a big step,” Ms. Sheffer says. “Adults sometimes sit outside our office for hours before finally deciding to come in here.” In Philadelphia alone, there are more than 70,000 adults who have at least one year's worth of college credits but have not completed their degree. In the Philly metro region, there are close to 300,000.

Philadelphia's downtown has seen its share of decline from Benjamin Franklin's time to industrial boom as suburban flight left the inner city impoverished and under-funded. The city is now engaged in a wave of re-developing its historic areas, attempts to lure the creative class and retain students as a flurry of pricy brunch places, arts organizations and wine bars open in the city of brotherly love.

Ms. Sheffer says she was dumb-founded by the contrast of Philadelphia's strength as a mecca for universities and students (on par with Boston for most universities in a region, with roughly 100) and its high number of college dropouts. Only 18% of Philadelphians have a college degree, compared to 26% of Americans nationally. Internationally, the US slipped to 16th, from 12th in the number of degree holders between ages 25 and 34 according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It trails South Korea, Canada, Japan and others.

“No one wanted to talk about this failure,” she says. She believed the lagging achievement in higher education affected other issues such as Philly unemployment trends, its economic growth and its numbers of poverty, crime and other social problems.

Similar projects are cropping up in other places such as Chicago, Memphis and Connecticut as well. An association is forming to network such non-profit college advising programs. “This has become a hot national issue,” she says, noting President Obama is talking about it and has sent more money to community colleges to expand capacity, aiming to improve completion rates. “This is about building local capacity.”

She and others started Graduate! Philadelphia in 2005 with United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board. The organization has six locations where counselors guide adults toward a college and career plan, helping them sort out what college, university or community college is right for the person.

“There's a multiplier effect from helping adults finish college,” says Ms. Sheffer. “They have children, nieces and nephews.”

It also tries to predict hiring and employment trends in the region, directing people to programs that help them find a job as well as those that meet workforce needs. For example, the organization has determined that Philadelphia needs more medical workers, social workers and early childhood development / day care workers. It only recommends colleges and universities that are regionally accredited, have high graduation rates and offer courses that are flexible and convenient enough for the particular adult learner. We asked her what the organization's policy is on for-profit colleges and how it prevents predatory recruiting by some of those schools of its clients. “Our partner colleges have to be invited in,” she said. “They have to conform to standards of graduation rates, policies for

adults..." The organization screens the schools to see how they use financial aid programs and how they market those to students. The president of a university must sign an agreement to work with Graduate! Philadelphia before it will send students to that college. The schools also have to commit a staff member in academic advising to work closely with Graduate! Philadelphia. "Absolutely no (for-profit) recruiters come near us. We are really good at sniffing them out."

She says some students do end up at for-profit colleges, which works for some of their clients but not others. The big questions her staff asks is whether a student can transfer credit in and out of a college (e.g. transferring a community college associate into a four-year bachelors program) and whether other schools recognize the degree.

Her advice for students considering for-profit colleges: "You should never go to a private lender when you have not maxed out your government grants and loans."

Garrett Selby, 43, is one local man who humbly knocked on Graduate! Philadelphia's door. He'd grown up in a rough neighborhood in Philly and worked jobs in security for the city over the years. When he was younger, he didn't think college was an option for him. Now, in adulthood, he manages small groups of people and is now pursuing a degree in IT management.

"I wanted to know how to better lead and guide people," he said. He also sees he should learn more about IT to stay up on changes at work and the interns who know IT better than he does. His daughter is in college and encouraged her father to also pursue a degree. "You have a lot of people in Philadelphia who are, unfortunately, a lot like me," he said. "I've had to learn to be my own cheerleader."

A former instructor at Swathmore, she was burdened with the fact that Pennsylvania had 250 colleges – third after New York and Massachusetts – and, yet, had so many minority adults who were not receiving a higher education. Nationally, the United States is lagging other countries in adults completing college degrees. As Daniel de Vise [writes in The Washington Post](#) last year:

*Instead of gaining ground, the United States has fallen from 12th to 16th in the share of adults age 25 to 34 holding degrees, according to the report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It trails global leaders South Korea, Canada and Japan and is mired in the middle of the pack among developed nations.*

*The stagnant U.S. performance on this key international benchmark reflects at least two trends: the rapid expansion of college attendance in Asia and Europe, and the continuing emphasis on four-year degrees in the United States while other nations focus far more on one- and two-year professional credentials.*

"We do college access much better than 30 or 40 years ago," she says. "What we don't do as well is college success." Her team works with people during their college experience and after they graduate to help them use their degree in the working world to find a job. Ms. Sheffer said of the 600 to 1,000 people her organization sends back to college each year, more than 90% will stay in college and finish a degree program.

She's planning to open two more locations in Philadelphia in the near future. She's also hoping to shift funding from 70% philanthropic to 30% philanthropic by 2014. She pauses for a moment while speaking with journalists because she sees an adult learner is knocking on the lobby door. "Excuse me," she says. "Patty! I think there's someone at the door."