Philadelphia targets one of its toughest problems

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On Jan. 8, with the new year barely a week old, Dionne Graham walked through the doors of Graduate! Philadelphia's College Access Center.

She was looking for a new beginning.

She was looking for a way back to college.

"It had been bothering me for a while that I hadn't finished," said Graham, a 44-year-old caseworker for the state Department of Public Welfare. "I always thought about going back. I just didn't know where to start."

Graham, a Navy veteran, had begun to study at Community College of Philadelphia in the late 1990s with the help of her GI Bill. But she left soon after she started, lured by a state job to support her growing family.

It's a Philadelphia phenomenon: Too few of our residents go to college. And too many who start don't finish.

Only 14 percent of city residents hold a bachelor's degree, according to the 2005 study "Graduate! Philadelphia: The Challenge to Complete," by the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia.

In Boston, that rate is 25 percent; in Seattle, it's 36 percent.

Philadelphia's college attainment rate puts it at 92nd among the 100 largest cities in the country — scraping the bottom.

In fact, in Philadelphia — unlike Boston, Chicago or Washington, D.C. — there are more people who have started college and dropped out than there are residents who actually hold a four-year bachelor's degree.

"Philadelphia happens to be the only major city we could find that has more people who started college and didn't finish than people who finished," said Sallie A. Glickman, chief executive officer of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board.

This gap in college attainment — the official term for getting a four-year degree — has long gotten less attention than Philly's other urgent educational shortcomings, including the city's poor high school graduation rate.

Frankly, a low percentage of workers with college degrees wasn't a problem when the city's economy ran on manufacturing, shipbuilding or other jobs where skill was more important than a diploma.

But now, as any job-seeker knows, the economy is "knowledge-based" and top employers want four-year college degrees. At least.

Which means that low educational attainment has become a big problem for people trying to find well-paying jobs — and, more significantly, for the city's tax base and its economic health.

"A city's economic future is tied to the education of its workforce," said David Thornburgh, a senior adviser at the consulting firm Econsult and a former executive director of the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia.

And so Philly's low college attainment rate has burst into the spotlight. Call it a new movement in Philadelphia, a peaceful revolution brewing in a city steeped in revolutionary ideas:

Philly folks need to finish those college degrees.

The movement has been building steam for several years. In 2005, it spawned the back-to-college group called Graduate! Philadelphia and its walk-in College Access Center at the Gallery mall, 9th and Market streets.

But long before that, other organizations in the city were also working to help Philadelphians enroll in, or return to, college.

There are two federally funded Educational Opportunity Centers, one in West Philadelphia operated by the University of Pennsylvania, and another in Center City operated by Penn State. Each helps clients meet their educational goals.

And the Philadelphia Education Fund, which joined forces with Graduate! Philadelphia to operate the new Gallery center, has been in the college access business for 18 years.

The education fund began operating three college access centers around the city, at the Gallery and in West and North Philadelphia, after officials noticed that city students weren't getting enough help applying to college in their schools because of a shortage of guidance counselors.

The centers were set up primarily to help middle and high school students. But staffers have always helped people of all ages who walked through the doors, said ThomasenniaAmos, director of the education fund's College Access Program.

"We know that when parents become educated, they have as a goal for their children to become educated," Amos said. "And when children become educated, we know they will affect at least someone else around them.

"This is going to have a domino effect that is going to be good for the lives of children and their families. It certainly will create a workforce that can better serve this city," Amos said.

Meanwhile, local colleges and universities have worked to make returning to college easier, with online, night and accelerated classes; at Peirce College, students can take college classes at Northeast Philly's Father Judge High School and other "cluster" locations around the city. Several Philadelphia unions run retraining programs with a strong emphasis on college degrees.

And many businesses with Philadelphia operations offer tuition grants or other assistance; United Parcel Service and other employers bring college instructors to work sites to make getting a degree easier on working adults.

So the idea of helping folks go to college isn't a new one here.

What is new is the idea that college attainment should be a civic priority — not just a personal one. More college graduates could improve the economy, reduce crime and help the whole city.

The idea's backers — including Graduate! Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and Thornburgh — have called for the business community, educational leaders, government officials and residents themselves to recognize the shared need to boost the college graduation rate.

"It's a movement," said Glickman.

And it gained a powerful supporter on Jan. 7, just one day before Dionne Graham went looking for help at the College Access Center.

That day, Mayor Nutter took office and gave a passionate inauguration speech about the need to rebuild the city.

"There is nothing more important than growing and developing a skilled and educated workforce," Nutter said. "That is the task, that is the work that will define who we are and what we are about."

Noting Philly's 92nd out of 100 ranking, despite the 93 institutions of higher learning in the region, Nutter called on city and corporate officials, employers, educators and Philadelphians in general to come together to address the problem.

"So, I challenge us to set another goal for this city," Nutter began, "to double, to double our resident four-year bachelor's degree attainment rate over the next five to seven years.

"If Portland and Seattle and Oakland and dozens of other cities can have over a third of their population with bachelors' degrees, then so can Philadelphia," Nutter said.

As with so many issues of education, low college attainment rates are a worse problem in Philly than in the 'burbs.

When including the nearby suburban counties in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New Castle County, Del., the college educational achievement ranking for the 11-county metropolitan region is 32 percent.

That's above the national average of about 27 percent, said Thomas Morr, president and chief executive director of Select Greater Philadelphia, a regional economic development agency.

Morr said the Philadelphia metro area's 32 percent college attainment level ranks right up with the top five metro areas in the country: Washington, D.C., at 45 percent; San Francisco, at 42.4 percent; Boston, at 40 percent; New York, at 34.5 percent; and Atlanta, at 33 percent.

Even in the city, the numbers improve when including people who have received two-year associates degrees, to about 20 percent. That puts the city on a par with Chicago, Dallas, Houston and Detroit, Morr said.

But two-year degrees don't necessarily help workers — or the city's economy — much.

The average Pennsylvania adult with an associate's degree earned $30,741, according to the "Self-Sufficiency Standard for Pennsylvania" report from social-services agency Pathways PA, published in May 2006.

With a bachelor's, that salary jumps to $39,375. With a master's or more, the average salary rises to $59,965.

"The mayor is absolutely right to try to influence the lives of people in this city, particularly those who have the ability to complete their college education," Morr said.

"The data shows, if you have a college degree, you're going to be able to earn more and have a better life than if you don't."

And then there's the larger problem: low-wage jobs depress the city's wage base, which lowers tax collection and spending, hurting the whole local economy.

The Workforce Investment Board's second major report on educational attainment, "A Tale of Two Cities," even put a number on the missed opportunity.

If the city simply brought its level of educational attainment up to the state's level of 25.4 percent, Philadelphia would see a jump in its wage base of $1.8 billion dollars yearly.

"A Tale of Two Cities," published last year, aped the title and opening of Charles Dickens' novel to illustrate the widening gap of educational attainment in Philly.

The report noted that for some Philadelphians, those with college degrees and other highly technical skills, Philadelphia is "a city on the rise." Careers in education, medicine, pharmaceuticals and technology make it "the best of times" for some.

But the report also warned that for city residents living in poverty — and with little education — "it is the worst of times." For this group, Philadelphia is "a city on the decline."

Glickman and Thornburgh said they began talking about the problem of low educational attainment several years ago. That was after Glickman had noticed U.S. Census figures showing nearly 80,000 Philadelphians had some college education, but had not completed school.

"We desperately needed to increase the number of college-educated people in the area," said Thornburgh. "These were people who were working by and large, and they had already been accepted in college. But for whatever reason, work got in the way, family got in the way, or health problems" somehow forced them to leave college without graduating.

They hired Hadass Sheffer, now executive director of Graduate! Philadelphia, to begin researching the data, and they realized they could begin increasing the number of college graduates by "growing our own," as Glickman put it.

Cities, including Philadelphia, had already begun to fight "brain drain" by encouraging college students to stick around after graduating. Our effort is led by nonprofit Campus Philly.

But Glickman said she realized it is also important to help native Philadelphians get that degree. "These people were already here, and they weren't going anywhere," Glickman said.

Graduate! Philadelphia's most concrete success to date is the opening of the access center at the Gallery, which took place Feb 5. — though early arrivals, including Graham, started showing up in January.

Outside of the center, however, Graduate! Philadelphia is working to change policies that hinder adults from completing their education and is trying to convince Philadelphia's business community to support the push to get more residents to finish college.

For example, some kinds of financial aid are only for full-time students. But working adults usually can't also carry a full-time course load.

Graduate! Philadelphia also has recommended that employers and colleges provide incentives such as a reduced work week, flexible class scheduling and child-care and transportation assistance to help adults return to college.

And it has suggested that businesses that encourage employees' education goals be rewarded with some kind of benefits also.

Graham, a native of Chicago, spent six years in the Navy after graduating from high school.

While in the service, she married a Philadelphia man and later moved here and had two children. Then she started at Community College of Philadelphia.

One day, she went to a career fair on campus where the Pennsylvania state government was hiring. With a young family, she said she thought the $29,000 salary too tempting to pass up.

She left college after completing about a year.

In January 2001, she had a nagging desire to return to school and enrolled again to study for a degree in information technology.

After the summer ended, in September 2001, she registered for the fall semester.

Then the Sept. 11 terror attacks happened. Graham spent the terrifying day walking from Spring Garden Street to her home near 20th and Dickinson in South Philly, trying to get back to her 6th-grade daughter, who had been sent home on a bus from Masterman.

Graham found it impossible to think about sitting in a classroom.

"All of a sudden, school didn't seem as important. I was already working and I felt like I had to be home," she said.

Her degree dreams were delayed again.

Now, however, her children are older; her son, Mikey, is 12, and her daughter, Brittany, is 17. Brittany is a senior at the High School for the Creative and Performing Arts, and she's been making her own plans for college.

Graham said that she, too, is ready for college again. She still wants to pursue studies in information technology.

And she wants to set a good example for Brittany, who has already been accepted to a couple of colleges but wants to attend Penn State.

"I want her to see how important it is," Graham said. "I don't want her to think she can ever stop like I did. " *

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