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Perris Working Scholars Initiative Draws Huge Crowd



The Perris City Council Chambers was filled with residents eager to learn more about the online education program that allows them to receive for free a Bachelor's Degree, thanks to a partnership between the City, a developer and Working Scholars, an online learning platform.

A standing room-only crowd packed the Perris City Council Chambers Nov. 1 to learn details about enrolling in a Bachelor's Degree program for free thanks to an innovative collaboration between the City, a developer, a university and corporation dedicated to helping working people succeed.

More than 200 people attended the formal announcement of the "Perris Working Scholars" initiative where they received information about requirements, enrollment details and met with students who succeeded in the online education program.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and City Manager Richard Belmudez addressed the audience, encouraging them to enroll and earn their Bachelor's, saying it will enhance their job and earnings prospects and improve their quality of life.

"I'm thrilled at the number of people who are taking advantage of this great opportunity," Vargas said. "To offer a Bachelor's Degree for zero cost is phenomenal. Many people in Perris are interested in continuing their education and we are very pleased they are."

Vargas credited City Councilwoman Tonya Burke with conceiving the Working Scholars Program for Perris residents as a way to make affordable what for many people has become financially impossible in recent years. The City partnered with Duke Realty, which provided \$1 million in seed money to pay for up to 150 Perris residents to earn their Bachelor's.

Also involved is Study.com is an online education platform and Thomas Edison State University in Trenton, New Jersey.

Working Scholars participants earn most of their college credits through Study.com, which are then transferred to Thomas Edison State where students complete the final part of their work to earn a Bachelor's Degree. The Working Scholars program is up and running in a few Northern California cities but Perris will enroll the largest contingent of students.

Belmudez told the audience that the Nov. 1 meeting was "the first step on your journey to a BA."

"This program really is a great option for people who can't go to a traditional college," Belmudez said.

Student success stories



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas addresses the audience of more than 200. "Many people in Perris are interested in continuing their education and we are very pleased they are."

Stephanie Thomas, 31, completed nearly all of her course work in a year through Study.com, often completing assignments while riding her stationary bicycle—and working two jobs and raising two children.

Lessons are presented in five-minute videos, after which students complete a five-question multiple choice quiz before moving on to the next assignment. This method allows full-time workers to complete several lessons a day and expedites the learning process.

Thomas was so successful that Study.com hired her as a "student success coach," which allows her to assist 50 other students in the program.

"Getting a BA is a big accomplishment," said Thomas, who hopes one day to run a family business. "Debt makes college non-attainable for more and more people. To be able to get a four-year degree for free? Who would not jump at that opportunity?"

Also addressing the crowd were two City workers currently enrolled in the Working Scholars program. Recreation Coordinator Jordan McClanahan and Accounting Specialist II Lizbeth Curiel said they are grateful for a college degree they otherwise could not have afforded.

"There's no better way to make it happen," McClanahan said. "All you have to do is make that decision."

Curiel said she studies with her 6-year-old son. Like McClanahan, she hopes to complete her Bachelor's Degree in about a year.

Diverse audience

Those attending the recent summit included teen-agers just out of high school, working professionals and prospective entrepreneurs.

Alexandro Merida, 18, graduated from the California Military Institute in Perris in June. He's attending community college now with the ultimate goal of earning a degree in mechanical engineering. Without the Working Scholars program, he could not afford college tuition and other expenses.



Perris City Manager Richard Belmudez called the Nov. 1 summit "the first step on your journey to a BA."

He's the first member of his family with a chance for a college degree.

"My parents would be very happy and very grateful," he said. "I really appreciate the City of Perris giving so many people the opportunity to pursue their dreams," he said.

Alejandro Gonzalez, 24, works as a supervising aide in Perris. She learned about the Working Scholars summit through social media. She'd like to earn a degree to help her enter the world of education or nursing.

"It's the chance for a better future," she said.

Debbie Barcos, 52, works as a transportation supervisor in the City. Earning a four-year degree strengthens her chance to move up the corporate ladder. It would also show her children that learning should never stop and that there is "never a reason not to continue my education."

"I want to enrich my life," she said. "I want to do better. As a citizen, I want to take advantage of this great opportunity."

Bo Cheli, program director for the Working Scholars program, told the audience that online learning might not work for everyone. Prospective students should not be fooled into thinking the program will be easy and success assured.

"This is a brand new type of program," he said. "It's innovative and it works for people who want to go to college on their own time. But it will only work if you work."

Working Scholars representatives said after the recent summit they received 300 applications from Perris residents. As not every applicant will qualify for the program, they are encouraging Perris residents to apply now at www.workingscholars.org to stay up-to-date about the latest developments prior to February, when the remaining spots are expected to be filled.

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