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Mary Gwen Wheeler | 55,000 Degrees: How Louisville is turning up the heat to get more residents to finish college

*By Mary Gwen Wheeler
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This is the first of an occasional series of Forum articles on the new local education initiative 55,000 Degrees. For more information, go to 55000Degrees.org.

It's the year 2020.

And Louisville has a lot to celebrate:

Record numbers of college graduates have new diplomas framed on their walls.

Thanks to grants, financial aid and public support, college is more affordable.

It's easier to transfer credit hours from school to school, so students can navigate coursework and earn degrees more quickly.

Professors are elated to find more students well-prepared — with strong writing and math skills.

Buoyed by their success, more of those students stick with school to get their degrees on time.

Employers recognize the benefits of education for their workforce. With their help, thousands of working-age adults are saying "I went back!" — completing degrees they once started.

And no longer do businesses and civic leaders worry about the talent and skills of Louisville's workforce. It's clear we work hard to meet fast-changing needs in a global economy, whether it's skilled health-care workers or computer science PhDs.

This picture is no fairy tale. It reflects the vision and goals of a new organization called 55,000 Degrees that was established in Louisville this fall. Why 55,000 Degrees? If our community rallies around its goals, we will have 40,000 more bachelor's degrees and 15,000 more associate's degrees by 2020. That will mean half our working-age population has a college degree. And it will put us in the top tier of cities we view as benchmarks. ((need to get this graph started before jump, if possible. We can cut above, if that's hard.))

Why does that matter? First and foremost, it matters to our residents. Education can be the ticket to more job choices, better pay, family stability and a higher quality of life. No, it's not an iron-clad guarantee in difficult economic times. But research shows college graduates are likely to earn more, less likely to become unemployed — even more likely to enjoy good health and longer lives.

It also matters to the community. Louisville's education attainment lags behind many cities that we view as competitors — as companies decide where to locate and as educated young adults look for exciting job opportunities and an appealing quality of life.

With a well-educated workforce, you can let your imagination take that positive scenario a few steps further.

Local entrepreneurs start more new companies and nonprofits.

More world-class research makes headlines at our universities.

More citizens get involved in schools and civic organizations.

Audiences expand to fill the seats at arts, cultural and sporting events.

As jobs and incomes grow, our community's tax base gets stronger. And that paves the way for enhanced public services and improvements that add to everyone's quality of life.

This new initiative is a team effort. Louisville was at a crossroads when our city and county governments merged in 2003.

With unity came a community consensus to take stock of our city's strengths and to confront our challenges.

Education consistently emerged as our most persistent challenge. The Greater Louisville Project, the independent nonpartisan civic initiative that has studied Louisville's progress since government merger, has called increasing education attainment the most significant "deep driver" of change that will bring our city strength and prosperity.

Our community had united behind a number of education initiatives in recent years — including improving reading and high-school graduation rates.

To jumpstart a new level of community conversation, Mayor Jerry E. Abramson invited local school superintendents, college and university presidents, business and civic leaders to a new Mayor's Education Roundtable in late 2008.

The challenge: to look at strategies to raise education attainment — and create transformational change. At the same time, Business Leaders for Education, organized by Greater Louisville Inc. (GLI), the local chamber of commerce, called for the urgent need to respond to global competitiveness challenges. They brought in the Business Higher Education Forum in August 2009 to help the Roundtable with a retreat to focus on solutions.

The members of the Mayor's Roundtable worked hard. College presidents rolled up their sleeves — and collaborated in unprecedented ways.

Twenty three members of this Roundtable signed a ground-breaking Greater Louisville Education Commitment last May to raise Louisville into the top tier of cities by 2020, so half of our working-age population has a college degree.

The Commitment focused on 5 key objectives to reach the goal. Educational institutions and community organizations are already rallying around them.

First, to create and support a college-going culture. That means creating expectations from preschool onward that post-secondary education is essential for success. It's not "if" you go to college. It's when and where. We have a good start. Right now, 7 in 10 graduates from Louisville's public, private and parochial schools enroll in college after graduation. But rates vary dramatically by race and socioeconomic status.

Second, to use the business community's unique points of leverage to accelerate attainment. Louisville has about 90,000 working-age adults with some college but no degree. Education-oriented employers can make a dramatic difference, from providing generous tuition assistance to offering career paths that reward education attainment.

Third, to prepare students for success in college, career, citizenship and life. Our data shows that too many students enter college without the skills to start their course work. Only 1 in 3 students accepted at public two-year institutions, for example, were judged to ready to start without remedial work — a drain on time and financial resources.

Fourth, to make post-secondary education accessible and affordable. The "sticker cost" of college is beyond the reach of many families. But scholarships and grants can cut the net price substantially. Our goal: to lower costs and better inform students and families of ways to make college more affordable.

Fifth and last, to increase educational persistence, performance and progress. Too many students drop out of college and too many stick around without graduating. Our research found that only 44 percent of students at Louisville and Southern Indiana 4-year institutions finish in six years. Only 23 percent of students at 2-year institutions finish in three years.

United behind these goals, we created 55,000 Degrees as a public-private partnership to serve as an advocate and catalyst for increasing college attainment. It will support partners as they implement policies and programs toward that goal.

Local foundations have stepped up — committing \$1 million for the next three years. They include the James Graham Brown Foundation, the Humana Foundation, the CE & S Foundation, the JPMorgan Chase Foundation and the Community Foundation of Louisville.

In addition, GLI and its HIRE Education Forum attracted an \$800,000 grant from the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation to help adults with some college complete degrees.

We are just getting started. We hope to engage every educational institution, every business, every family as we move forward.

It was a great sign that after we chose the name 55,000 Degrees, someone told me he remembered something from science class.

The temperature, he said, of lightning as it touches earth is 55,000 degrees.

This is not to suggest that we will make lightning-fast progress.

But if we reach our goal, it will feel as dramatic and profound as a lightning strike — and our city will be alive with a new level of energy and excitement. It will brighten the future for Louisville and serve as a beacon for communities across the nation with ambitious dreams for educating their residents.

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