New center strives to help adults finish off their college degrees

by Solomon D. Leach / Metro Philadelphia
FEB 5, 2008

PHILADELPHIA. Hours before Kimberly Stephens helped officially open the doors of a new college access center, she was already confident about the impact it would have.

"For the first year, we have a goal of 650 students," said Stephens, director of Higher Ed Partnerships and Services for Graduate! Philadelphia, a free program that aims to help adults who have dropped out of college return to school to complete their degrees. "We have a good feeling that we will be able to surpass that number just by the interest that we have seen already."

The program, funded by the city and the Knight Foundation, will have its hands full in making a dent in the 70,000-plus college dropouts in the city and 300,000 in the region.

Still, city officials have high hopes that the program will increase the number of residents with four-year degrees — a goal Mayor Michael Nutter emphasized in his inauguration speech.

"We think that since this model has been used for other demographics, particularly high school students interested in going to college, it might be highly replicable with older students," said Lori Shorr, the city's new chief education officer.

The center opens today and will provide adult students with academic advising, workshops and help with financial aid, along with later hours to cater to working adults.

Peter Awn, dean of Columbia University’s School of General Studies, said centers similar to Graduate!
Philadelphia should become more common with a growing number of “nontraditional” students.

“I think they can be enormously beneficial,” Awn said.

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If you go

The Graduate! Philadelphia College Access Center will be open Monday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday by appointment. Walk-ins are welcome on weekdays.