



September 18, 2011

Mary Gwen Wheeler | Higher education takes effort

By Mary Gwen Wheeler

Special to The Courier-Journal

A little more than a year ago, a group of education, business and civic leaders in Greater Louisville set a big community goal — to gain 55,000 more college degrees in our community by the year 2020. Achieving the goal will move Louisville into the top tier of educational attainment among cities we compete with for good-paying jobs. More important, it will give a majority of our citizens and their families the ticket to better jobs and larger lives.

To meet the goal, we created a group called 55,000 Degrees. This public-private partnership, which is serving as both an advocate and a catalyst to higher education attainment, last week published its first annual progress report.

Working with the available public data, our research quantifies progress in five key focus areas:

Creating a college-going culture

Using the business community's leverage to accelerate attainment

Better preparing students for college and career

Making college more accessible and affordable; and

Increasing educational persistence and degree completion.

So, how are we doing?

First, Louisville is making encouraging progress in adding college graduates, but we are not yet on track to reach our goal of 55,000 additional college degrees — 40,000 bachelor's degrees and 15,000 associate's degrees.

The number of working adults with college degrees is on an upward trajectory, increasing by 7,000 in the most recent year figures are available. In fact, over the past 10 years, Louisville posted the second-largest increase in working-age adults with college degrees among 15 competitor cities. But because we started out so far behind, we must accelerate our gains to reach our goal by 2020 and outpace competitor cities that are also working to increase their educated workforce.

Second, far too many first-year college students arrive unprepared academically for their coursework. At public two-year institutions in our area, almost 80 percent of entering students last year required remedial courses, meaning they had to spend time and money on non-credit-bearing classes.

Across Kentucky, most of the 2010 graduating public high school seniors across Kentucky were not college-ready. According to the benchmarks set by the Kentucky Department of Education and the Council on Postsecondary Educations, only 31 percent of seniors in Jefferson County Public Schools

and 34 percent statewide were college-ready.

More troubling, there is wide variation among high schools. In more than a third of JCPS high schools, 95 percent of juniors had math scores below the benchmark for college readiness on the ACT in 2010. In other words, only 5 percent of junior students in those schools have even a 50 percent likelihood of getting a B or better in college math.

Poor preparation impedes students' progress to earning degrees and increases costs for them and their colleges and universities. Educational institutions around the region are working to help students who need additional support in developing academic skills. But this challenge will require the coordinated effort of K-12 and higher education as well as the business and community partners to make progress.

Third, more working-age adults with some college are back in school — a 20 percent increase in two years. This is a promising trend since more than 90,000 adults in the Louisville area have some college but no college degree.

However, these nontraditional students face great challenges in balancing school with jobs, families and other life commitments on the road to degree completion. Now more than ever, colleges and universities are changing to offer more accessible course offerings, college credit for prior learning, and a learning environment that fits the busy schedules of these students.

As part of the 55,000 Degrees partnership, Louisville now has a program to help these students enroll and persevere in their education. The Employee Education Delivery System (EEDS), organized by Greater Louisville Inc. with a grant from the Lumina Foundation, is a consortium of employers committed to helping their employees pursue higher education.

Our community has its work cut out for it, but many are already responding to the challenge. As our chairman, Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer, said earlier this week, "We are united with one common agenda: to make Louisville a well-educated city where lifelong learning is part of everyday life and is ingrained into our DNA."

To reach this audacious goal, we all have a role to play. Whether it's going back to finish college yourself or ensuring your child is prepared to go, whether it's tutoring at a neighborhood school or donating to a scholarship fund, whether it's advocating for education funding or helping your co-workers balance school and work, we all can make a difference.
