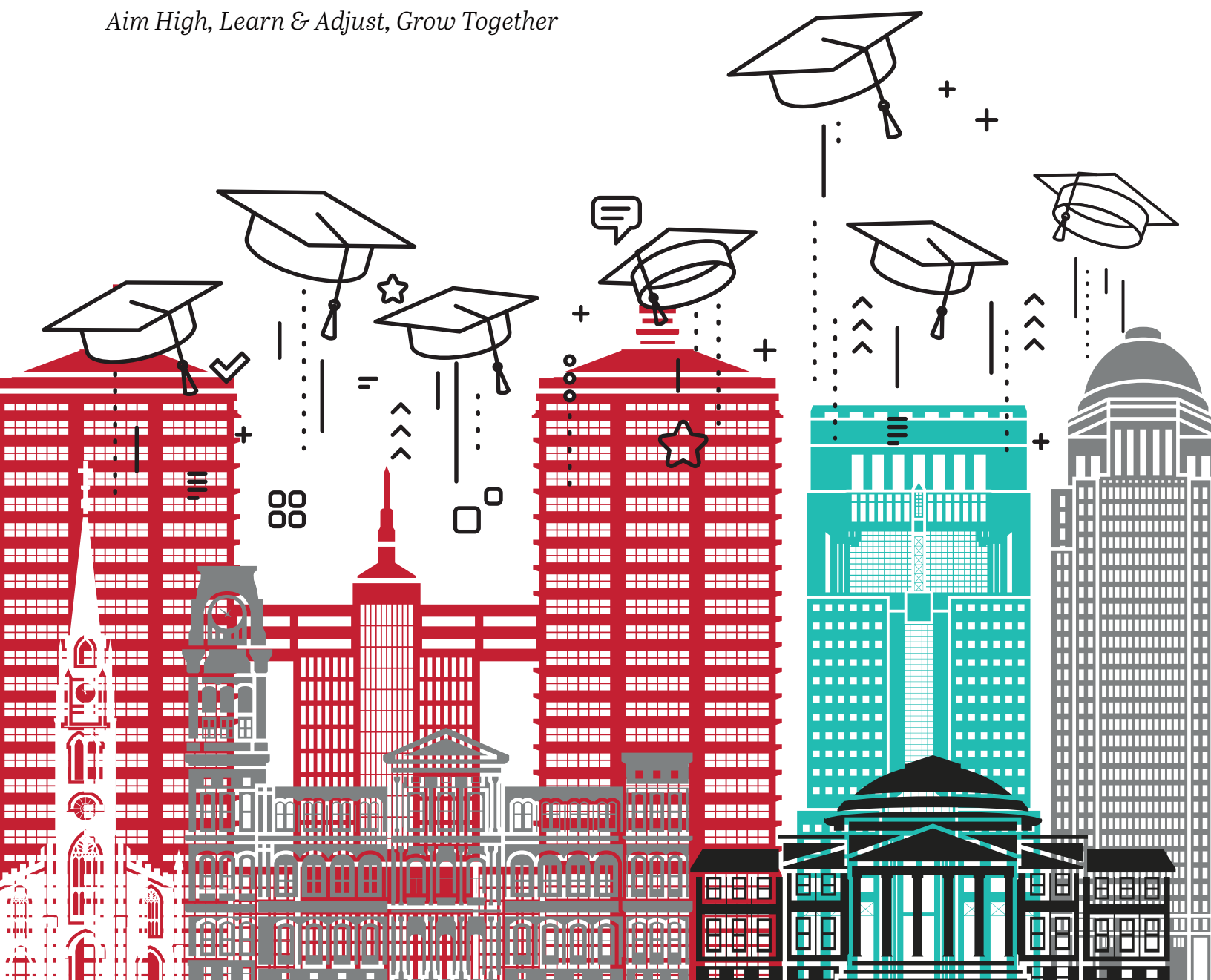


55,000 Degrees: Achieving a More Educated City

Aim High, Learn & Adjust, Grow Together



“I want to live in a city where the future is being mapped out.” — Jim Crace, novelist

T**o guide the way forward, we need to know where we came from and where we stand now.** 2020 will be remembered as the year turned upside-down by the COVID-19 pandemic, a year where we have been forced to face uncomfortable truths about inequities in our society. It is not what we envisioned when, in 2010, Louisville leaders set an ambitious 10-year goal to achieve dramatically higher and more equitable education attainment levels.

The story of the 55,000 Degrees partnership, however, provides confidence in collective action to tackle complex problems. It's a story of a group of leaders from different sectors who picked up the challenge and worked toward a common goal. The results were not all that we hoped for, but the progress is tangible: Louisville's education attainment rate increased 8 percentage points, from 38% to 46% of the working-age population with an associate degree or higher, an addition of 40,000 degrees.

When working on shared problems, we tend to stay in our silos – it's what we feel we can control. 55K built a framework to keep cross-sector stakeholders working together to close “leakage” points and secure “hand-offs” between different parts of the system, creating a more aligned education system and, in turn, increasing the chance that students and lifelong learners could persist in their educational aspirations. As of 2019, Louisville's postsecondary institutions are producing 2,500 more degrees annually than when we first signed the Greater Louisville Education Commitment in 2010.

Regular reviews of the data over the decade also highlighted the biggest challenges. The financial burden of postsecondary education has increasingly shifted to students and their families. For many, the cost has become untenable or the value perceived as not worth it. And while education outcomes improved all along the pipeline, race and income gaps - particularly in the K-12 system - did not close, leaving a large number of students unprepared or underprepared for college and career.

The ripple effects of 55K's collective work positions Louisville for the courageous conversations required to change policy and practice and to better align resources in this next decade. A few examples:

- Evolve502's guarantee of two years of tuition-free postsecondary education means that every Jefferson County Public Schools graduate, regardless of race or income status, can afford to get the skills and education needed to earn a living wage.
- KentuckianaWorks and Greater Louisville, Inc. recognized the changing nature of work and the need for more short-term, work-based learning and have built services for youth and adults to upskill or reskill, brokering partnerships between employers and education providers.
- 15K Degrees, dedicated to Black degree attainment, urged the community to examine the root causes for gaping inequities and structural barriers to racial equity in education.

This report, commissioned by 55K and conducted by Higher Ed Insight, reflects on 10 years of work, captures lessons learned and provides insight on the value of cross-sector partnerships, common agendas, transparent data, and mutual accountability in creating a more equitable and meaningful education system. These lessons, hard-earned, position us as Louisville sets course for the next decade. Shared goals help keep our eyes on the collective prize – the rewards come one degree at a time.



Greg Fischer
Mayor, Louisville, Kentucky
Chairman of the Board, 55K Degrees

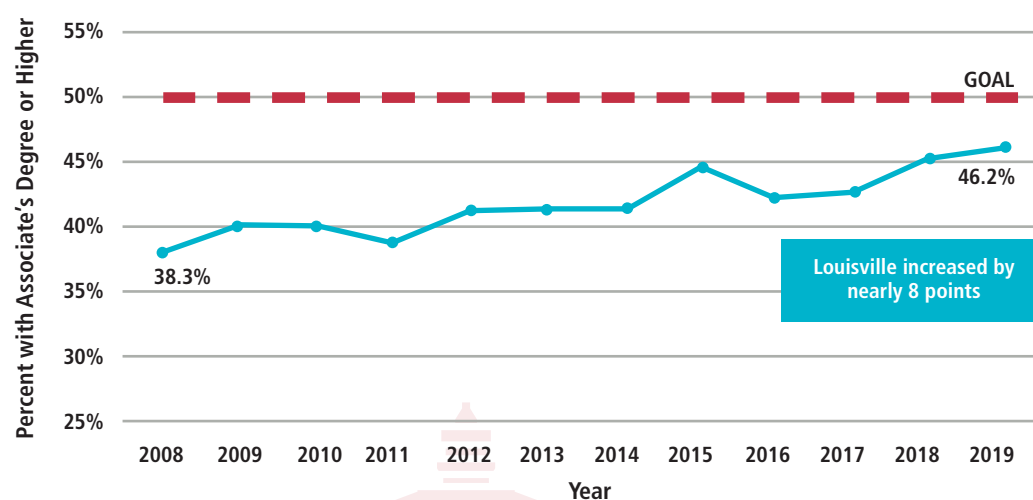


Mary Gwen Wheeler
Executive Director, 55K Degrees

Executive Summary

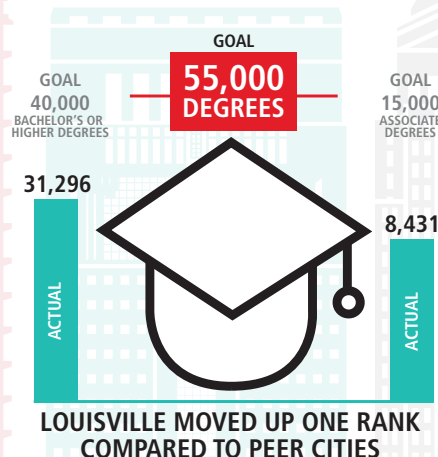
This reflective brief on the 55,000 Degrees initiative (55K) tells the story of a meaningful public-private partnership around postsecondary education. What began as an aspiration to drive economic growth via post-secondary degree attainment evolved into a more comprehensive roadmap for prosperity and opportunity via equitable P-16 educational pathways and workforce preparation. Because of the achievements and pathways built by 55K, and through its successor organization Evolve502, Louisville is better positioned to expand educational opportunities, reduce systemic barriers, and prepare a 21st-century workforce—all for a more equitable and competitive city.

Education Attainment of Louisville's Working Age Population



SOURCE: 55K Dashboard, U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

While 55K did not ultimately meet its ten-year attainment goal, the city can celebrate having **added nearly 40,000 degrees** (31K+ bachelor's degrees and 8K+ associate's degrees). As of 2020, **46% of Louisvillians now hold a degree, which is a nearly 8 point increase**. Louisville has moved up one rank in degree attainment in the last decade compared to peer cities.



¹<http://dashboard.5500odegrees.org/>

GREATER LOUISVILLE EDUCATION COMMITMENT (GLEC) GOAL:

To move the Louisville region into the top tier among its peer cities by raising education attainment so that by 2020 at least:

- 40% of working-age adults hold a **bachelor's degree (40,000 more)**; and
- 10% hold an **associate's degree (15,000 more)**.

Key Successes

Through the work of 55K, the leadership of greater Louisville:

- **Coalesced around a common goal of degree attainment.** Committed local leaders, including the mayor, worked to maintain momentum.
- **Embedded collective effort into the DNA of the city.** 55K's visibility in the Louisville community helped to train leaders to expect to solve problems with cross-sector partners.
- **Embraced data as a learning tool and "action catalyst."** Stakeholders from different sectors agreed on shared measures, reflected on data regularly, and held each other up as responsible to the common goal. 55K partners used data to learn and test new approaches.
- **Lifted up issues of racial equity.** From the start, 55K disaggregated outcomes based on race. Recognizing the stark difference in outcomes based on race, corollary initiatives formed with a focus on Black and Latinx degree attainment.
- **Recognized the importance of adult learners.** 55K was forward-thinking in understanding the importance of adult learners in increasing local degree attainment.
- **Garnered recognition and support on a national stage.** National and local funders lifted up Louisville's collective goal and supported 55K through funding, technical assistance, and exposure to best practices.
- **Improved student success at 55K partnering postsecondary institutions.** Pledging improvements, Louisville institutions made numerical and equity gains in college persistence, graduation and degree completions – 2,500 more degrees produced annually than in 2010.



Lessons Learned

55K encountered some significant headwinds within the larger economic and educational contexts in which it operated. It became clear that convening a multi-sector table to align systems around a common metric was a valuable, but not sufficient, approach. The partnership pivoted to build capacity to coordinate and realign existing “wrap-around” services and invest financial resources to mitigate barriers of poverty and structural racism. In the past decade, Louisville:

“I don’t know if you’ve heard the stories of Louisville? It was this great city sitting between a lackluster Indianapolis and a country music town down the road called Nashville. They both leapfrogged over us. That’s burned a lot of people for a long time. Everybody saw this merger and the opportunity to become more competitive as a good thing for us.”

— MASON RUMMEL,
President and CEO of the
James Graham Brown
Foundation

- **Saw state postsecondary funding plummet.** Associated rising postsecondary costs for students created dense roadblocks. Across 55K’s ten years of work, local college enrollment declined and the college-going rate of public school graduates declined more than 10 percentage points.
- **Struggled to close achievement gaps at the K-12 level.** While JCPS increased college-readiness of public high school students, wide gaps between Black, White, and Latinx students did not close.
- **Learned that using data to raise issues of equity is important—but only a first step.** Whereas 55K made intentional choices to commit to equity in education attainment from its inception, the barriers of poverty and structural racism must be addressed more directly if gaps in attainment for Black and Latinx Louisvillians are to be closed.
- **Recognized that adult learners with “some college, no degree” are not always “low-hanging fruit” for increasing degree attainment.** This demographic faces significant and complex barriers to re-enrollment and completion.
- **Confronted the limits of a collective initiative’s influence on action.** Bringing previously siloed sectors to the table around a common goal measured by data is necessary but not sufficient. Deeper collaboration comes in the form of shared governance, where sectors agree to share student-level data and invest financial resources to align activities toward a common goal.

Based on 22 interviews with key Louisville stakeholders and document analysis of organizational materials (n=294), this report traces the arc of the organization from inception, through deep learning and nimble recalibration, to managing the process of creating new civic infrastructure. This report outlines one of the first successful collective impact initiatives in Louisville and how partners from the private and public sectors worked together to build a more educated city. Louisville’s education ecosystem continues to build on the legacy of 55K through numerous cradle-to-career initiatives, especially the two-year promise-scholarship and wraparound student-support infrastructure supported by the new backbone organization Evolve502.

Greater Together- The Genesis of 55K

Overview

In 2010, business, education, government, and civic leaders in the city of Louisville coalesced around a common ambition to rise in peer postsecondary attainment rankings and transform the quality of life for city residents vis-à-vis education. From the beginning, key partners agreed to a plan of action that would use community-level data to understand the core challenges of increasing postsecondary attainment. They committed to work both independently and together to build a community-wide college-going culture, increase college readiness, make college more affordable, and support adults returning to college. After signing the Greater Louisville Education Commitment (GLEC) in May, the organization 55,000 Degrees was born that October as the backbone of this effort.

Background

The city and county governments of Louisville consolidated in 2003 to leverage a larger population with more streamlined operations, particularly as Louisville's peer cities were becoming more competitive economically. Structural shifts in Louisville's regional economy from manufacturing to services elevated the need for education and a skilled workforce to remain competitive.

The Community Foundation of Louisville (CFL) established the Greater Louisville Project (GLP) with the support of local foundations shortly after the merger to benchmark the city's progress and provide research and information for community improvement. A 2008 "Education Pipeline" report by the GLP showed that of the 10,000 children born in a typical year, nearly one-third would not graduate high school and only 25% would earn a postsecondary degree.

After a "Drop-Out Summit" catalyzed community attention to education challenges in 2008, Mayor Jerry Abramson convened a Mayor's Education Roundtable (MER) of school superintendents, college and university presidents, and civic leaders from Louisville and Southern Indiana to improve and align the education pipeline. Simultaneously, Greater Louisville, Inc. (GLI) (the local chamber of commerce) convened business leaders with the Business Leaders for Education (BLE), which emphasized the need to respond to global competitiveness challenges. Together, these influential partners commissioned a strategic plan and held a joint retreat to set an action agenda, ultimately coalescing around what would be called the Greater Louisville Education Commitment (GLEC). This was a commitment to move Louisville into the top tier of its competitor cities through building a numerical attainment goal to reach 50% of the working-age population with a degree by adding 40,000 Bachelor's degrees and 15,000 Associate degrees by 2020.²

² Note: In later years 55K wrestled with how to include non-degree credentials as progress towards the goal. This data was unavailable from the American Community Survey, and thus never added to Louisville's count.

Aim High

In signing on to this historic commitment in May 2010, MER and BLE, along with philanthropic partners, formed 55,000 Degrees to carry out the GLEC and its five key objectives:

The Arc of 55,000 Degrees



1. Create and support a college-going culture
2. Use the business community's unique points of leverage to accelerate attainment
3. Prepare students for success in college, career, citizenship, and life
4. Make post-secondary education accessible and affordable
5. Increase educational persistence, performance, and progress

“What 55,000 Degrees did, stunningly, was become the ‘cool kids club.’ You couldn’t send a proxy: it was either the president or no one.”

— BEN RENO-WEBER,
Project Director at Greater Louisville Project

A Framework for Working Together: The Early Years

Much of 55K’s approach to community change aligned with what is known as a “collective impact” (CI) approach, which leverages the power of cross-sector networks to break down silos by sharing data, decision-making, and visioning among private and public partners to solve society’s complex policy conundrums (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The key components of 55K’s framework for action included bringing core champions and multi-sector leaders to the table, serving as the backbone organization to align all players, using data to inform decisions, and leveraging a host of mutually reinforcing activities.



Convening the Table

As the backbone organization, 55K set the rules for engagement by being the convener; communicating the data; coordinating partners to set agendas, strategies, and partner pledges; and reporting on progress annually. 55K cultivated the active support of a wide range of community actors and institutions.

All 55K partners brought a unique focus to the table, including:

 **Core city champions**, like Mayors Jerry Abramson (2003-2011) and Greg Fischer (2011-present), ignited and maintained momentum by bringing decision makers to the table, keeping them engaged, and lifting the banner of increased degree attainment citywide to keep it in the community's zeitgeist. The support of the mayors and the consistent leadership of 55K Executive Director Mary Gwen Wheeler were key to the initiative's success.

“The idea that two mayors back-to-back were putting this front and center and trying to use their leverage and leadership to convene the key stakeholders and set a big broad goal and then track and measure progress is a big deal.” — MICHAEL GRITTON, Executive Director, KentuckianaWorks

 **Business partners + Greater Louisville Inc & KentuckianaWorks** provided guidance on local industry talent needs and worked with JCPS and higher education to align curriculum with career pathways. Many local business partners, such as Humana, Universal Woods and Norton Healthcare pledged to support their employees as adult comebacks (e.g., through tuition remission, mentors, college-going information).

“Longer term, our collective work needs to illuminate the route of lifelong learning—no one's cracked the code on the ecosystem that blends credential attainment, employers, and postsecondary”

— ROGER CUDE, Senior VP, HR Business Partners, Talent Management, and Organizational Development, Humana

 **Higher education partners** were key. Eight local institutions were founding signers of the GLEC. Sitting at the same table looking at education data across institutions and sectors was catalytic for these leaders who had often worked independently from or in competition with one another. Spurred by this and the 55K approach to aggregating community-level data, local institutions made significant changes such as adopting predictive student tracking systems matched with intrusive advising, peer mentoring, and redesigning remedial education to address retention and affordability issues.

“Even the moments when we had to slow down and talk about data ... those were still valuable because it was a process-conversation and coming to terms with the fact that some of the data were really ugly.”

— TORI MURDEN-MCCLURE, President of Spalding University

 **The Archdiocese of Louisville** impacted 55K's understanding of the hurdles around how to compare data across institutions and showed how various sectors of the community could be included in the collective. The Archdiocese set its own goal of 99% of students pursuing college or postsecondary training.

 **Philanthropic funders** included The Community Foundation of Louisville (CFL), The James Graham Brown Foundation, Lumina, Foundation C. E. S. Foundation, Humana Foundation, JP Morgan Chase Foundation, Brown-Forman, Foundation and LG&E. Funders promised multi-year support so the organization could feel secure in building new infrastructure and campaigns. 55K’s “deep dive” into the education challenges informed the local donors at the GLP table.

The work of 55K—the priority and focus it created in our community—helped inform millions of dollars in grant-making. We created a common language, we’ve broken down silos, we’ve brought people together around new tables to tackle things in much more collaborative way. The dialogue opens up opportunities for new, informed and intentional grant-making to move our community forward.”

—TESS MCNAIR, Executive Director of the C.E. & S. Foundation, Inc,

 **Community, faith, and civic organizations** acted as advocates within their communities to spread the message of 55K and align activities to support student success. In particular, the Louisville Urban League (represented on 55K’s board) helped community and business leaders design an intentional strategy to increase degree attainment among the Black community of Louisville. Metro United Way (also represented on 55K’s board) committed to building a system to support out-of-school time for JCPS students and eventually became the pillar lead of a coalition to improve kindergarten readiness across the city.

 **Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS)** pledged through 55K’s goal setting to improve high school graduation rates, college-going rates, and college and career readiness scores. JCPS partnered with 55K to improve college-going culture through initiatives like increasing FAFSA application rates and introducing college signing days. JCPS also worked to redesign high schools through what has become the Academies of Louisville, with support from the business community. This early initiative to align curriculum and student experiences to current workforce needs was deployed as “wall-to-wall” career academies in all comprehensive high schools.

“55K has really been the foundation for a number of other initiatives we’ve spearheaded and helped grow within JCPS. For example, in some of the reports we did really early on for 55K, equity was a big lens through which we were looking – how do we look at opportunity gaps? Since then we’ve had a racial equity policy passed, started a Young Males of Color Academy and a Females of Color STEAM Academy.”

—DENA DOSSETT, JCPS Chief Executive Director of Accountability



“Data is everything in terms of being able to make decisions, to see progress, to see what progress is not being made, to see slices of the community. All parts of the community shouldn’t be treated equally – meaning, equity is very different from equality.”

— DAVE CALZI, Retired Partner, Ernst & Young

Data-backed Decisions and Goals

Data is an essential driver of goal setting, progress tracking, and collective accountability. For 55K, having a clear goal and consistently sharing relevant data was a core strategy for mobilizing community leaders, maintaining buy-in, measuring success, and organizational learning along the way. Asking founding partners, businesses and community organizations to make pledges also provided a mechanism for mutual accountability.

A robust data dashboard featured on 55K’s website provided the community with open, transparent data that could be used to create critical feedback loops by tracking progress by sector and school, demographic groups (e.g., by race, gender, and by high school), other cities’ attainment, and more. 55K used data systematically with their board to set strategy, to deliver an annual presentation to the school board on benchmarks and progress towards the goal, and to organize action teams. 55K published an annual report to share data outcomes and presented it at an annual community summit. In later years, this evolved into a joint education and workforce summit drawing hundreds of participants.

Data as Flashlight on Equity

Regular use of data disaggregated by race was a key tool for emphasizing issues related to poverty, immigrant populations, and racial inequity in education. Black community leaders, convened by the Louisville Urban League in an ad-hoc committee to 55K, took ownership of an African American education attainment goal. At initial 55K board meetings, this steering committee advocated for the creation of a corollary initiative focused explicitly on college attainment for Louisville’s African American community. The leaders of this initiative, known as 15,000 Degrees (15K), were also leaders within 55K and spoke directly to African American attainment at each collective meeting. Other organizations also emerged to support the Latinx community.

“I think it was important to highlight the need for the African American community to own some of the work and to definitely understand that we are a part of the solution, that Louisville cannot get to 55,000 more degrees without us.”

— SADIQA REYNOLDS, President and CEO, Louisville Urban League

Haley Glover, Strategy Director for State Action and Equity at the Lumina Foundation, noted that 55K’s willingness to consistently share data disaggregated by race stands apart from the approach of other similar initiatives of this era. She described, *“What I remember vividly is that at one of 55K’s annual reports, where they disaggregated the data, they showed how they were making better progress among Black and Latino residents and they were celebrating it. Even four or five years ago, race was not something that people were very comfortable talking about.”*

“I think [55K] caused people to collect data that held us accountable but nobody said around that table, ‘it’s [only] JCPS’ job to make this happen.’ They said ‘It’s our job to make this happen.’ You felt like you were accountable, but you didn’t feel like you were out there alone to do it.”

— DONNA HARGENS,
Former Superintendent
of JCPS

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

For 55K, change was accomplished through the many activities of stakeholders across the community working in concert to build a culture towards moving the needle, as opposed to working in silos. One stakeholder characterized the work of 55K as “peeling an onion” with each layer of data examined, a new barrier to attainment would come to light to be addressed by the collective. The organization’s success relied on this dynamic of testing and constant refinement. Mutually reinforcing activities included the following:

- **Campaigns and Commitments** (such as the founding partner pledges). These were central to garnering buy-in from various stakeholders maintaining commitment to degree attainment and for engaging students in college-going behaviors such as the citywide College-Signing Day at the YUM! center. Here is another core example:
 - **Count Me In!** was a city-wide initiative to build a framework for citizens to take ownership of 55K. Employers pledged a specific number of degrees through allocating resources towards tuition remission and tracking employees who returned to college. Individual adults self-identified to be counted as future degree holders. Community organizations like local hospitals committed to helping a specific number of their employees get to college.
- **Action Networks.** Using data to work together, stakeholders across sectors coordinated to improve a specific student outcome. Here is an example:
 - **College Transition Action Network (CTAN).** 55K convened leaders from high schools, higher education, and college access organizations to increase college-going rates. The CTAN group’s data review showed that a large number of high school graduates were submitting a Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) and were accepted into college but were not enrolling in the fall (i.e., summer melt). CTAN tested strategies to reduce melt, such as providing students with mentors and managing a texting campaign to keep students informed regarding application processes. CTAN built awareness, launched process changes, and sustained relationships that improved the “hand-off” from high school to local colleges, but it did not find a sustainable source of funding for the additional student supports.



- **Built Infrastructure.** Beyond creating a space for sectors to learn from each other and the data, 55K also catalyzed the establishment of cross-sector alignments and capacities. Examples include the following:
 - **Degrees Work.** Community leaders piloted several initiatives focused on supporting adults through their employers. The most recent iteration was called “Degrees Work,” a one-stop-shop for adults returning to college, run by the local workforce investment board, KentuckianaWorks. Through Degrees Work, businesses paid to make college advising services available to employees and higher education institutions paid membership fees to engage new or returning students. This model never became self-sustaining and Degrees Work closed in 2019.
 - **Destination Degree.** 55K spent resources to build a website directory, Destination Degree, in an attempt to address the gap in “college knowledge.” Ultimately, it was underused by students and parents and was difficult to maintain due to constantly changing information. This attempt at building an information source revealed a struggle within 55K as it wrestled with whether to provide direct services to students or only work behind the scenes as a convener and organizer.

This process of collectively deciding which activities to implement and utilizing data to determine strategies created a culture of working together. Additionally, public commitments created new accountability, which led to a city-wide culture of shared ownership around postsecondary attainment. Over this decade, siloed sectors found ways to work together, either directly led by 55K or energized by the environment that 55K helped to create.

Mid-point (2014-2017): Learn & Adjust

From its inception, 55,000 Degrees was dedicated to continuous improvement through assessment and learning. Based on its continuous learning approach, the partnership had several recalibration points in its drive towards reaching the goal.

After several years of annual reporting, the mayor and leaders of 55K began to recognize that, despite significant effort and incremental progress, it was not going to reach its namesake goal without acceleration of the upward trend. Some suggested pushing for college and career readiness earlier than high school.

“We saw the same things that other communities were...And we said it so many times in CTAN and in other groups, we can't just focus on high school because the die is cast unfortunately for a lot of our kids, we have to look earlier and beyond. I think when we started to make that pivot, we started to look at things like a promise scholarship and really tried to dive deeper into that systemic community change. [We realized] what we really had to solve is [things like] families getting evicted. What we really have to solve are these community issues, because it's not the will or the want, it is all the other stuff that happens in people's lives that prevent us from getting those education attainment goals.”

— PAM ROYSTER, JCPS

Cradle-to-Career. In 2014, Mayor Fischer raised the idea with the 55K board of adding metrics and strategies to start tracking education readiness earlier and on the other end of the spectrum to make clearer pathways to high demand jobs. He developed a Cradle-to-Career (C2C) framework for the city by organizing four “pillars” with leads to connect the various stages of the education pipeline. 55,000 Degrees was positioned at the third pillar focused on Postsecondary Transition and Completion, while Metro United Way led Kindergarten Readiness, JCPS led K-12 Success, and KentuckianaWorks led 21st Century Workforce and Talent. These pillars reported on progress at a community forum once a year, but there was otherwise no organized structure to coordinate or align action.

Mid-point Retreat. To identify acceleration strategies, 55K leadership commissioned a recommendation-focused report and brought stakeholders together for a 2015 mid-point retreat. In this reflection process, they wrestled with the role of credentials—which could have put them closer to their goal, but which were never included in the 55,000 degree count due to data issues. Three priorities emerged from this time:

- (1) increasing college readiness,
- (2) addressing affordability, and
- (3) engaging a more vocal and strategic emphasis on equity.

Though equity was a value of 55K from its founding, a new emphasis emerged at this period, recognizing an equity-centered approach and addressing the needs of students with higher barriers and opportunities for assistance was integral to the success of 55K. 15K and 55K leader Audwin Helton shared in an interview,

“A result of 55,000 Degrees being a champion for equity is that participating in it has helped the business community to fully understand equity versus equality.”



Pivot to Promise

Say Yes. After the mid-point retreat, 55,000 Degrees made a more substantial pivot when it chose to take on the challenge of applying to become a “Say Yes to Education” (Say Yes) city. If selected, Louisville would have to raise the funds for a locally endowed scholarship. Say Yes would support Louisville with millions of dollars in funding and technical support to build data-driven alignment of wrap-around services that would keep students on track to postsecondary success from preschool on. The Say Yes model touched on many of the original objectives of 55,000 Degrees, namely addressing affordability, college readiness, and the creation of a college-going culture (though it does not address opportunity needs for adult returners). The decision to apply to becoming a Say Yes city was a choice to orient the coordinated action of 55K and the Mayor’s C2C pipeline towards creating an entity that would directly serve students with financial aid and coordinate Pre-K-12 wrap-around services through a shared governance model.

By All Means. At the same time, Mayor Fischer joined a consortium of six cities called By All Means (BAM), run by Harvard’s Education Redesign Lab and focused on youth in poverty, to learn from national experts and other cities. BAM required a “children’s cabinet” to be formed, so the mayor and superintendent formed a Cradle-to-Career Cabinet to address academic and non-academic barriers, including the effects of poverty. 55K became the staff organization to the Cabinet to support the exploration of the Say Yes to Education model in conjunction with BAM’s effort to support Louisville to “build integrated education and child development systems” to “restore social mobility” and “close achievement and opportunity gaps.”

Homegrown Evolution. Louisville ultimately encountered unanticipated challenges to becoming an official Say Yes city, but joined Say Yes’ Weiss Institute as its first partner city to receive consulting support as they envisioned their own version of a supported pathway to postsecondary success capped with a promise scholarship, what was originally called the Louisville Promise. 55K as a backbone organization moved into a new and final era to build lasting civic infrastructure that would support more equitable access to a postsecondary credential. In the last few years, 55K managed the process to build Evolve502’s scholarship and student support capacity, taking steps including initiating a search for an Executive Director, determining the composition of the board and cabinet, and raising funds. The effort to build a “comebacker” service to re-engage adult learners, on the other hand, did not find a sustainable model of operation.

Headwinds

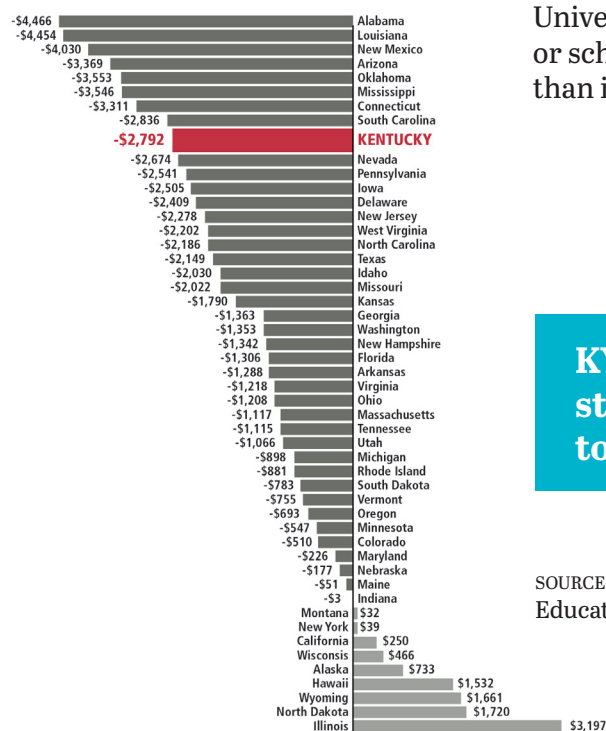
55K encountered significant headwinds in the larger economic and educational contexts in which it operated. Louisville’s gains in postsecondary graduation rates are particularly noteworthy when one considers that state support for higher education dwindled, postsecondary costs for students rose, and college enrollment declined in this period.

In the decade of this initiative, postsecondary spending in Kentucky was gutted. The 55k initiative was launched on the heels of the 2008 recession, and universities faced difficult decisions on where to find alternative funding or make cuts without jeopardizing quality. The average state budget allocation for higher education per student was 16% lower in 2018 relative to 2008 levels; in Kentucky, the budget allocation was 27% less (Mitchell et al., 2018).

Changes in State Spending Per Student, 2008-2018

The financial burden was shifted, in part, to students and families at the four-year level. The loss of funding coincided with trends in rising tuition: at the state level, undergraduate tuition at public colleges and universities in Kentucky increased by 39% between 2008 and 2018 (Mitchell et al., 2018).

For example, the average net price of attending the University of Louisville for students who received grant or scholarship financial aid was 58% higher in 2018 than it was in 2008 (NCES, 2018).³

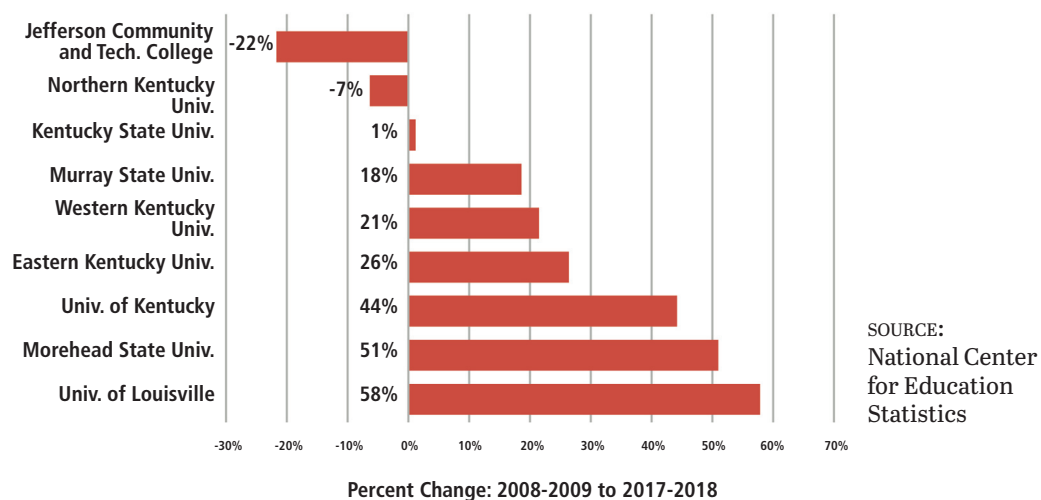


KY is Spending \$2,792 less per student in 2018 as compared to 2008

SOURCE: CBPP analysis using SHEEO State Higher Education Finance Report

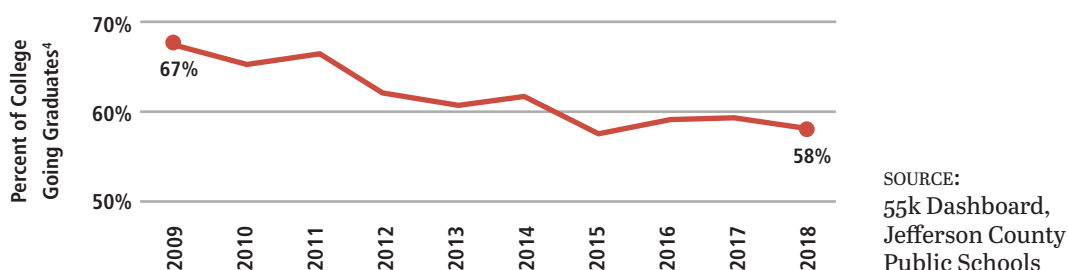
³ Calculated by the National Center for Education Statistics as the difference between the total cost of attendance and the average amount of aid received.

Percent Change in Average Net Price for Students Awarded Grant or Scholarship Aid, 2008-2009 to 2017-2018



College going rates decreased. In 2010, 65% of JCPS graduates enrolled in college. That number has decreased alarmingly, and only 58% of JCPS graduates enrolled directly in college as of 2018.

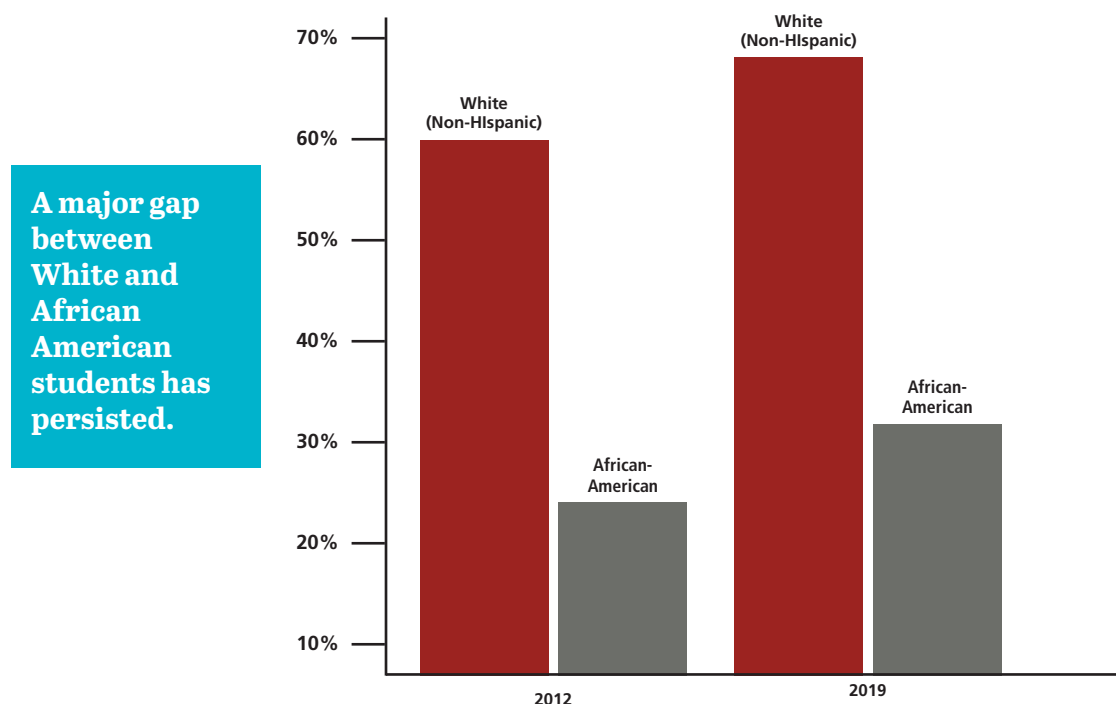
Jefferson County Public Schools College Going, District Total



⁴Jefferson County Public Schools Percentage of Jefferson County Public School graduates who enroll in a postsecondary institution before the Fall the year following students graduation.

College and career readiness scores showed progress but failed to close wide racial gaps. As of 2019, JCPS lagged behind the state College and Career Readiness (CCR) score by 12 points. Gaps in CCR scores are palpable by race, with only 40% of African American JCPS students identified as college and career ready in 2019, compared to 69% of white JCPS students.

JCPS College/Career Readiness Scores by Race



- It is important to note that significant progress was made in one area for the K-12 system: high school graduation rates increased. In 2019-2020, 84% of JCPS students graduated, compared to the overall Kentucky rate of 91%. This is up from the 2010 JCPS rate of 69%.

Louisville has experienced very little population growth over the last decade while its peer cities experienced booms in talent attraction. Despite this challenge, Louisville had an eight-point increase in degree holders among the working-age population and was able to move up one spot in peer city rankings, suggesting that Louisville was able to increase educational attainment among its own community members, rather than relying only on attracting degree-holders.

Findings

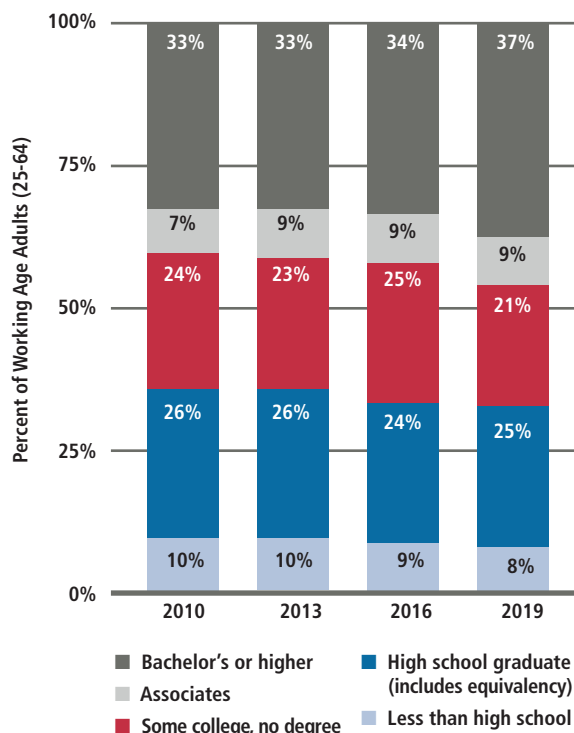
In an effort to document the vast communal learning in Louisville over the last decade, 55K commissioned this report with applied research firm Higher Ed Insight (HEI) to conduct interviews with local leaders and review internal documents from 2010-2020. This analysis consisted of reviewing 294 total documents, including board meeting notes, reports, and public-facing previous studies and reports for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative findings reveal the progress made toward the ambitious goals set in the GLEC: Foundational goals. Interviews were conducted with 22 local leaders, who provided their own perspective on how 55K evolved and what lessons were learned for the city. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and a qualitative content analysis was conducted to bring forward the following findings in three categories—what progress was made toward the ambitious goals set in the GLEC, what key successes did the collective action produce, and what lessons were learned.



Foundational Goals

Louisville is a more educated city. In 2020 Louisville is a more educated city than it was when 55K launched in 2010. The city has experienced a nearly 8 point increase in education attainment since the initiative was conceived: the percentage of Louisville working-age adults with an Associate degree or higher is 46%—2.5 percentage points above the 2019 national total and less than 4 points away from their goal (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b).

Changes in Educational Attainment Among Working Age Adults in Jefferson County from 2010-2019



Ultimately, more citizens of Louisville shifted into credentialed categories. In other words, more Louisvillians shifted from less than a high school degree or some college no degree into degree-holder status. Significantly, as can be seen by the bar chart on the following page, those with high school or postsecondary credentials increased, while those with no high school or some college/no degree declined. A larger percentage of the working-age adult population holds a Bachelor's degree or higher in 2019 (37%) as compared to 2008 (31%). Significantly, the overall population with some college but no degree has decreased by 3 points, indicating that more adults were able to finish a credential they had previously started. Graduation rates have increased, which is reflected in a decrease in the overall population with less than a high school degree (2 points lower than in 2010).

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. (2010-2019). ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables

Key Successes

The city of Louisville was changed because of 55,000 Degrees. The following themes emerged from interviews with 22 stakeholders in leadership roles across the city:

55K led Louisville to coalesce around a common goal. Momentum for this initiative was maintained by stable and committed leadership in Mayor Fischer and Executive Director of 55K Mary Gwen Wheeler, using the Greater Louisville Education Commitment (GLEC) to consistently mobilize local leaders around the common goal of degree attainment even through many leadership changes. The message of why degree attainment matters to Louisville and its businesses, institutions, and funders was highlighted through mutually reinforcing activities.

55K embedded collective impact into the DNA of the city. 55K built a table where previously siloed business leaders met with university presidents and community-based leaders to develop a shared vocabulary around data use and education. 55K's visibility in the Louisville community helped to train leaders to expect to solve problems with cross sector partners.

“The work of 55K has created a set of common themes, shared vocabulary—we're all talking about the same thing now.”

— MASON RUMMEL, CEO and President of James Graham Brown Foundation

55K established that data is key for focusing stakeholders around a goal. As is outlined in detail above, stakeholders from different sectors agreed on different measures, reflected on data regularly and publicly, and held each other up as responsible to the common goal. Common measures were not linked to any accountability system, but the data *offered a light* to guide the direction of stakeholders. 55K partners used data to learn, constantly trying new approaches and guiding organizational recalibrations.

“I think that [data] was one of the most compelling pieces of 55,000 Degrees. The goal is in the name, the data point is there. There was a recurring rhythm and cadence to meeting and looking at the data and reporting out for the community and where we were with the data. There was that ability to, at some point, ring a bell and sound an alarm that we're not going to get there.”

~ THERESA RENO-WEBER, President and CEO of Metro United Way

“55K connected the universities and transfer patterns. You had a community body interested in how Jefferson students are transitioning to earn additional degrees. That would usually be addressed internally by the schools, on a one-off circumstance. We now send 1500 kids a year to 4-year: 700 to UofL, 200 to Bellarmine, 200 to Spalding, 200 to IUS, 160 to Western Kentucky. We track them and in their junior years, they had slightly better GPAs than kids who started at U of L. That's data we would not have if it weren't for 55K recognizing that we're all in this together and we need to share data.”

— TY HANDY, President of JCTC

“When you have national experts that are constantly partnering with you, that puts a stamp on you, as a seal of approval in some ways. It gets you a little bit of attention, which really helped. It definitely helped keep us at the forefront of people's minds as an expert in the thing we were trying to do here locally.”

— MATT BERRY, Chief Scholarship and Policy Officer at Evolve502 and previously of 55K:

55K lifted up issues of racial equity. From the start, 55K disaggregated outcomes based on race. Recognizing the stark difference in outcomes for Black community members, the African American leaders on the 55K board formed a corollary initiative entirely focused on Black postsecondary attainment: 15,000 Degrees (15K).

Lumina’s Haley Glover noted that “15K’s approach of a specific goal organization infrastructure for engaging credential attainment within the Black community in Louisville [...] was and remains a very innovative and unique angle.” 15,000 Degrees partnered with the Louisville Urban League to conduct community outreach and student mentoring in five Zones of Hope neighborhoods, funded a grant scholarship program across nine local higher education institutions to increase affordability for African American students, and partnered with Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC) to create Rise Together, an initiative designed to foster inclusivity for minority students in higher education. As clarion calls for racial justice and the dismantling of systemic racism across all sectors are underscored across the nation and in the Louisville community itself, future efforts to address racial equity will build upon the work of 15K and 55K.



55K recognized the importance of adult learners.

55K was forward thinking in understanding that adults are key to increasing city-level degree attainment. In the past decade Louisville tested several strategies for supporting adults, primarily by collaborating with employers to offer support directly to students or trying to connect employers, students, and education institutions under one “roof.” Additionally, 55K secured technical assistance that helped local postsecondary institutions make adjustments to become more “adult-friendly.” (See more under “Lessons Learned.”)

55K garnered recognition and support on a national stage.

National and local funders lifted up Louisville’s collective goal and supported 55K through funding, technical assistance and exposure to best practices.

Different entities within the city of Louisville won awards for working with adults through Lumina Foundation and Kresge Foundation. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan praised 55,000 Degrees when he visited Louisville to recognize the innovative college-access programs at JCPS. 55,000 Degrees’ Interactive Data Dashboard was profiled by the Institute for Higher Education Policy.

55K's partnering postsecondary institutions made significant gains in student success. Overall graduation rates increase slightly among four-year institutions. Aggregate degree completions increased by an average of 2500 annually, despite the challenges associated with some local institutions closing, declining enrollment, and fewer JCPS graduates enrolling directly in college,

It is not possible to attribute causality for these gains to 55K's initiative alone. Among other factors, in 2018, the state adopted a performance-based funding program, which added real consequences to a focus on student success goals. Institutional leaders did note that having 55K lift up this data in the context of a community asking for improvement impacted their push for student success, as illustrated by Dr. Laura Smith, VP of Student Affairs at JCTC:

"For Jefferson, we began to take a very hard look at why more students were not finishing and which students were not finishing. There was additional accountability in knowing we, as an institution, are committed to reviewing our data [through 55K], making data-informed decisions, and being strategic about the decisions that we make to help students be successful. Also, now we have this community partner who is invested and is asking questions."

Several initiatives at local institutions were found to be successful in boosting student retention and persistence, including debt and GPA forgiveness, the adoption of early alerts for student success systems, proactively contacting off-track students, known as intrusive advising, equity-focused strategies, and redesign of remediation. One approach worth lifting up was the policy of awarding "reverse degrees." The University of Louisville partnered with Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC) to comb through student records and identify which current UofL students had earned enough credits at JCTC and UofL to be awarded an Associate's degree. Over 1100 degrees have been awarded since 2015.





Lessons Learned

Pivoting within deeply-entrenched institutions is a challenge. JCPS set its own strategic plan with “Vision 2020” to develop and implement structures supporting social, emotional, and intellectual knowledge and skills needed to thrive in college, career, community, and life. However, they faced barriers of their own over this decade. Even with increasing graduation rates, JCPS did not move the needle on college readiness or college-going. Larger headwinds such as state takeover, a controversial ousting of the superintendent, and a Charter School bill at the State Level created a turbulent environment for change.

David Jones Jr., former Jefferson County Public Schools Board Chair, described a huge governance hurdle for the K-12 system: *“The reality is that the state government has lots of proclamations and regulations and a certain amount of grant funding for specific things. And that in Louisville, the state funds about 30% of the operation of our K-12 system but they regulate the entire thing. The more I’ve learned, the more I’ve concluded that the state law limits the actual authority that they have to change the flow of money and therefore the activities that are undertaken and completed.”*

Adult learners with “some college, no degree” are not always “low hanging fruit” for increasing degree attainment. Adults are often navigating the demands of caretaking and employment; they require different, often individualized, support approaches. Louisville made strides when it comes to aligning education systems with employer needs. The city’s approach was to offer a neutral, community-based service (spearheaded by the Chamber [GLI] and entitled Degrees@Work, later Degrees Matter, and finally Degrees Work managed by KentuckianaWorks) for advising individual students. This model did not prove financially sustainable, as maintaining business investment beyond already-interested key businesses is a challenge. Notably, helping employees make the final step to actual enrollment proved to be one of the biggest challenges.

Michael Gritton: Executive Director of KentuckianaWorks: *“We were starting to make progress [with DegreesWork] but we weren’t making it fast enough to keep the startup alive. The only way it’s going to work is if you have government or outside funding to sustain it. Because there just aren’t enough companies interested enough to pay into this. The big ones who do have interest and money have it in-house.”*

Initiatives must directly address underlying structural barriers for students, including poverty and racism. While 55K made intentional choices to focus on equity with data sharing and evolved their beliefs around underserved students, the barriers of poverty and structural racism must be addressed more directly if gaps in attainment for Black and Latinx Louisvillians are to be closed.

“Reverse degree was an initiative of the University of Louisville with JCTC, but what made it happen was some of that conversation and some of that awareness through 55K about the importance of moving the needle on the Associate degree educational attainment numbers.”

— JENNY SAWYER,
Former UofL Executive
Director of Office of
Admissions

Speaking about the potential of Evolve502, Sadiqa Reynolds, President and CEO of the Louisville Urban League, underscores how the cultural shift in who should be able access college represented growth in understanding around equity for the city: *“To be able to become a community that ensures that no child, no student, is prevented from attending college because of money—I think that is monumental. It is not a small thing. The fact that students in Louisville are watching us and hearing us fight over whether or not they should go college or should pursue a credential is a huge improvement in this community. Even invoking and provoking that debate is a win. That’s what we have to understand because there was a time when there was no debate.”*

Bringing previously siloed sectors to the table around a common goal measured by data is necessary, but not sufficient. Deeper collaboration comes in the form of shared governance – establishing mechanisms to adapt core institutional policies and put financial resources on the table to change the trajectory of a city.

A Promising Future: Build on Learning to Achieve Greater

Despite having not reached their official goal, 55,000 Degrees achieved something long-lasting for the community: it helped to build bridges, leverage networks, and bank collective learning to set Louisville on a trajectory toward supporting more equitable cradle-to-career outcomes for its residents. The successes of 55,000 Degrees as a collective impact initiative are the shoulders on which a new organization in Louisville is now standing: Evolve502. Through 55K, Louisville learned that certain elements of collective impact were valuable for this community, namely (a) convening a table, (b) using data systematically to drive action, and (c) create mutually reinforcing activities around a common goal that reduce silos.

Matt Berry, Chief Scholarship and Policy Officer at Evolve502 (previously at 55K) reflected on how Evolve502 builds on 55K’s learnings: *“We have gone well beyond where we used to (which was inviting people to come to our meetings and sit at the table and be on committees, and hoping that they’ll engage in a really deep and meaningful way) to actually structuring formal long-term agreements which dictate behavior and mandate engagement of certain types.”*

“One of our challenges is that many organizations develop their budgets and execute their strategies with limited or no ongoing communications or consultation with others who are working on the same or similar objectives. The creation of a shared governance system will address this by aligning resources and sharing data at the planning and budgeting stages as opposed to the execution stage of service delivery.”

— MARY GWEN
WHEELER, Executive
Director of 55K

Evolve502 emerged out of this new culture in response to a number of the lessons learned by 55K. Most importantly, it was recognized that college affordability in the context of rising costs and low college readiness in an urban school district are huge hurdles to degree attainment for a city. Evolve502 answers this challenge directly by building a shared civic infrastructure that will support the twin issues of college readiness and affordability and serve as convenor to comprehensively address education challenges in the community. The key structural change of this approach is a 2-year tuition-free guarantee for all JCPS graduates at any Kentucky Community and Technical College or the local Historically Black College – Simmons College. Just as important as the free-college scholarship to Evolve502’s theory of change is their role as a community broker for student success.

“Unless all children are successful, my kids aren't going to be successful, and our businesses are not going to be successful. If we can scale Evolve502 properly, or if you can get system redesign around that, that really is the goal—that is the key.”

— MAYOR GREG FISCHER

As 55K sunsets as an organization built upon a time-bound goal, its legacy is a culture of learning through data, of collaborating across sectors, and of coming together around postsecondary attainment. As the community of Louisville builds upon the era of 55,000 Degrees and looks to the next decade, they do so in the midst of wicked challenges as the world reconciles what communal life during and after a pandemic will look like. In addition, the very nature of work continues to change with technological advances, and educational systems must adapt to equip individuals to be lifelong learners, in part by connecting more meaningfully to employers. In short, the need for innovation and pivots based on past learning and a fresh vision for unimaginable outcomes has never been greater.



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**55,000
Degrees**



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