

## Counting on 15K

Including African-Americans in efforts to boost the number of college graduates in Louisville

BY ANNE MARSHALL

About a year and a half ago, in the twilight of former Mayor Jerry Abramson's reign in Louisville, an ambitious goal was set: 55,000 Degrees. The hybrid business/education initiative is aimed at increasing the number of college degree holders in the city by 55,000 (with at least 40,000 being bachelor's degrees) by 2020.

A flurry of promises followed: Greater Louisville Inc. secured an \$800,000 grant that would assist an effort to get 15,000 working adults without a degree to go back to school. Jefferson County Public Schools pledged to boost graduation rates.

The motivation? 1) All those college graduates would result in nearly half of our adult workforce being college educated, meaning Louisville would finally nudge up near that research-triangle of educational dominance that is Raleigh-Durham. (Currently, about 30 percent of adults in Metro Louisville hold a college degree.) 2) A higher-educated workforce should (in theory) attract more companies offering higher-paying jobs.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan applauded the initiative during his recent trip to Louisville.

But during the early planning phase of 55,000 Degrees, a few African-American leaders grew troubled because closing the persistent achievement gap between black and white students wasn't part of the goal. The Louisville Urban League led the charge in the creation of 15K Degrees, a goal of black students attaining 12,000 bachelor's degrees and 3,000 associate degrees.

The two initiatives are connected, but 15K has its own advisory board and focus.

"The 15K goal was not originally a part of 55K," says J. Blaine Hudson, education professor and dean of the University of Louisville College of Arts and Sciences. "This is one that we had to research and do the data analysis for and propose largely on our own. It was important for us to make the case."

In the summer of 2010, as 55,000 Degrees was being shaped, Blaine collected data showing the discrepancy between black and white education achievement, a problem at the confluence of social, economic and historical factors.

The numbers show black students at JCPS scoring nearly 30 percentage points lower on the year-end standardized math tests than their white peers. And while 33 percent of white adults have a four-year degree in Louisville, the total drops to 14 percent for black adults.

"If you think about 55K as being a community-wide initiative, part of our argument was you've got to be sure to bring all segments of our community along," says Hudson, who co-authored "Two Centuries of Black Louisville."

Mary Gwen Wheeler, executive director of 55,000 Degrees, embraces the idea.

"There's no question, if we don't serve more low-income (people), and people of color don't get degrees, we won't get to our goal," Wheeler says. "There's no question about that."

Several organizations, including U of L and Simmons College, are now involved in the 15K initiative. In the fall, Hudson held two "Saturday Academy" sessions for the public to gather ideas on how to better prepare black students for college. Right now, 61 percent of freshmen coming into Jefferson County Technical and Community College test into at least one developmental course.

The Saturday Academy sessions honed in on JCPS, devising familiar recommendations, like greater student mentorship and more diversity training for teachers. The challenge now is turning ideas into action.

"You can always create a PR effort. PR on one side, cheerleading on the other, but you've got to get more college-ready students out of the public schools,"

Hudson says. "And you got to get them through college and get them all the way through."

**About 40 Academy at Shawnee** seniors rise from their chairs, grab a pen and head to a piece of paper taped to the wall. Anthony Smith, with the Network Center for Community Change (NC3), has just spent an hour talking with seniors about the figure eight drawn on the piece of paper — it's an accountability pathway. Each curve represents the various stages of reaching a goal: waiting and hoping, action, excuses.

The kids jot their own mantras: "You fall seven times to get up eight," reads one. "Education is my way out of not being killed," another student writes.

"Education is the great equalizer," Smith says, nodding as he reads the messages. He's been working with Shawnee students all year, visiting about once a month to support kids as they wind through this final phase before adulthood.

Many students he works with will be the first in their families to attempt post-secondary education. The prospect of ACTs and college applications is overwhelming. Many parents don't realize the importance of filing taxes on time for financial aid.

"Everybody wants their kid to go to college," Smith says. "But there's a lot you've got to do to get ready."

NC3 also connects students with support groups at their college of choice.

Data shows less than a quarter of students at two-year institutions finish in three years. Dropout tends to occur within the first 15 credit hours. Four-year colleges are better at hanging onto newcomers.

Whenever Smith mentions the 55K/15K initiatives, he says most look puzzled and think it involves money for college. Few know it's a citywide goal they could help achieve. 15K, in particular, is still very much a word-of-mouth movement. Whereas the larger 55,000 Degree initiative has an executive director, a \$1 million budget and a marketing campaign, 15K does not.

"It's up to us to fill in the blanks to how to achieve this goal," says Ben Richmond, president of the Louisville Urban League. "Do we have a definitive financed plan? No we don't. I think that's the next fill in the blank. And who's going to be accountable for that?"

15K's grassroots efforts are working. Many organizations want to be part of the challenge — including NC3. Dana Jackson, NC3's executive director, believes the biggest challenge for 15K is figuring out how to keep all the moving parts focused. "There's not a leader. There's not a structure," Jackson says. "I think, personally, that is, and could be over time, a tough spot."