

Graduate! Philadelphia: Turning Unused Credits into College Degrees

Amber Cameron and Anix Vyas 29 January 2010

Summary

In Philadelphia, more than 70,000 adults have started college, earned some college credit, but never completed a degree; in the greater Philadelphia region, over 320,000 adults have started college but never finished. In 2005, recognizing the significance of this population, Sallie Glickman, CEO of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board; David Thornburgh, then Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Economy League; and Hadass Sheffer, then Director of Higher Education Fellowships and Program Development at the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, combined their backgrounds in workforce development, economic development, and higher education to create Graduate! Philadelphia (G!P), an innovative organization that is committed to increasing the number of adults with college degrees in the greater Philadelphia region.

G!P's innovation is to create a general awareness messaging campaign and targeted outreach to adults ("Comebackers") with some college credit but no degree, matching these adults with a dedicated advisor in order to

create a plan for completing a college degree efficiently and expeditiously, and providing continuous comprehensive support to these individuals until degree attainment. G!P succeeds in supporting these adults through the creation of strategic partnerships with colleges, workforce and economic development organizations, and other support resources that have historically been separated by institutional and theoretical boundaries around an adult-focused college completion agenda. Finally, G!P pursues systematic public policy initiatives that will better support higher education learners of all ages, but in particular the population G!P is targeting.

G!P aligns systems and fills in gaps in resources to enable adults to go through college more efficiently and successfully. Adults are an important regional focus in three ways. First, they have a more immediate impact on the workforce, as they may be already employed or of an age to join the workforce; second, they tend to have stronger local connections and therefore are more apt to look for work in the region; and third, they are role models for their children and peers in their families and communities and tend to create a multiplier effect by helping others get to and through college.

Focusing first on adults with some college credit but no degree helps a region and the individuals achieve faster outcomes because these students have a shorter path to completion than those who have not yet started college.

The systems and practices perfected for the Comebackers can then be adapted into more productive pathways for adults who have never attended college. By partnering with employers, organized labor, community-based organizations, colleges, foundations, and government agencies in the greater Philadelphia region, G!P is improving not only the earning potential of those who participate in its programs, but also the region's competitive advantage by developing a labor pool. With every graduate that G!P supports, this innovative model is proving that the competitive educational position of the United States can be advanced. By applying the G!P model and helping Comebackers graduate, other regions can achieve better economic outcomes for their populations.

Introduction: The Broken System

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Like many Philadelphia high school seniors, Kenya had plans of going to college to pursue her dreams. She was ecstatic when she left home at 17 to attend Hampton University in Virginia. She decided to study nursing, and at first things were going great. She was enjoying school, making friends, and learning many new things. In her junior year, however, she struggled terribly with one class: Pediatrics and Maternity. She was unable to find the support she needed to help her through this course and

eventually failed. In the nursing program at Hampton University, students are required to maintain a "C" grade point average, and by the end of her junior year, Kenya's GPA had dropped below this cutoff mark. Kenya was encouraged to leave Hampton University and was assured that transferring to another nursing program would prove easy. In reality, transferring was too difficult, and Kenya did not manage to re-enter college. She dropped out.

Kenya's story reflects an emerging hot issue in the United States. Increasing the attainment rates of two- and four-year college degrees is key to ensuring that the United States remains competitive in the global economy.

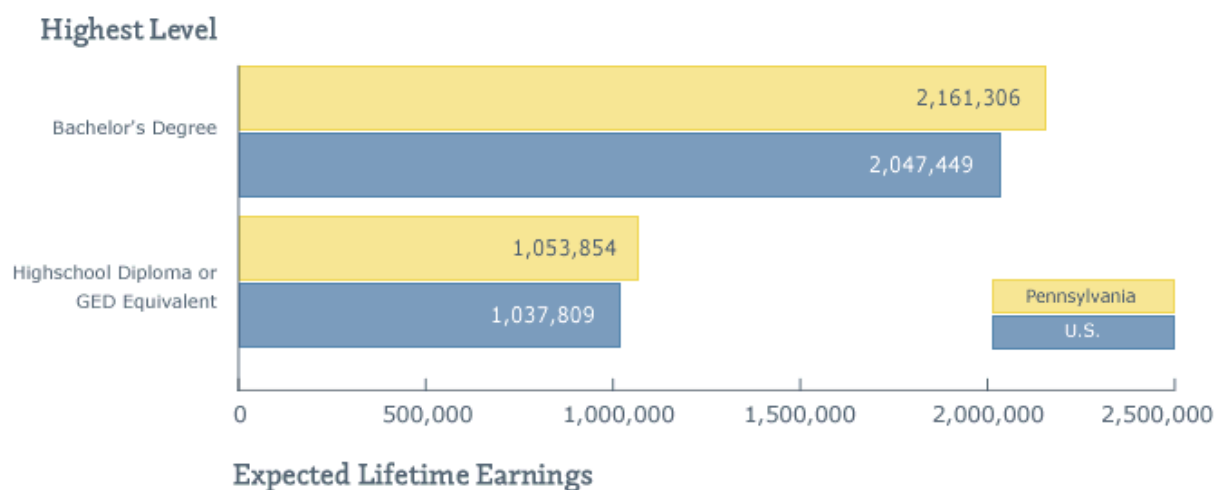
President Barack Obama has called for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Obama 2009). The Lumina Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and a long list of other education activists and state-run initiatives are working to improve the nation's educational standards and college degree attainment rates.

Compared to other nations, the United States is falling behind in providing access to and completion of college for its population. Among comparable countries, the U.S. now ranks 12 of 32 in the percent of young adults (age 25 to 34) with a college degree, substantially lower than the country's rank of third in the percent of older adults (age 55 to 64) with a college degree (OECD 2008). One study indicates that if today's college completion rates persist, the United States will face a significant deficit of college

degree holders compared to the best performing countries in the world (NCHEMS 2007).

Addressing college completion not only benefits the country, it also helps individuals. Income potential can increase from between 45 and 100 percent for individuals who have a bachelor's degree versus those who have only a high school diploma or GED equivalent (Walsh 2009). The graph showcases the significant improvement in lifetime earnings of a college graduate versus an individual with only some college credit.

Expected Lifetime Earnings for the 18- to 64-Year-Old Population of Pennsylvania and the U.S., by Level of Educational Attainment, 2006 (excluding 18- to 22-year-old students)



Beyond the concrete economic benefits, an individual with a college diploma also benefits from better career advancement opportunities, improved working conditions, better self-esteem, and stronger health (Walsh 2009). In addition, college graduates are much more likely to be civically engaged and are more likely to vote, to be active in the local community and their children's schools, to volunteer, and to contribute to charities. College

graduates are also less likely to consume social services or to commit violent crimes (Walsh 2009).

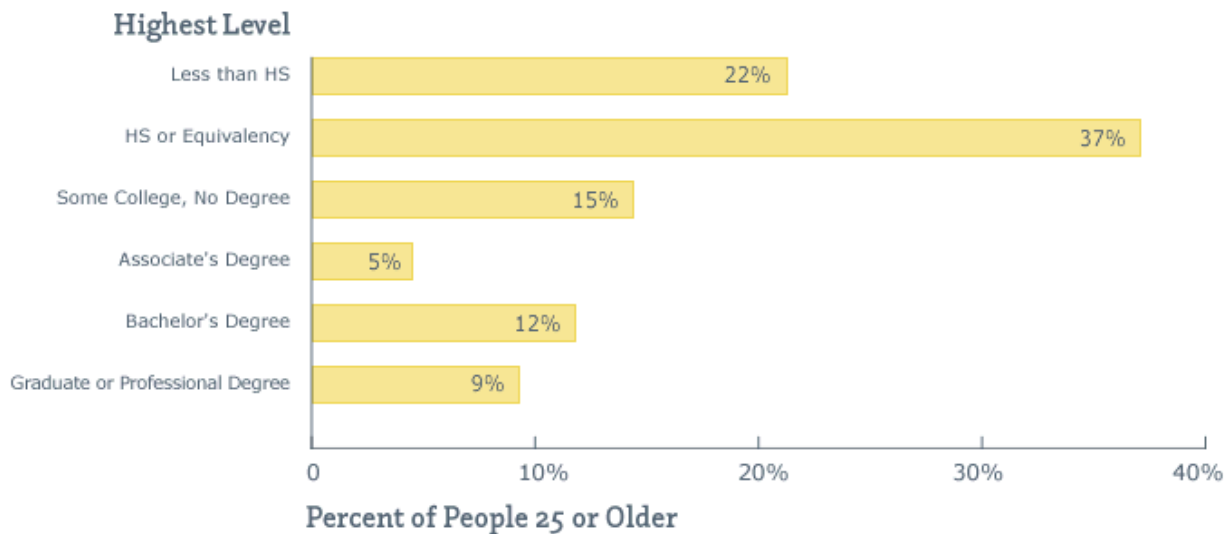
G!P has identified key challenges for college reentry. The chart below highlights these specific challenges.

Key "Comebacker" Challenges				
FINANCES	TIME & LOGISTICS	ACADEMIC PREPARATION	COLLEGE POLICIES	ANXIETY
Governmental loans fall short of need	Travel obstacles	Refresher needed for academic writing and research skills	Previous failure to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP: minimum 2.0 GPA) makes students ineligible for financial aid	Scared about "fitting in"
Part-time students' limited access to financial resources, rising tuition costs, previous defaulted loans	Child and elder care		Not meeting SAP excludes these students from financial aid support in future	No longer confident in learning abilities
Grant deadlines not student-friendly	No computer access		Limited registration periods; registrar inflexibility to adult learner needs	Scared of repeating past failures

Post-secondary educational attainment is clearly a national issue, but some regions are far more challenged than others. On the state level, for example, Pennsylvania trails in adult post-secondary participation. In a 2008 national study, Pennsylvania was ranked 49 out of 50 states in adult post-secondary education participation (NCPPE 2006). Not only is Pennsylvania's post-secondary adult participation rate one of the lowest, but it is also sharply declining. From 1999 to 2006, Pennsylvania adult enrollment in higher education programs declined by 22 percent, nearly double the national average decline of 12 percent (NCPPE 2006).

In Philadelphia, adult education is particularly challenged. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Philadelphia trails other large cities, such as Boston, Chicago, Washington, and Seattle, by 10 percent or more in the proportion of adults with a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2006; Von Bergen 2008). As shown in the graph, 74 percent of Philadelphia's adults do not have a bachelor's degree, though 20 percent have started college or have an associate's degree.

Educational Attainment in Philadelphia County, 2005–2007



The severity of the problem in Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia in particular, provides an ideal setting for experimenting with possible solutions. Some state governments have implemented policies and programs designed to increase the number of adult residents with college degrees. Some states have created financial aid programs for adults with non-traditional college attendance patterns (part-time students and evening/weekend courses). Other services offered by individual colleges and universities to non-traditional

students include adult-friendly web portals for accessing college-related information, access to online courses, academic advising, transcript retrieval, financial advising, waived application fees, priority enrollment, help obtaining credit for prior learning, and accelerated degree options. Despite these past attempts, prior to G!P, no organization has successfully addressed the behavioral and systematic issues that prevent students who started and dropped out from re-enrolling and completing their degrees.

The Innovation: A Three-Pronged Approach

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In 2004, workforce and economic development leaders in Philadelphia, as in other urban areas, were increasingly concerned with brain-drain issues. In Philadelphia, the Knowledge Industry Partnership published *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* The release of this report highlighted the fact that less than one third of the Philadelphia population that graduates from college stays in the region, thereby significantly hurting the potential for a growing skilled labor force in Philadelphia. To combat this drain of talent, the report recommended recruiting more college students from other parts of the country to fulfill the job needs of the region. It also prompted David Thornburgh, then Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Economy League of Southeastern Pennsylvania, and Sallie Glickman, CEO

of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board, to take a closer look at post-secondary attainment rates of Philadelphians. They wanted to find another solution that would build on local talent. Glickman recalls, "We were moving as a region towards a knowledge economy and the response in the region [to the brain-drain issue] was 'let's recruit people from somewhere else.' But there was no voice for the people who lived here. No one said, 'Maybe we have some people in Philadelphia who could be part of this knowledge industry bandwagon.'"

Hadass Sheffer, who was also interested in pursuing alternative solutions to the brain-drain problem, joined them and wrote *Graduate! Philadelphia: The Challenge to Complete* (2005), which suggested that a strategy focused on the region's resident adults could quickly, significantly, and more sustainably improve the region's competitiveness. *The Challenge to Complete* made a compelling argument that the single most important factor in the economic vitality of the Philadelphia region is the college attainment and the related workforce skills of its residents, who are invested in staying in the region and strengthening it for themselves and their families.

Glickman, Sheffer, and Thornburgh acknowledged that many organizations were trying to "fix" the broken higher education system, primarily by increasing and improving access. Instead of taking another stab in the same direction, the three decided to first focus on the individual already navigating the system and eventually move

towards building up market forces and enticements to address necessary changes in the system. After a two-year planning period, G!P officially launched as a partnership of the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania. Colleges and other partners signed on to the partnership shortly thereafter.

Recognizing the substantial number of individuals in the region with some college credit but no degree — like Kenya — G!P has identified a way to address a local issue with a model that can be applied and adapted nationally. G!P's three-pronged approach consists of (1) developing and piloting innovative programs, such as the G!P college access and success program for adults, (2) raising awareness of the issue and leading a regional, multi-partner collaboration approach to solutions, and (3) influencing public and institutional policies pertaining to adult learners.

(1) The Outreach and Success Program

G!P's most publicly visible work so far is its innovative service model. By providing a physical and online "one-stop college shop," G!P offers personalized and professional support to Comebackers. Acknowledging the research on college access and success, and guided by the expertise of G!P's Director of Higher Ed Partnerships and Services, Kimberly Stephens, the G!P model underscores that the most important factors in a student's

success in college is preparedness for navigating college as a system, academic preparation, having realistic expectations and a plan for completion, and the connection to a college where the student feels supported and encouraged.

None of this is simple or easy for a person who has not already done it, nor is it always easy or simple to find the right match among the area's dozens of college programs. G!P's services help Comebackers understand the system they are about to re-enter and provides them with personal connections and individualized support from both the partner colleges and G!P advisors. The G!P support system is most beneficial if things start going wrong again for a college student and he or she feels that there is no one who can help at the college. G!P advisors first try to re-connect the Comebacker to college-based services, advocate with and on behalf of the student within the college, or help the student explore other solutions.

The Comebacker population is diverse in the needs and supports required to successfully return to and get through college. Accordingly, G!P is designed to provide tiered levels of information and service delivery. G!P spreads the message about the benefits of college completion and shares basic information on how to return to college with thousands of potential Comebackers each year through media and a website that is full of resources. More individualized guidance can be easily requested and

accessed as well. Current capacity for individualized services is over 1,000 Comebackers each year. The individualized support services may be accessed at the flagship outreach center in Center City Philadelphia, at eight more recently established satellite outreach centers throughout Philadelphia, through email, and by phone. The goal is to bring services to Comebackers.

How does it work? Once a Comebacker registers with G!P and requests G!P services, G!P staff meet with the individual to assess his or her academic background and educational and career goals. Together, the Comebacker and the advisor identify the college programs that seem potentially best for the individual. G!P helps to connect the Comebacker with the potential colleges for further discussion, comparison, and guidance. G!P staff remain available to discuss the options.

G!P has found that almost 100 percent of Comebackers who request services require intensive advising. The initial advising sessions establish a trust relationship between G!P staff and each Comebacker. This relationship is at the core of the Comebacker's connection to and identification with the G!P program, and is critical to G!P's continued guidance, encouragement, and problem-solving after Comebackers re-enroll. The OMG Center for Collaborative Learning recently completed an 18-month evaluation of G!P's services. Their report (2009) says, "This one-on-one relationship-building approach has resulted in strong client satisfaction and strong enrollment and early

persistence indicators."

In addition to helping Comebackers find an appropriate educational fit, G!P staff assist them with the financial aid process, often helping them solve complex financial issues. G!P also helps Comebackers with transferring credits and other core academic components that are typically roadblocks to the students' success.

Comebackers can participate in academic writing refresher tutorials, demonstrations of online learning, and a range of career and education-related workshops. For other issues that Comebackers face, G!P staff refer students to relevant services, such as childcare support.

(2) Partnerships

At the foundation of G!P's work is the creation of strategic partnerships, both with higher educational institutions and regional employers. G!P recognizes that no single organization can provide all the solutions to the systemic problems that cause low college completion rates. Only by developing and sustaining collaborative partnerships between key stakeholders can the entire system be improved. Although other college access programs use strategic partnerships, what G!P does differently is focus its partnerships on college success, rather than issues of access. Sheffer believes that "partnerships are at the core of what makes this work." Thornburgh adds, "Collaboration is hard work but is increasingly the only way. Your choice is to do nothing and suffer the

consequences or come together in these regional collaborations to tackle the pressing issues of the day."

Universities and Colleges

Establishing strong partnerships with regional colleges and universities that have a good track record of serving adult learners is imperative to the success of G!P. By 2009, fifteen institutions of higher education in the greater Philadelphia region had signed on as G!P partners, and five more will join in 2010, including the first representative institution of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. The colleges and universities, as members of the G!P initiative, provide public support, actively participate in helping Comebackers re-enroll in school, and support them through graduation.

G!P Partner Colleges and Universities

Center for Urban Theological Studies
Chestnut Hill College

Community College of Philadelphia

Drexel University

Holy Family University

La Salle University

Neumann University

Peirce College

Penn State University

Philadelphia University

Rosemont College

Rutgers University–Camden

Temple University

Thomas Edison State College

Widener University

In signing on as partners, colleges and universities are expected to allocate college advising staff to meet with Comebackers regularly at the G!P outreach centers. The college advisors help Comebackers determine a specific area of study and identify the college that would best fit the student's degree goals. A college is not there to recruit solely for itself. G!P stresses that for a particular Comebacker, some higher education institutions will be a better fit than others. College advisors must be willing and prepared to help a Comebacker find the best fit, even if it means suggesting and promoting another institution. The college staff who work with G!P are required to attend training sessions on the unique programs and options that each partner college offers students as well as G!P advising practices and protocols. Because Comebackers are directed toward the best fit for them, their probability of succeeding increases significantly. Partnering with higher education institutions in this manner enables G!P to leverage the resources and strengths of its partners in a way that benefits Comebackers the most.

Joining the G!P partnership offers colleges and universities a ready pool of students who are well-prepared and well-supported to re-enroll and succeed in college. The support that G!P provides also reduces the

resources that colleges have to devote to recruiting and retaining these students.

The first colleges to join the partnership were Chestnut Hill College, Community College of Philadelphia, Holy Family University, Neumann University, Peirce College, Philadelphia University, Rutgers University–Camden, Thomas Edison State College, and Widener University. Each institution had a visionary leader on campus who recognized the power of the partnership's approach, and their missions were similar to the mission of G!P. As word of early successes spread, other area institutions asked to join G!P. The most fundamental success of these partnerships, however, is that some of the college policies that disadvantaged adult learners are beginning to change to encourage and support Comebackers, such as more flexible registration periods and better access to and support for financial aid inquiries.

Businesses

David Fair, co-managing partner of G!P and Senior Vice President for Community Impact at the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, notes that "so many people with such strong skills are being wasted every day because they are either not working or they are working in jobs way below their talents. G!P represents the path to infusing those talents through the region." In addition to creating partnerships with higher education institutions, G!P is creating partnerships with regional employers, such

as the City of Philadelphia and Independence Blue Cross. These companies are interested in hiring local residents, but not enough workers meet the educational and skill requirements for these positions. These companies have partnered with G!P to promote an educated workforce that they hope will quickly fulfill their talent needs. G!P recommends that employers offer tuition prepayment or reimbursement programs for their employees, enter into preferred provider arrangements with colleges to lower tuition costs, and provide flexible work schedules to accommodate employees who are attending college. G!P also hosts college fairs and workshops at employer sites to introduce employees to G!P services and opportunities and to encourage employees to return to college. G!P works with labor unions in much the same way, offering its services and opportunities to union members.

CareerLink and Social Service Providers

Recognizing that adults may not be able to come to G!P's flagship center in the Gallery Mall, G!P takes its services and opportunities into the neighborhoods, online, and to where adults already are. In addition to providing services at employer sites, G!P makes it possible for Comebackers to connect with them online, by phone, at CareerLink offices (the Pennsylvania system of one-stops where individuals can receive support in job searching, creating résumés, and accessing job training) and at several other locations. As with other organizations, the activity is part of a partnership agreement that includes space, outreach

to the community, college-related events, and G!P signature services. Current site partners are concentrated in northeast and northwest Philadelphia where there are large numbers of Comebackers.

(3) Public Policy

Understanding the impact that changes in public policy could have on the challenges that Comebackers face, G!P works with regional- and state-level government agencies to influence and suggest ways in which adult learners can be better supported by governmental policy. G!P is currently working on adjusting state requirements for financial aid application.

Outcomes

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G!P's multi-faceted investment in partnerships, policy work, and intensive advising is generating outstanding results, with close to 500 Comebackers re-enrolled in college as of October 2009.

The majority of Comebackers served by G!P are African-American women, with an average age of 40. Most report that they are currently employed. They cite three main reasons for re-enrolling: to achieve personal goals, to obtain a better career, and to be more competitive for a promotion at their current employer. The age

demographic of these Comebackers is slightly higher than G!P originally expected, which is probably attributable to the nature of G!P's grassroots and newspaper-focused outreach. A resulting benefit, however, is that this population has the potential to have a strong impact on the next generation's college attainment rates as they provide their children with the resources and encouragement to attend college.

For the period February 2008 through October 2009, G!P is realizing impressive statistics. Through their mass media outreach, one million people are now aware of G!P. G!P's website has had over 12,000 unique hits, 40 percent from return visitors. Through outreach events, such as one-on-one college fairs and orientation workshops, G!P has reached over 4,000 people, 1,400 of whom have registered online for G!P support. Of these 1,400, 63 percent, or 880, Comebackers are actively using G!P services. A challenging aspect for G!P is moving people from the advising stage to the re-enrolling stage. To date, 53 percent of G!P's Comebackers, or 470, have re-enrolled. Even more notable, 95 percent of Comebackers stay enrolled in each subsequent term after their initial re-enrollment, working towards graduation. After just 18 months of operation, G!P has helped 10 students graduate from college.

An additional challenge for G!P is making sure the interface with the colleges — institutions that have historically not been required to interact with external

systems — stays open and productive. Also, G!P must try to identify when enrolled Comebackers are at risk for dropping out again.

The 10 students who have graduated with the help of G!P will provide an estimated return to the regional economy of over \$9 million during their lifetime. As the rest of the current re-enrolled Comebackers complete their degrees over the next five years, they will provide an additional return to society of over \$406 million. The chart illustrates the five-year projection of the economic return on investment to the region considering the 470 current re-enrolled Comebackers. As G!P delivers on their expected growth of serving more Comebackers, the economic return on investment will be even more significant.

Is this success story a regional anomaly? The founders of G!P don't think so. From the beginning, they envisioned that this innovative model would be a national remedy. Fortunately, word spreads fast.

Replication in Action

Replication in Action

John Shemo, Vice President and Director of Economic Development at the Metro-Hartford Alliance¹ in Hartford, Connecticut, first learned of G!P and its recent successes in August 2008, when G!P received the Alliance for Regional Stewardship's Organizational Champion award

for its impact on the region. Shemo was immediately drawn to the innovation and wanted to learn more, because the Metro-Hartford area, like the Philadelphia region, has a large population of potential Comebackers (approximately 90,000), many nearby colleges and universities, and a growing need to attract, retain, and develop local talent for employers.

Shemo believed the G!P model could be applied to his region given the similar demographics, so he invited Sheffer to Connecticut to discuss the possibility of creating a similar program. The meeting sparked additional interest, and in a matter of months, Shemo took a dozen college and workforce development colleagues to Philadelphia to see G!P in action. Shemo calls the idea a "triple win: colleges get quality students, Comebackers get degrees, and employers get more qualified employees."

With the assistance of G!P, Graduate! Connecticut (G!CT) is close to launching. Shemo indicated that he is pleased to have G!P as a model and a resource. Given the Alliance's minimal financing, knowing that G!P was willing to share marketing material, website content, and general know-how ensured that this replication was successfully implemented.

One appealing characteristic of the Graduate! model is that it can be adapted to the specific dynamics of different regions. G!CT, for example, is experimenting with

the idea of charging colleges and universities for participation in the program. The idea behind this experiment is to ensure that each partner has “skin in the game.” The nominal fee also goes toward making the model more sustainable in the long term. Given the current fundraising challenges many nonprofits face, this adaptation could prove to be very timely.

If the Graduate! model is implemented elsewhere, Comebackers, their regions, and the nation as a whole could benefit. By adapting and supporting the partnerships, public policy changes, and innovative programming to each region, G!P may have created a model that gives the United States a real chance of addressing a critical problem.

1. ^ Formed in 2001, the Metro-Hartford Alliance is Hartford’s Chamber of Commerce and the Hartford Region’s Economic Development Leader. The Alliance brings together 1,000 businesses, education and healthcare institutions, municipalities, nonprofit organizations, and government leaders who are invested in the Hartford, Connecticut, region’s future economic growth and its viability for robust business development.

Conclusion

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G!P is offering support and hope to individuals who want to pursue their dreams. Through robust partnerships, public policy work, and innovative, individualized support, this organization is making change happen. As more Philadelphians re-enroll into college and obtain their degrees, G!P is hoping to reach a tipping point where people throughout the region will have the resources and know-how to navigate the college process with less need for this kind of centralized, individualized advising.

The story of Kenya, as one of the early Comebackers, provides a glimpse into what could be. By walking through the doors of the G!P's outreach center, Kenya activated the support and resources necessary to pursue her dreams again. She is now enrolled at Philadelphia University pursuing a bachelor's degree in Health Science. Without G!P, Kenya believes that she would "still be floating." G!P helped her re-enroll into college, and guided her through all the other important steps involved in making this commitment. Kenya says she now "has the confidence to go back to get my bachelor's degree and to show off my leadership skills. Even with my past challenges, I know I can still have a future." Kenya represents Philadelphia's new comeback story — just one example of how G!P is contributing to the future of an individual, the region, and perhaps, the entire nation.

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