

**55,000
Degrees**



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Census Data Reinforces Call to Remove College Barriers

Bold Action Needed to Build a More Skilled Louisville Workforce

LOUISVILLE (September 14, 2017) – A drop in the percentage of college graduates in Louisville demands bolder, more proactive efforts to build the skilled workforce the region needs to remain competitive for better-paying jobs, according to education and community leaders.

In Louisville, 42.4 percent of working age adults have at least an associate degree, according to census numbers released this week. That's a 2.3 percentage point drop from last year – a dip that is within the margin of error. The decrease balanced out a similar increase from the previous year, making the longer term trend basically flat.

“We are simply not making the steady, sustained increases we necessary to make the life-changing differences we want for our children and our community,” said Mary Gwen Wheeler, executive-director of 55,000 Degrees.

Paying tuition remains one of the toughest obstacles to college for many students. College costs have risen dramatically and many students face financial struggles at home that make even getting through high school difficult.

“We need bold, innovative action that will help families over the obstacles they face,” Wheeler said.

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer, who is chairman of 55,000 Degrees, said that the organization is currently working on a plan, to be announced in the coming weeks, which will transform the opportunities for young people in Louisville.

“Bottom line: We’re not going to be able to move the needle on college attainment until we do something fundamental about the challenges that are keeping young people out of college,” Fischer said. “We need to address affordability and other significant barriers soon.”

Wheeler said the data paints a picture of a generation that is struggling to get the postsecondary skills needed for family supporting jobs – in an economy that demands those skills. Most of Louisville’s progress in recent years has been among older, adult students – who may include people who have migrated in or returned to school for a career change. But younger working age adults – who are unlikely to have savings or employer supported tuition programs – have not seen similar gains.

Among the 25-34 year old population, for example, the percentage with an associate degree or higher actually dropped by 4.4 percentage points. The percentage with a bachelor’s degree or better dropped five percentage points.

Among the 16 peer cities that Louisville usually compares itself to, Louisville is now 11th on the list – down from last year’s ranking in 9th place. Birmingham, AL and Greensboro, NC moved ahead of Louisville.

55,000 Degrees started seven years ago, with a simple goal: By 2020, 50 percent of working-age adults in Louisville should have at least an associate degree. Just 38.3 percent of Louisville adults had a college degree in 2008, which was the most recent census tally when the multi-sector partnership launched in 2010.

