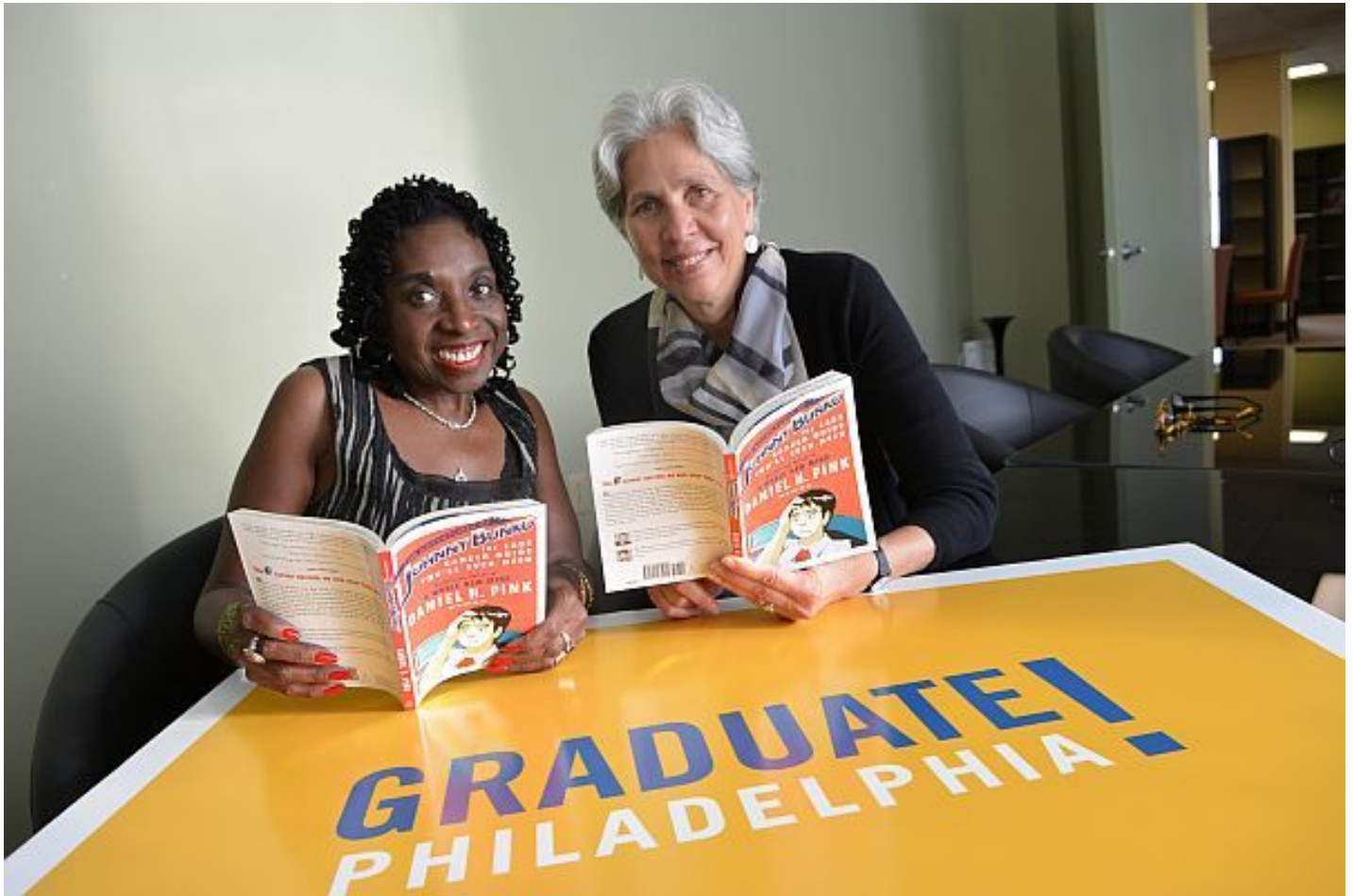


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Program encourages adults to go back to college

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From left, Denise Whittaker meets with working adults contemplating returning to college in her role as an adviser for Graduate! Philadelphia program. Barbara Mattleman serves as executive director for the college success program geared toward returning adult students. — PHOTO BY TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER ABDUL R. SULAYMAN

The Graduate! Philadelphia college success program has taken a chapter from Rocky Balboa's playbook by encouraging adults who left college before earning their degree to make a comeback.

The program prepares students with a sense of direction, determination, and the drive to stay in school until they've completed their college degree and offers assistance in overcoming the obstacles that often make people temporarily stop their studies or drop out entirely.

"That's part of the mission here," said Denise Whittaker, a full time adviser for the Graduate! Philadelphia program in Center City.

She was a 19-year-old when she left college to focus on her health and then she married and raised a family.

"I wanted to go back during all that time but I didn't think it was just the right time," said the North Philadelphia woman who started the job in April 2013.

Those who accept the challenge and seek assistance from Graduate! Philadelphia before restarting their college studies are affectionately called "come-backers."

"Everybody likes a comeback story," said Hadass Sheffer, president of the Graduate Network, Inc. which launched college success programs across the country.

"It's a positive, upbeat term," that emphasizes action and perseverance in pursuing and achieving goals.

"We have Rocky. It seems like a very Philadelphia thing," Sheffer said about a mile from where the fictional character from South Philadelphia ended his memorable run on the stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"People deserve a second chance. They deserve to make a comeback and fulfill their dream and potential within them," Sheffer said.

So far, the college success program has met with 3,500 people. Nearly two of every three working adults who visit the office have resumed their college degrees. More than 500 have completed degree programs, according to Graduate! Philadelphia, a declarative sentence that places emphasis on graduating for the roughly 70,000 adults who started college but never graduated. Across the region, that number rises as high as 300,000.

Graduate! Philadelphia staff members say working adults are no longer the exception but becoming the norm. Advisers highlight the value of a college degree because it opens the way to higher lifetime earnings than those who do not have degrees, according to a survey by The College Board.

Barbara Mattleman, executive director of Graduate! Philadelphia, said, "In order to compete for those jobs, people have to meet the requirements."

Of the 100 largest U.S. cities, Philadelphia ranks 21st in the number of people in a household with a college graduate, and steps need to be taken to improve the city's position, she said.

"In order for us to grow economically, and we want to attract businesses here, and we want to keep the college graduates in the city. We really need to help those adults," Mattleman said.

Graduate Philadelphia has several initiatives designed to assist working adults transition to the on-ramp that puts them on the path to higher education.

College 101 is an intensive, 10-week course that helps students explore their options and prepare to navigate potential obstacles prior to returning to college.

It helps them avoid predatory lenders and institutions with questionable credentials and other common pitfalls while seeking financial aid assistance. Advisers help students understand the educational institution that best fits their personal and professional goals may not be the school that offered the most scholarship money or financial aid.

In meeting with an adviser, returning students talk about their previous work experience and how to further develop skills and training they have learned. They are asked to share their personal and professional goals in order to find the sources to keep them motivated to stay in school.

Part of the built in support system includes addressing negative messages that attack their self-esteem and

may have been reinforced by family.

"We show them that they do belong in college, and they can do the work," Mattleman said.

Statistics show students who take one college course per semester have a higher success rate (80 percent) than those who take a stop-and-go approach (35 percent).

"Once you come back, you can't stop," Sheffer said. "Just keep going."

Support includes strategies for avoiding burnout and helping with the personal adjustment that comes with deciding on going back to college. It also includes help in overcoming financial obstacles.

"Since 2010, we've seen the double the number of the people with defaulted loans," Sheffer said.

Unpaid loans that have been written off by a lender or banking institution and considered derogatory credit information are no longer considered the red flag it once was, Sheffer said.

There are local colleges and universities offering baccalaureate degrees with articulated agreements that provide scholarships and tuition breaks for prospective students.

Eleven higher education institutions, including Community College of Philadelphia, Temple University, Peirce College, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) Center City, work in partnership with Graduate! Philadelphia.

Returning students can learn about jobs with social service agencies, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies that allow students with loan in default status to qualify for financial aid after meeting certain requirements, including a minimum 10 years of service. Their debt remains but they can qualify for financial assistance that can help with tuition costs until they earn their degree and find a job that will improve their ability to repay the loan.

Whittaker said she is inspired by the many compelling stories from adults who return to college because they want to become a role model to their children, friends and community.

There was a time when Whittaker sat on the other side of the desk and sought advice about returning to college.

She stresses the importance of perseverance to the dozens of working adults seeking help. She offers tips on time management to adults who must juggle responsibilities between family, job and college studies.

"I can relate to them," Whittaker said, "and I do share my story with them because many times, people feel they're alone. Even though you know you're not alone, that's a feeling that what you're going through, no one is going through. When you go to college, your family goes to college.

"They need to support you going back to school. It isn't just for you but it's for everybody, not just monetary value but in other ways too," she said.

There's adjustments on both sides, for families in understanding their loved one is not always available and for the student who must decide on making the changes that best suits them. It may mean household chores may be left undone for longer periods. Family members may need to pitch in, Whittaker added.

Returning students generally fall into three age brackets: students in their 50s and 60s; 50- to 55-year-olds who want to become role models for others or find higher paying jobs with better benefits; and high school graduates who enroll in college immediately.

Working adults may consider going back to college once their health has been restored or when the children have matured into young adults or left the nest or when they no longer have to be caregivers for a parent who has fallen ill, according to Graduate! Philadelphia.

Returning students must grow comfortable with making themselves higher priority. Many students who have decided to finish their college degree have adopted the personal mantra, "It's my turn now," Mattleman said.

Sheffer added, "They need to have the confidence they can do it, pull others up along the way."

On the day Whittaker graduated from college, her son told her she is his greatest inspiration, and he too wanted to earn his college degree.

Whittaker was encouraged to go back to a school by a neighbor who, in her mid-50s, went back to community college for a nursing degree so he could provide professional medical care for her mother.

If an older neighbor could go back to school, Whittaker thought so could she.

"I'm doing this for me," Whittaker said.

She wanted to see a goal to its completion, a move that would put on the path toward realizing a lifelong dream of becoming a teacher. She worked as an administrative assistant for Aramark before accepting a transfer to the corporate side as a regional event coordinator.

Whittaker lost some of the credits earned previously during the transfer but earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Phoenix in June 2003.

Advisers at Graduate! Philadelphia have access to data and research from local colleges and universities that can help inform decisions returning students make. The college success program offers a number of tools that can help returning students learn how to craft narratives that show their aptitudes and personality to professors who will then be in a better positions to help them and their peers who can offer support.

"We know what some of our challenges are, so we make sure the support they need is there and show them how to access them. It's a great way for us to communicate. That's the strength of our program," Mattleman said.

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