

**55,000
Degrees**



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Louisville's postsecondary attainment reaches highest level ever, continuing upward trend

Trajectory is promising as 55,000 Degrees initiative sunsets this year

Louisville, Ky. (September 21, 2020) – For the second year in a row, the percentage of college-educated, working-aged adults in Louisville has reached its highest level ever, with 46.2 percent now holding an associate's degree or higher, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) released this week.

"This continued upward trend shows that the commitments our founding partners made a decade ago, and the hard work to deliver on those commitments, are paying off," said Mary Gwen Wheeler, executive director of 55,000 Degrees, Louisville's 10-year, multi-sector effort to increase postsecondary education attainment levels in Louisville.

The city increased by about 1 percent its number of working-age adults with an associate degree or higher since last year, according to the survey. Driving those gains was a 1.3 percent increase in bachelor's degrees – or more than 4,000 new bachelor's degrees - from 2018 to 2019. That means businesses have more access to the skilled workforce they need, and individuals have the greater opportunities that a postsecondary education provides.

"This is unequivocally good news for our city's families and our business community," said Mayor Greg Fischer, chair of the 55,000 Degrees Board of Directors.

55,000 Degrees, which sunsets in December, was formed in 2010 by a partnership of corporate, government, education, social service and civic groups to ensure the city remains competitive in talent with its peer cities. Together, these organizations and institutions focused on student success strategies so that more students who started school finished; helped adult "comebackers" - those who earned some credits but didn't graduate – to finish degrees; and

focused on equity with intentional strategies to increase readiness, access and success of marginalized populations.

“The Louisville area’s institutions of higher education have positively moved the needle in the last year on degree attainment, student success work, retention and aid initiatives. These efforts are working,” said Spalding University President Tori Murden-McClure, who chairs 55,000 Degrees’ executive committee.

Since 55K started, Louisville has added almost 40,000 degrees in the working-age population. In that time frame, Louisville’s college-educated population grew much faster than the general population of 25-64 year olds: the overall growth rate in that age group was about 5 percent while those in the same age group with an associate degree or higher grew 27 percent. Additionally, the numbers reported by the ACS do not include the growing number obtaining short-term credentials, such as those offered at Jefferson Community and Technical College and Ivy Tech, that are increasingly valued in the workforce.

Other highlights from the ACS report:

- Louisville is 2.5 percentage points above the national average of 43.7 percent attainment in postsecondary education;
- Attainment of an associate degree or more is now 8 points higher than when partners began tracking data in 2008;
- Louisville maintained its rank of 10th in postsecondary attainment among its 16 peer cities;
- The number of adults 25-64 with some college but no degree continued to decrease, down to 86,000 from 89,000 a year ago and from a high of 100,000 in 2016;
- Most of the positive movement came from 25 to 34 year-olds, including a huge jump in bachelor’s degrees for that age group: up 5.6 percentage points.

Education attainment is a key measure of whether cities have the skilled workforce needed for a 21st Century economy. It is also one of four key indicators of a community’s success, as identified by the Greater Louisville Project, which tracks data to drive positive change in the city.

"This most recent data is the perfect way to sunset 55,000 Degrees,” said Ben Reno-Weber, director of the Greater Louisville Project. “But the work of building a more educated, inclusive, and prosperous community continues. The Greater Louisville Project looks forward to continuing to benchmark Louisville's educational attainment and build on this momentum."

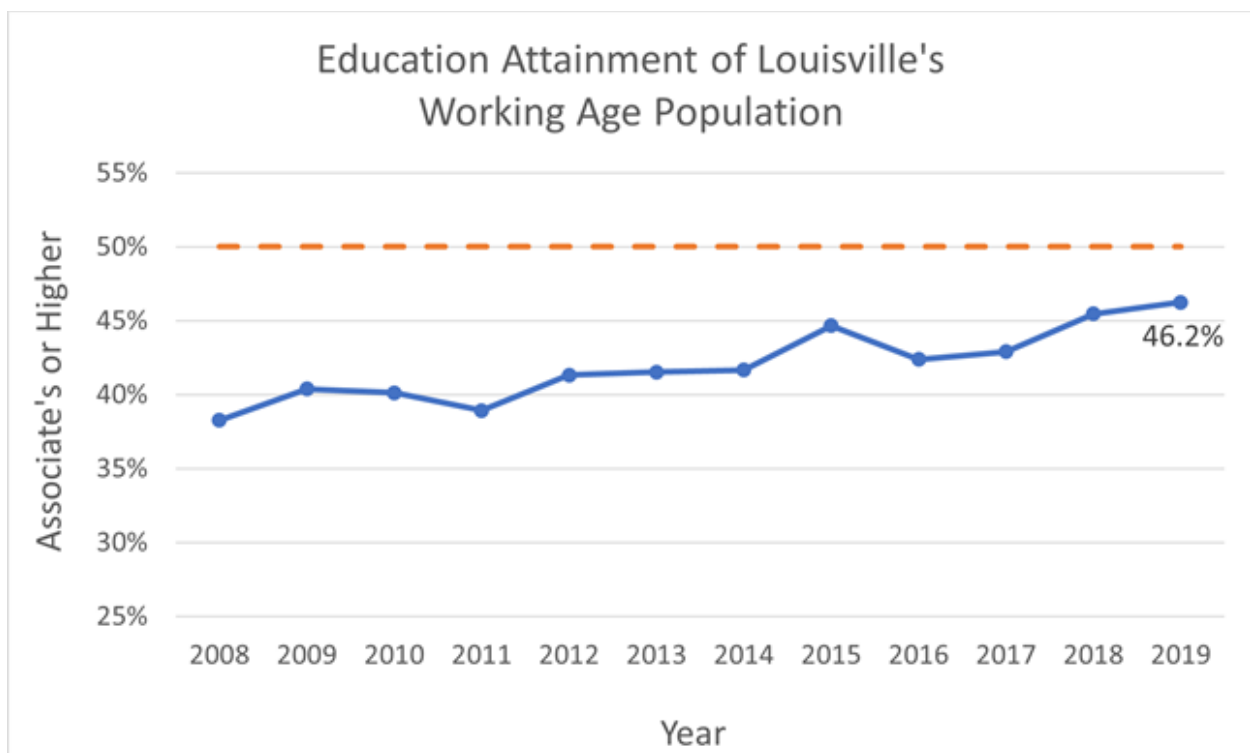
While the news is positive, leaders warn that next year’s attainment figures could be lower due to the economic strains caused by COVID-19. The pandemic and recession have amplified the college affordability crisis and equity gaps, causing many low-income and first-generation students to drop out or not enroll at all. Evolve502, formed in part from the lessons learned by 55K partners, is carrying on work to close those gaps and make college affordable

and accessible for all. Evolve502 is a partnership of private and public organizations aligning to provide the supports and resources necessary for every child to thrive. The Evolve502 Scholarship, announced in August, will provide every eligible 2021 graduate of Jefferson County Public Schools with free tuition for up to 60 credit hours at Simmons College or any Kentucky Community and Technical College school. Evolve502 is currently raising funds to extend the scholarship opportunity to future JCPS graduating classes.

“Because higher education is a leading disruptor of poverty, any improvements in our numbers mean that Louisville is better prepared as we work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn, as well as address systemic racism that has hampered too many of our residents for far too long,” Mayor Fischer said. “Kudos to JCPS, Evolve502, KentuckianaWorks, 55,000 Degrees and 15,000 Degrees and our higher education partners for their work to improve attainment now and into the future.”

A full analysis of the 55,000 Degrees initiative will be presented in a final report in December. *For more information on the latest data from ACS, visit the 55,000 Degrees Education Data Dashboard at dashboard.55000degrees.org.*

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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey