



Staten Island Advance

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OUR OPINION

A united front on the need for higher education

For the three top college leaders on Staten Island to work closely together on a project is unusual. But they are doing just that on a plan called 30,000 Degrees by 2025.

The trio of educators is seeking to encourage more of our students and other local residents to pursue higher education, either on or off the Island.

Working to tell Islanders about the benefits of college are William Fritz, president of the College of Staten Island in Willowbrook; Richard Guarasci, president of Wagner College in Grymes Hill, and James O'Keefe, vice provost of St. John's University in Grymes Hill.

Give the educators credit for their ambitious plan to sway the working-class culture on Staten Island.

A substantial majority of Islanders, 71.1 percent, don't hold college degrees. In a borough of nearly half a million residents, only about 136,000 are college graduates.

The Bronx is the only borough that has a lower percentage of college-educated residents. Why do so many Islanders decide to skip college?

"The reason I hear the most often," said Mr. Fritz, "is people say, 'My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather worked for the police or fire [department] and they rose up through the ranks without college.' "

He points out: "They don't realize the world has changed, and this is no longer possible."

Mr. O'Keefe, the son of a plumber and a homemaker, was the first in his family to go to college. He hopes that more young Islanders will accomplish the same thing.

"Staten Island has always been very strong in civil service and construction. Young people see their parents doing very well in those fields, and figure, 'I don't have to go to college either.' "

Job climate

But today's job climate increasingly favors college grads more than ever. It has done so since the economic recovery began five years ago after the Great Recession.

So reports a study by Georgetown University. The study determined that a "good job" pays at least \$53,000, tends to be full-time and provides health insurance and a retirement plan.

Of the 2.9 million good jobs gained since the recession, 2.8 million have gone to college graduates.

On average in 2013, Americans with four-year degrees earned 98 percent more per hour than people without a degree, which is up from 64 percent in the 1980s.

A college graduate is estimated to make \$1 million more in lifetime earnings than a non-graduate.

The pay gap between college graduates and everyone else continues to widen.

"There is a myth that you don't need a college degree to succeed in the new global economy," said Mr. Guarasci.

It's a myth the three educators are working to overcome with their initiative, which aims to hike the number of college-educated Islanders by 30,000 within 10 years.

Changing the conversation

“It’s about changing the conversation from, ‘I don’t need a baccalaureate, I can do just fine,’ ” said Mr. Fritz, “to, ‘In this day and age, obtaining one is a surefire way of moving up the ladder.’ ”

They believe that a better-educated work-ready community will attract new businesses to the borough.

For this reason, the Staten Island Economic Development Corp. is backing the initiative.

“If we want the high-tech jobs here, we need an educated work force here,” said Mr. Fritz.

The idea is to provide a better educated workforce that would help to create more lucrative job opportunities on Staten Island so young people need not go to Manhattan or New Jersey for them.

The educators’ point about building a more attractive work force and attracting high-end businesses is absolutely correct. It would benefit all of us.

“Staten Island is the only borough where I would try this” initiative, Mr. O’Keefe said. “People work well together here. With Cesar Claro [of the SIEDC] and the borough president’s office, all our ducks are lined up to make a run for this. We’ve got the arrow moving in the right direction.”

High school involvement

The three local colleges have joined with the principals of four public high schools — Staten Island Tech, Port Richmond, New Dorp and McKee — to develop programs that “demystify college,” as Mr. Guarasci put it.

This is an effort to offer access to college students, college programs and financial aid advisers.

“If every college would partner with schools of need and use faculty and other resources, think how much better our city, our country, would be,” Mr. Guarasci said

He stressed: “Young people succeed when someone believes in their dreams. You’ve got to start early to nurture a college-bound focus.”

Even with all the negative things reported lately about the burden of college debt, there’s no doubt that people fare better in the long run with a better education.

Finding innovative ways to help students afford a college education is a major challenge that schools must face up to in order to boost enrollments.