

Going back to school A college degree matters

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Houston Defender

Houston-area education visionaries are focusing on a stark reality – there is a shortage of local talent in professions for which there is growing demand.

That means not enough Houstonians are obtaining the college degrees needed to fill certain jobs created by area employers. And the gap grows even wider among African Americans and minorities who fail to complete a college education that many say is necessary to compete in today's workforce.

In an ambitious collaboration with leaders in the education, government, nonprofit and business sectors, the Center for Houston's Future is taking charge of efforts to change that fact.

The Center, founded in 2000 as a nonprofit organization with a mission to identify and help solve the region's toughest problems, has created a regional public campaign, My Degree Counts, to not only recruit people to college, but provide the support needed to make sure they earn degrees.

The program is designed for all ages – from recent high school graduates to grandparents.

"The bottom line is that we feel a key economic driver for our Houston region is college completion and it's not just getting these people into college, it's about getting the degree," said Catherine Mosbacher, president and CEO of the Center for Houston's Future.

"We know that the more educated the population, the more prosperous, innovative and more productive we will be in our region," Mosbacher added. "Our new initiative, My Degree Counts, is going to help us achieve this goal."

The Center's campaign actually developed out of a nationwide competition called the Talent Dividend Initiative, which is encouraging Houston and 55 other cities to increase two-year and four-year college graduation rates by at least 1 percent by 2013.

The national competition is sponsored by CEOs for Cities, a nonprofit group that believes an educated workforce translates into a better economy. The city that increases college graduation rates the most wins \$1 million, which must be spent on a national advertising campaign centered around talent development in that city.

Studies show that for the Houston region, increasing the number of post-secondary degrees by just 1 percent would raise personal incomes more than \$4.2 billion annually.



Juanita Chrysanthou



Jolea Bryant



Catherine Mosbacher



Graduating from college is possible even with family obligations.

It's never too late to graduate

The Center for Houston's Future and its My Degree Counts initiative is hoping people who dropped out of college will return for their degrees. Initiative organizers want to particularly target those who came close to completing college but failed to do so for various reasons. That group includes anyone from young adults to grandparents, and organizers said it's never too late to finish what you started.

The Center's website at www.centerforhoustonfuture.org asks the question, "What is your obstacle to starting or going back to college?" It lists money, family and kids, math, fear, age, disabilities, lack of time, legal status, or service in the military as reasons for stopping short of a post-secondary degree.

The site also lists help available, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Lone Star College System Childcare, Virtual Math Lab, and the CHCI National Scholarship Directory for Latino Students. If military veterans want to return to college, they could even receive an educational benefit of up to 150 hours of tuition and fee exemptions at state-supported colleges and universities. For more information about the My Degree Counts Initiative, call 713-844-9303.

Fact:
College graduates can earn twice as much...

"When we talk about the million-dollar prize, that gets people excited but I want to get people thinking about the \$4.2 billion dollars and the impact it has on our economy," Mosbacher said.

"We can use this as a way to begin to raise the level of awareness and get people to focus on college completion," she added. "The fact is we are not going to quit on this initiative whether we win the \$1 million prize or not. We know education is a key issue for our region and we are definitely in this for the long term."

That commitment extends not only to the general public, but particularly to African Americans and other minorities who traditionally have a lower rate of obtaining college degrees.

Degrees needed

In the Houston region, 28.4 percent of the population has a college degree but when it comes to the African-American community that number drops to 14.2 percent, Mosbacher said. Hispanics have an even lower figure, with only 8 percent of them earning college degrees.

The reasons why minorities don't enroll or drop out are varied, from financial roadblocks and time restraints to a lack of role models, said Larry V. Green, Houston City Councilmember for District K.

"Because African-American communities are suffering so, a lot of parents don't stress the importance of a college education to their children because they know from an economic standpoint they won't be in a position to pay for college," Green said. "But there are grants and loans out there for them."

Despite such obstacles, more minorities must get college degrees in order to compete in talent pools being tapped by local industries, especially in areas of expertise such as engineering, oil and gas. And with degree in hand, minorities can become the role models that many didn't have themselves.

"If we are able to put those graduates in front of our youth, not only will they be able to inspire other minority students to achieve a higher education but also be trained and in a position to better assist the community in combating some of the social ills that our community currently faces," Green said.

A mechanism such as My Degree Counts, which provides information on financial aid, mentoring, choosing college courses and time management, among other things, is worthy of support from region leaders and residents, Green added. More important is getting

Help available for employers

The Center for Houston's Future offers a My Degree Counts Employer Toolkit for local employers searching for solutions to finding the right talent for today's rapidly changing industries.

The toolkit is designed to help companies maintain a competitive edge by tapping into the "hidden" talents in their current workforce, and provides employers and their employees access to resources that make it easier to complete a college degree.

It includes downloadable promotional materials to communicate the initiative to employees, direct links to all local colleges and universities, and resources to organize workplace college fairs or seminars.

For more information visit www.mydegreecounts.com/ employers or call 713-844-935.

African Americans to tap into the resource, either by connecting to it through the Internet, educational institutions, churches, media outlets or public service announcements.

All of those avenues are being utilized to help the Center for Houston's Future meet its goal of increasing the graduation rate, said Jolea Bryant, project manager for My Degree Counts.

In addition, the Center hosted a Talent Dividend Summit last year at the University of Houston to rally community support and discuss strategy. The center's website lists programs, agencies and scholarship foundations that help people overcome obstacles to starting or returning to college.

"What I'm really excited about is how we are collaborating with several nonprofits that work directly with Hispanics and African Americans," Bryant said. "These nonprofits all target at-risk students in mostly communities of color and they have really rallied behind My Degree Counts."

Mayor Annise Parker also supports the program.

"My Degree Counts is an important collaborative effort to help Houstonians to overcome obstacles to college completion. While residents can find resources on the My Degree Counts website, local businesses and nonprofits can make direct connections between their employees and our local colleges and universities," she said.

Educated workforce

For 10 years, the Center already has been preparing minorities for the workforce through its leadership programs. More than 40 percent of program graduates are minorities who will not only reflect Houston's diverse population but hopefully lead it as well.

"We know we have got to have an educated workforce to be competitive globally and

we can't leave anyone behind," Mosbacher said.

"When it comes to African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and whites, we need all of those groups participating in our economy and in order to do that they must get college degrees," she added.

Juanita Chrysanthou, interim vice chancellor for Student Success at Lone Star College System, recently chaired a team of faculty, staff, administrators and students who were charged with identifying barriers to college completion and strategies to address those barriers. The My Degree Counts Initiative fits well with their goal.

"We are attempting to influence not only the college-going culture but those who have gotten off course," Chrysanthou said. "We want to help them through the academic planning so these students can move forward."

Many community colleges and universities have pledged to increase graduation rates by offering guidance and support where needed.

Lone Star College offers a diverse staff that can easily connect to minority students and a special program pairs up African-American men with minority role models on campus. In the financial aid office, staff has been doubled and advisors help students pick courses needed to graduate, Chrysanthou said.

Chrysanthou points out that employers are not only looking for diversity, they want someone who is qualified to do the job.

"It's important to have a diverse job pool but in order to be seriously considered you must have the credentials for it as well," Chrysanthou said.

Houstonian David Parra realized that fact and after years of working full time, he returned to college at age 26. He graduated last year from the University of Houston-Downtown with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies.

It was a good decision, according to research. College graduates can earn twice as much during their lifetime than people without degrees. And with a college degree, a person's chance of becoming unemployed is cut by about 75 percent.

"What made me go back to college was the reality that I needed a degree," said Parra. "A degree opens up a lot of doors for you."

At first, it wasn't easy. Although Parra enrolled in a community college, he dropped out before completing the program because of poor study habits and time management.

Several years later, Parra watched as his wife April worked on completing her master's degree. It encouraged him to give college another try and this time he stuck with it.

"As a minority, it's just imperative to get that college degree in order to level the playing field," said Parra, who is Hispanic. "With a degree I can show I have the ability to complete the task and do the job."