

# Business' role is critical in increasing city's college attainment



Mary Gwen Wheeler

## GUEST COMMENT

depends on the education and skill of its work force, as quantified by its number and type of college degrees.

Data released in late 2011 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development show that, despite outspending every other country on education, the United States has dropped from first to 15th in the college-attainment level of its young-adult population, an ominous sign for our ability to compete in the global marketplace.

The 55,000 Degrees initiative recently released its 2011 annual progress report to raise awareness of how we are progressing toward our 2020 goal of increasing by 55,000 degrees the number of adults with post-secondary degrees, which would mean 50 percent of our working-age population would have a college degree.

Encouragingly, Louisville is making progress and our efforts are gaining momentum.

At the same time, we are not yet on track to reach our goal by 2020. We must acceler-

ate college completion.

### The business side of the partnership

Business and employers can play an important role in boosting college attainment. First, they can help tap the potential of the adult learner.

According to the 2010 American Community Survey, more than 114,000 adults in Louisville, aged 25 and older, have some college education but no degree.

The good news, as reported in the 2011 Progress report, is that the number of working age, 25 to 64, adults enrolled in our area colleges has risen dramatically by 20.6 percent — growing from 22,300 students to 26,900 students between 2007 and 2009.

### Support the effort

Employers can support the progress and graduation of these and additional returning students in a number of ways.

Last year, the Lumina Foundation funded Greater Louisville Inc. and the Business Leaders for Education group with the goal of helping 3,500 working adults earn a degree.

The Employee Education Delivery System is developing resources and a toolkit to help employers support their employees.

The system is off to a great start with more than 16 partner businesses representing 15,675 employees as potential supporters or returning students.

Supporting employees returning to school can take a variety of forms, including:

- Promoting college knowledge, such as how to apply, transfer credits and secure financial aid;
- Establishing a college tuition reimbursement or deferment program;
- Hosting a college education fair;
- Exploring ways to balance demands of school, work and life;
- Setting up a mentor program;
- Organizing and allowing use of common areas for distance learning activities;
- And consolidating the purchasing power for their employees to secure lower, more affordable education costs.

Businesses also can help by partnering with schools and universities. Clarify what skills your business needs, and communicate back to high schools and colleges on how well their graduates do.

Offer students career-related experiences such as internships and job shadowing to improve the chances they pursue a career pathway that matches our community's 21st century work force needs.

By working together, we can increase the productivity, quality and affordability of our education system. When Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer is asked how we will reach our goal, he says, "That's simple: one degree at a time."

Each one of us can make a difference. We all are accountable.

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**E**ven in times of high unemployment, businesses report having trouble finding people with the right skills.

General Electric is looking for engineers, yet had thousands of people apply for a few hundred line jobs. Construction jobs have dried up, yet some businesses say they can't find welders.

Nationally, economists estimate that more than 1 million jobs are unfilled due to labor mismatch, even as about 10 percent of Americans seeking work cannot find it.

The "skills gap" explains a big part of our jobs crisis in our community and nationwide.

From the individual worker's perspective, college improves employment opportunities. Compare the 10.3 percent unemployment rate in 2010 for high school grads to the 5.4 percent unemployment rate of bachelor's degree holders.

You also could compare the average annual earnings of workers with bachelor's degrees — \$54,000 — versus those with just a high school diploma — \$32,500.

### Local initiative seeks to reach goal

These are just a few of the reasons that 55,000 Degrees, Louisville's college-attainment goal as well as a new public-private partnership, was formed.

55K's business, government, civic and education leaders understand that a city's ability to prosper in the global economy de-