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Adult learning gets tech-heavy update in Philadelphia

By: Jake New | February 20, 2014

Manufacturing jobs in Philadelphia once accounted for 45 percent of the city's workforce. Today, that number is closer to 5 percent, leaving thousands without jobs – and without the level of education required to find new ones.

Sixty-five percent of job seekers in the city's employment system read at only a fourth- to sixth- grade level, and 80 percent can only do math at a sixth-grade level.

The level many employers expect an applicant to have? At least tenth grade, said Judith Renyi, executive director of the Philadelphia Mayor's Commission on Literacy.

"That's a problem, in its starkest, starkest sense," Renyi said. "A lot of these people are displaced workers. Fifteen to 20 years ago, they were just fine, but then their jobs disappeared."

Philadelphia is transforming its old adult literacy program – a hands-off approach that could only offer referrals – into a modern, technology-driven system of adult learning campuses, powered by Instructure's learning management system Canvas.

It's a big shift, Renyi said, but, with a 25 percent poverty rate, the city is addressing a big problem.

Philadelphians seeking adult learning programs in past years could call the commission and it would suggest some classes near their location. "Then we would hang up the phone," Renyi said. "There might not even be a place for them at those classes. The demand was enormous, and the supply was very small. So they are just put on a waiting list."

With the city's new Philadelphia Literacy and Adult Career Education (myPLACE) program, adults are immediately given an appointment at one of three campuses around the city.

Then they are quickly enrolled in their first introductory course, either at one of the campuses or online. "No break, no pause," Renyi said. "They're right in class."

As many of the adult learners have not had to apply for a job in 10 to 20 years, the program has paid particular attention to designing courses around differing levels of computer literacy.

The first level is for adults who have never used a computer at all. The second is for adults who have used one a few times. And the third level is designed around adults who have a basic, modern understanding of computers.

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"I think training and support for all of this has to be tailored for the specific audience and their background experience," said Jared Stein, vice president of education at Instructure, which has primarily focused on systems used by traditional college students. "That's something the campuses are going to have to facilitate, but on the Canvas end we're constantly striving to make the user experience very simple and very accessible."

Seventy students are already enrolled in the program after its first week, Renyi said, outpacing her own estimates. She said she originally planned for 500 students to join the program in its first five months.

The scope of the program and framework of the technology is something she said that has not been attempted before. It's an experiment, she said, that may result in some mistakes along the way.

Like the students in the program, the commission will be learning as well.

"There is nothing like this anywhere," Renyi said. "And we're going to find out if it works."

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