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New Philly program encourages college dropouts to get degrees

The Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA - A program debuting this week aims to boost the number of college graduates in Philadelphia by encouraging people who dropped out to finish their degrees.

Economists say the city's low percentage of college graduates, 21 percent, in the bottom quarter of the nation's 100 largest cities, pose challenges for employers trying to find professional talent.

"Our demand is increasing for certain job categories, but the supply isn't there," said Elizabeth Wasserman-Riley, a human resources executive at the University of Pennsylvania Health System. She must recruit nationally to make up for the lack of qualified people in Philadelphia, she said.

U.S. Census data show that 88,000 college dropouts ages 25 to 64 live in the city. A program called Graduate! Philadelphia, set to open Tuesday at a downtown shopping mall, hopes to encourage dropouts to go back to school.

The program's director, Hadass Sheffer, said returning to college can be difficult because admission and financial-aid programs are designed with recent high school graduates in mind. Colleges often keep their offices open in the day, making matters difficult for working adults.

But an educated workforce is critical to the long-term health of the local economy, said Sallie Glickman of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board.

"The employers will either get the human capital they need or they'll leave," Glickman said. "If we don't have the people to fill these jobs, if we don't get this right, we're going to lose these jobs for good."

By comparison, about 56 percent of Seattle residents boast a college degree, along with 49 percent in Washington, D.C., and 44 percent in Boston, according to Census data. And only 8 percent of Philadelphians have earned a graduate degree, less than half the percentage in those cities.

The Knight Foundation and the city contributed a combined \$750,000 for the program, while the Workforce Investment Board will provide administrative help.

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On the Net: <http://www.graduatephiladelphia.org/>

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Information from: The Philadelphia Inquirer, <http://www.philly.com>

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