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# Mesa will help pay for college to improve the city's education after high school

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Mesa Community College (Photo: Cheryl Evans/The Republic)

City leaders in Mesa hope to increase the number of residents pursuing education after high school by helping them pay for two years at Mesa Community College.

The effort comes as just 35% of Mesa residents ages 25 to 64 hold a degree, license or credential beyond a school diploma.

That's less than the statewide figure of 46%, which itself trails other states.

One Mesa City Council member questioned whether the city proposal oversteps the role of local government, but others said encouraging education is critical to attracting employers to Arizona's third-largest city.

Funding is expected to come through a mix of city money and private donations.

The effort is part of the Achieve60AZ nonprofit and non-partisan initiative. The alliance of Arizona organizations and communities is pushing to have 60% of Arizonans earn a postsecondary degree, license or credential by

2030. Gov. Doug Ducey touted the importance of the initiative in 2016 ([/story/opinion/op-ed/2016/09/17/arizona-needs-more-college-grads-ducey/90363958/](https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/2016/09/17/arizona-needs-more-college-grads-ducey/90363958/)).

STORY FROM U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

## The 2020 Census isn't as complicated as people might think



(<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sponsor-story/us-census-bureau/2020/02/21/2020-census-counts-on-every-person/4832269002/>)

The state so far does not appear on track to meet that goal (<https://www.azcentral.com/in-depth/news/local/arizona-education/2019/09/18/life-after-high-school-education-level-by-state-arizona-trending-wrong-direction/1963893001/>). Arizona has seen a 4% bump in the four years, from 42% to 46% of Arizona adults meeting the goal.

Mayor John Giles said when he first heard about the initiative, it seemed to perfectly fit Mesa's needs. For a while, he waited for direction from the governor or state lawmakers on how to implement the program.

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“No one is coming to solve this problem for us,” he said. “We need to be the leaders in this.”

Rachel Yanof, head of the Achieve60AZ organization, said it's been largely up to cities to figure out how to achieve the statewide goal. Because education in Arizona is decentralized and varies from place to place, and because her office has just two staffers, Yanof said they provide support and start conversations, but can't necessarily create a plan for every community.

She said that's where Giles stepped in to see what Mesa could do.

## **‘Tough statistics we have here in Mesa’**

While about two-thirds of Mesa Public Schools graduates enroll in post-secondary programs, only about a third of them finish a degree, license or certification program, according to a city report.

These are “tough statistics we have here in Mesa,” Councilman Francisco Heredia said.

He and Councilwoman Jen Duff led a task force on educational attainment and recently presented their findings to the council.

Mesa’s workforce will begin to see a reduction in qualified workers starting in 2025 if postsecondary attainment isn't improved, according to the report.

Duff said Mesa has among the highest homelessness rate and lowest employment rate of area cities. Without an educated workforce, Mesa won't continue to gain new employers and high wage jobs, she said.

“It is a dire time to take action and commit to this Achieve60AZ,” she said.

Mesa needs 135,000 more residents to attain a degree, license or certification to meet the 60% goal, said Amy Trethaway, director of the Mesa Council on College program and staffer on the city's higher education task force.

Statewide, 1 million more adults need to be credentialed.

Achieve60AZ is not just about attending a two or four-year college, but earning any sort of post-high school credential that will make someone a better job candidate, Trethaway said.

That could include earning a license to be a realtor, a barber or a massage therapist. Or earning certification in a skilled trade such as welding, auto mechanics, cosmetology or cybersecurity.

## **How would the tuition help work?**

The city plans to help provide two years of free tuition at Mesa Community College for students with financial need. The idea is for the city to make a “dollar promise” to fill funding gaps after local students apply to receive federal financial aid.

That could include stipends for books or other academic fees, Trethaway said.

She said Mesa expects to help at least 600 students the first year and more in years after.

The promise program is expected to be up and running for high school students graduating in spring 2021 and entering the community college that fall.

The MesaAchieves60AZ effort also will also:

- Track the city’s PK-20 education data through an online dashboard.
- Help students with applications for federal aid for college.
- Partner with Mesa Public Schools on mental health and socio-emotional learning programs to help students with skills to succeed after high school.

The public-private effort to fill gaps in tuition costs is expected to require \$1 million over five years or about \$200,000 annually.

The mayor said he plans to court local businesses to provide \$100,000 per year, which the city would then match.

“This is going to be the easiest fundraising job that I have ever had anything to do with,” Giles told the council.

He said businesses, a few days after announcing the program, have already committed more than half of what’s needed for the first few years with sponsors that include the Mesa Marathon, Cigna and Rolfs Salon.

## **Should the city step up?**

Most of the council seemed to support the initiative, but Councilman Kevin Thompson questioned using taxpayer dollars on something he feels is out of the city’s responsibility. The city should lobby the state Legislature to provide workforce development money rather than use city money to fund education, he said.

Councilman David Luna and other council members maintained it’s the city’s job to lead the effort to build an educated workforce that attracts companies and improves the city’s quality of life.

“I’m reminded by my story coming up as a kid in a small town near the border (Somerton) and seeing the various institutions of government being engaged in lifting up students,” Heredia said.

He said he received state and federal scholarships to attend Arizona State University, but that never would have happened without mentors from his school district and city.

Heredia now wants Mesa to do the same. “How do we lift up those neighborhoods and those students to move forward and give them an opportunity I was given?”

Mesa is the first city in Arizona to help offer free community college for local students, Heredia said. States such as Tennessee and cities such as Philadelphia and Long Beach, California have similar college promise programs, he said.

Heredia said he hopes other Arizona cities will follow Mesa’s lead.



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- [Roberts: 3 reasons why McSally will win \(and 3 more why she won't\)](https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/oped/laurieroberts/2020/02/24/can-arizona-sen-martha-mcsally-win-donald-trump-mark-kelly/4851193002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=1804070001) (https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/oped/laurieroberts/2020/02/24/can-arizona-sen-martha-mcsally-win-donald-trump-mark-kelly/4851193002/?utm\_source=oembed&utm\_medium=onsite&utm\_campaign=storylines&utm\_content=news&utm\_term=1804070001)
- [John Beilein will recover from Cavaliers fiasco](https://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/nba/2020/02/24/john-beilein-cleveland-cavaliers-fiasco-missed-opportunity/4851010002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=1804070001) (https://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/nba/2020/02/24/john-beilein-cleveland-cavaliers-fiasco-missed-opportunity/4851010002/?utm\_source=oembed&utm\_medium=onsite&utm\_campaign=storylines&utm\_content=news&utm\_term=1804070001)
- [Robb: Let community colleges offer four-year degrees](https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/oped/robertrobb/2020/02/24/let-community-colleges-offer-4-year-degrees-revolutionize-higher-ed/4825158002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=1804070001) (https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/oped/robertrobb/2020/02/24/let-community-colleges-offer-4-year-degrees-revolutionize-higher-ed/4825158002/?utm\_source=oembed&utm\_medium=onsite&utm\_campaign=storylines&utm\_content=news&utm\_term=1804070001)

## How are other cities doing?

While statewide attainment for adults with degrees, licenses or certificates is at 46%, it's much harder to figure out where each city ranks.

This is because there's no generally accepted data source that counts adults with non-academic professional credentials (rather than degrees), according to Melissa Lempe, a spokeswoman for Expect More Arizona.

Her organization, in partnership with Achieve60AZ, is working with Arizona communities to set local attainment goals by looking at existing data and filling in the gaps.

Although 46 towns, cities and counties have signed on in support of the state's 60% goal, Tempe is the only city so far to set its own local goal, Lempe said.

Tempe seeks to achieve 65% attainment by 2030, an objective it set in 2017. It's the only Arizona community to set a goal higher than 60%.

*Have a story about Mesa or Gilbert? Reach the reporter at [Alison.Steinbach@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:Alison.Steinbach@arizonarepublic.com) (mailto:Alison.Steinbach@arizonarepublic.com) or call 602-444-4282. Follow her on Twitter [@alisteinbach](https://twitter.com/alisteinbach) (https://twitter.com/alisteinbach?lang=en).*

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