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## Kevin W. Cosby | U of L, JCTC lock arms with Simmons

### Schools partner to reach black students

*By Kevin W. Cosby, James R. Ramsey and Anthony Newberry  
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They all looked the same. Every major league baseball player had the same uniform number for their games on April 15. They all wore number 42 on their backs. It was a salute to the most famous “42” in baseball history — Jackie Robinson — on the anniversary of the day he broke the color barrier in 1947.

And don't forget, it was one of Robinson's white teammates who eased the talented African American's acceptance into the big leagues. A shortstop from Louisville named Pee Wee Reese befriended Robinson, even getting his picture made with his arm around his black teammate. That relationship and Robinson's foray into a white man's league brought value to major league baseball and, perhaps more important, put a face on racial equality for millions of Americans.

We're reminding you of Jackie Robinson's story because a historic African-American institution has the arm of a Louisville friend, or two or three, around its shoulders as it returns to the big leagues of higher education. Simmons College, a historically black institution that downsized to a theological school during hard times in the 1940s, was re-energized in 2005 and now has about 100 students enrolled in liberal arts programs as well as its traditional religious and theological degree programs.

Many of those students had nobody else telling them they could and should go to college. And now, through partnerships being developed by our three institutions — the University of Louisville, Jefferson Community and Technical College and Simmons — many of these students will have a chance to use their classes and credits to complete a degree at Simmons, pursue a different two-year degree at JCTC or a four-year degree at U of L.

We're already seeing a crossover of U of L and JCTC faculty teaching classes at Simmons. We're working on agreements to allow credit hours and degree continuity among the three schools. In a nutshell, we know that Simmons can reach west Louisville students that U of L and JCTC can't.

We hear from many Louisville teenagers that they feel trapped in a cycle of crime, poverty and unemployment and don't know how to escape. Simmons and education are a way out for those kids because we know that pushing a student to get their foot inside the door of a higher education institution is a big first step to getting a college degree and the skills to get a quality job in the 21st century.

We also know that cities that have, and embrace, historically black colleges or universities have a much higher percentage of African Americans with college degrees. Among 15 peer cities, Louisville ranks 14th in the percentage of black adults with college degrees. An embarrassing 14 percent of African Americans over age 25 have college degrees. As presidents of three Louisville higher education institutions, we won't stand for that. And you shouldn't either.

We need others to be involved. Just opening our doors will not be enough. Many students from west Louisville neighborhoods face significant barriers to completing a degree that include being the first in

their families to attend college, low incomes that make it difficult to arrange child care and transportation, and family responsibilities. Their success depends on knocking down these barriers.

If our community is going to reach its goal of 55,000 more college degree-holders by 2020, roughly 15,000 of those additional degrees must be conferred on African Americans. That's a big number. But with partnerships like the ones forged by Simmons, U of L and JCTC, and the support of the community, we can do it. We must do it if Louisville has a chance to be a relevant force in the new economy where high-paying manufacturing jobs are no longer a way of life.

Our three institutions are promising to do our part. We're wearing the same jerseys with the same number on the back. We're a team. And with a little help from Louisvillians like you, we'll all be winners.

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