

## 8 From the Eighth: Louisville's 55,000 Degrees

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**Louisville's 55,000 Degrees, Mary Gwen Wheeler** (19:31)

Mary Gwen Wheeler, executive director of *55,000 Degrees* in Louisville, Ky.—a multi-sector public-private partnership dedicated to increasing educational attainment levels—discusses how her organization is striving to make education a key factor in helping to move Louisville's citizens forward and boosting the region's overall economic outlook, emphasizing cross-sector collaboration as the cornerstone of the initiative.

### Transcript

**Maria Hampton:** Welcome to Eight from the Eighth, a podcast series produced by the Community Development department of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. I'm Maria Hampton with the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

An emerging strategy in the community development industry is to strengthen human capital by promoting local initiatives aimed at increasing educational attainment. While many cities recognize the importance of education as a key factor in helping to move their citizens forward and boosting the region's overall economic outlook, Louisville's 55,000 Degrees is striving to pursue this goal in a manner that emphasizes cross-sector collaboration as the cornerstone of the initiative. Today, I'm speaking with Mary Gwen Wheeler, Executive Director of 55,000 Degrees, Louisville, Kentucky's multisector public/private partnership dedicated to increasing educational attainment levels.

Mary Gwen's experiences include managing five employment and training programs for New York's Chinatown Planning Council and serving as a Project Manager and the Vice President of Planning and Development for the National Center for Family Literacy. Most recently, she has served the Louisville mayor's office as senior advisor for education and use for Louisville metro government and in 2010 was appointed to the Kentucky Board of Education. Mary Gwen, thank you for joining me today.

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Thanks, Maria, for the opportunity.

**Maria Hampton:** Part of the fascinating story of 55,000 Degrees is the background that led to the initiative's launch. What exactly is 55,000 Degrees?

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Well, yes. It's both an organization and a community goal. The goal of 55,000 Degrees represents the number of degrees that Louisville needs to add by the year 2020 to reach a goal of having 50 percent of our working age population with a college degree and a two-year associate's degree, a bachelor's degree or higher. You know, this syncs up with President Obama's goal to have 60 percent of our population by 2020 with some college beyond high school. That came from this need for the U.S. or the desire for the U.S. to regain its top spot among the developed countries of the world in terms of education attainment. We've slipped to 12<sup>th</sup> in the world in the number of people that have that college degree. So 55,000 Degrees is 40,000 more bachelor degrees and 15,000 more associate degrees in the Louisville area to help us get to that 50 percent of our working age population with a college degree.

**Maria Hampton:** You have given us a good example of where the 50 percent number came from, but could you explain a little more about the initial aspects of this initiative that in your view have already demonstrated success?

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Sure. Well, let me step back a little bit and say how we developed. Louisville merged its city and county governments back in 2003, and it took that time to really assess where we stood among about 15 competitor cities—peer

cities in a similar region, a similar size. And we found some startling results, some that we've grown in certain areas but we were lagging behind in education. We were near the bottom in terms of the number of people in our population with a college degree, and that made it hard to compete and to have a strong economy. And the mayor decided to pull together a group of higher ed leaders, the K-12 system superintendents of both our public and archdiocese schools, community leaders, business leaders and an education roundtable to say how can we move ahead. That group ended up deciding at a retreat in the summer of 2009 that we needed to set a goal to be in that top tier of those 15 competitor cities. And to do that, we needed to have at least 40 percent of our working age population with a college degree. The Charlottes and Raleighs of the world had that kind of education attainment. And by the spring of the following year in 2010, we had signed what we call our Greater Louisville education commitment. This is a big step. One of the biggest successes was actually putting to paper a pledge that we're going to work together in a collective spirit to impact our community by increasing education attainment by the year 2020. And then by October of 2010, we had launched the organization called 55,000 Degrees. We gave the name of our goal to the organization and had raised dollars to launch an organization that would bring together this table. And we're functioning under a collective impact theory of action, where we feel like we can accomplish more by working together, but by setting a common goal, creating a shared agenda and a shared measurement system and then aligning all of our activities around this goal. It's not that we all have to agree to the same strategic plan. Each organization has its own goals and strategies, but we are trying to align our activities so that they're mutually reinforcing and not duplicative and at odds with each other.

**Maria Hampton:** I see. You've done a great job of explaining how you came about identifying this as your primary goal. Could you talk a little bit more about what leadership organizations were at the initial table that made all this happen?

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Sure. We had, as I mentioned, the universities so there were presidents of the area's colleges and universities. There were superintendents of the public schools and the archdiocese schools. The mayor was the convener. This group is now the board of 55,000 Degrees. We had CEOs and our Chamber of Congress representing the business community, the Urban League, the United Way and also our work force investment board, just to mention that the breadth of people that had come together. And the general feeling was rather than focusing on a certain sector or trying to get a certain type of job guild created, that we simply needed more, better-educated people. The low-skill, high-wage jobs are disappearing in our community. Manufacturing has decreased the number of jobs they offer. And even those manufacturing jobs, which had traditionally been the low-skill, high-wage jobs, require a higher level of skills because everything is automated and you need math and computer-type skills as well.

**Maria Hampton:** So now that you've mentioned work force, can you expand a little on what you believe is going to be the real economic impact that 55,000 Degrees would have on the entire Louisville region?

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Well, research shows a very clear link between earnings and education, and this is only getting stronger. In 2002, a person with a bachelor's degree makes about \$75,000 more than somebody with just a high school diploma. And today that premium has risen to about 84 percent higher. Over a lifetime, that translates to about \$1 million that a person with a high school diploma makes less than a person with a bachelor degree. And for our community, that translates into certainly greater economic prosperity if we have more people with those higher-level degrees and higher skills. And there's a group called "CEOs for Cities" that has translated this impact. They show that the biggest predictor of a community's GDP, so to speak, is the level of education attainment. And they've translated that a one percent increase in the number of people with four-year degrees in the Louisville area would translate to \$938 million more in aggregate annual personal income. That's a huge impact on a community. That's the kind of impact that we were seeking by setting this goal to increase education attainment.

**Maria Hampton:** That's certainly powerful. Mary Gwen, part of the plan targets an additional 15,000 college degrees from within the African-American community. Can you tell me a little more about that?

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Yes. I mentioned that we were in the bottom tier of our peer cities when we looked at the percentage of our population with a college degree. We had about 30 percent with a bachelor's degree and we wanted to move to about 40 percent. The African-American attainment was strikingly lower. It was about 14 percent, and that put us dead last among our peer cities. The African-American leaders who were sitting at the table of the education roundtable that the mayor had called together were alarmed by this statistic and catalyzed into action. They self-formed a group of African-American leaders to set their own goal, and they said basically that they wanted to close the gap as well as increase their level among

peer cities in African-American attainment but also to close the gap between African-American and overall attainment in our community. In order to do that, they targeted an additional 15,000 degrees by the year 2020. So 15,000 of the 55,000 they'd like to see obtained by African-Americans. And this is a group of faith-based leaders, of education leaders, of community organizations, and they've formed a thing they're calling 15K—the 15K degree initiative that has both a faith-based committee and a community-based organization committee. So churches are seeking to identify their church members that they can support and make sure that they can help them get into and get through college, and then the community-based organizations are doing a similar thing with after-school programs in neighborhoods and with parents and trying to do outreach to help more people obtain that college degree.

**Maria Hampton:** So could you talk a little bit about how 55,000 Degrees is actually evaluating its efforts?

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Well, when we signed the Greater Louisville Education Commitment, we agreed to hold ourselves mutually accountable and that we would have a common measurement system. And part of that was to have an annual progress report, not only on our overall goal of how are we going in terms of the percentage of our population with a college degree, but we also wanted to measure some leading indicators. These indicators align around five main objectives. These objectives are basically what we think are the biggest barriers to getting to our goal. Are we creating a more college-going culture? Do people have access and is college affordable? Are enough of our students ready for college when they graduate high school? Do they persist and complete once they get to college? And are we helping the adults come back to college? Those who are out in the work force have some college but no degree. We have about 90,000—almost 100,000 now—adults in our community that have some college but no degree. Can we help them come back and can employers specifically leverage their power with their employees to help them to return and finish their degrees? So we have an annual progress report and we're actually about to publish one next week, and it's not all encouraging. It's mixed results. It looks like it will be more like 2030 by the time we reach our goal if we continue at our current trend. So we must accelerate and how we're helping people increase and attracting more people to our community that have a college degree. You can also then go online to [www.55000degrees.org](http://www.55000degrees.org) and dig deep in what we call our data dashboard. You can look by college and university and by high school in our area and see how they're performing on these leading indicators, and it gives us an idea of where our real challenges are. So we're trying to put data in the hands of the community so we know where we are and what our challenges are and how we can move ahead.

**Maria Hampton:** Initiatives of this kind are springing up all across the nation. What do you feel really distinguishes 55,000 Degrees from other programs that cities are establishing to boost educational attainment and what are the truly unique aspects that have fostered success so far?

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Well, you're right, Maria. Many communities are focused on this education attainment as a key indicator and a key lever in increasing economic prosperity and quality of life. A number of foundations, the Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation have post-secondary success. Networks and Efforts and Louisville—we've had an opportunity to be part of that. But I think Louisville was unique in actually setting a goal, saying that by a certain year we wanted to increase. And the 55,000 Degrees captures people's attention and immediately translates into this community excitement and catalyzes people toward working together. We've also learned that a lot of people are interested in, as I mentioned, our data dashboard and how we're doing this measuring but that we have so many of our sectors at the same table saying that we're going to work together on this. This is not a point fingers and say, "It's your fault." It's not a "gotcha" system. It's more about how can we work together. We recognize our challenges. If we can break down some of those silos, maybe we can move ahead. The mayor playing this convening role was critical. He could call together these people from the various sectors on leadership to come together, and that really made an important difference for us. And this has ended up capturing some of the attention of National League of Cities and some others. The Lumina Foundation actually sent a group here to do a documentary, and we have several of those short-clip documentaries now available to be seen on our website. You know, profiling this business involvement. The African-American leadership, 15K Degrees initiative and just how we got started. Now our challenge is to engage more stakeholders in our own community. We're looking to ask everybody to step up and play a role in this community goal. We've established a program called "Count Me In" where you can take your own pledge to help out, either by supporting a person to get a degree by saying, "I'm going to get my own degree" or by helping with some of those challenges that I mentioned before about helping more people be college ready and helping them persist once they get to college or helping them pay for college. We've even gotten some attention from a local foundation, the Gheens Foundation to help us create a \$20,000 prize for the best innovation in increasing education attainment in the

Louisville area. And that innovation competition is closed at this point. We're now in the process of judging a group that we'll ask to create a demonstration model and by next spring we hope to announce that \$20,000 prize. That's the kind of way we're trying to reach out and engage more people in being a part of this, and that is getting some national attention.

**Maria Hampton:** That creativity is so exciting.

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Well, we're excited to see the kinds of things that people are talking about, and we hope that we'll be able to deploy and implement some of the ideas.

**Maria Hampton:** I have one final question. There are sure to be communities that are listening to you now and are interested in doing something similar on this topic. You now have two years under your belt. Looking back, what advice would you offer to communities regardless of their status on how to begin work similar to Louisville's 55,000 Degrees.

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Well, I think there are a couple of key elements in getting started. You need to have that key convener that can bring people from across the community and different stakeholder groups, different sectors together to work. For so long we've been working in silos and, in fact, we've even thought of our education system as two separate systems, a K-12 system and then the higher education. But, really, we need one seamless system to prepare people for jobs, for careers, for life, for being good citizens and to make sure our work force gets the types of skills that is needed by our economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We need to be globally competitive and benchmark ourselves globally. And by having one set of standards across that education system, we can get there. So I'd say having the convening of the tables, bringing those silos together and being honest about measurement and data and embracing the challenges has been really important to us by creating this individual opportunity for people. We create a stronger middle class and we begin to close the gaps between the low- and the high-income communities and strengthen our community overall. So just understanding that payoff and of more college-educated people and investing in it is the biggest step forward.

**Maria Hampton:** Mary Gwen, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Mary Gwen Wheeler:** Well, I really, as I said, appreciate the opportunity and look forward to hearing this online.

**Maria Hampton:** We've been speaking with Mary Gwen Wheeler, Executive Director of Louisville's 55,000 Degrees. For more information about the Eight from the Eighth, the Federal Bank of St. Louis Community Development podcast series, please visit [stlouisfed.org](http://stlouisfed.org). Thank you for listening.