

## As Cities Seek to Connect Residents to High-Wage Jobs, More Mayors Lead College Success Initiatives

### *Skills Mismatch and Equity are Among Top Concerns*

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by Michael Karpman

Mayoral leadership to boost local college completion rates is both a recent and growing phenomenon, often spurred by dual goals of attracting and retaining high-wage employers and promoting equity by enhancing the skills and credentials of less advantaged populations. These efforts grow out of a recognition of the rising wage premium for workers with postsecondary degrees and the related need for cities to increase the share of their local workforce holding credentials from two- and four-year colleges.

Last week, mayors from four of those cities traveled to Denver for a [Mayors' Institute on Children and Families](#) to exchange ideas and strategies for promoting postsecondary success: Berkeley, CA, Mayor Tom Bates, Louisville, KY, Mayor Greg Fischer, Memphis, TN, Mayor A C Wharton, Jr., and Salt Lake City, UT, Mayor Ralph Becker.

Sponsored by NLC's Institute for Youth, Education and Families (YEF), the Mayors' Institute series allows each participating mayor to present prepared case statements of a local challenge and then receive feedback from peers and a team of national experts assembled by NLC. The [Lumina Foundation](#) supported this particular Mayors' Institute, and Denver Mayor Michael Hancock welcomed participants to his city.



Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker speaks to Mayors' Institute participants.

The four participating mayors and their staff and local partners shared similar concerns. Too few workers have the educational attainment and skills needed to obtain well-paying jobs in fast-growing industries, such as advanced manufacturing, bioscience, renewable energy and health care. Moreover, each city struggles with racial, ethnic and economic inequalities in access to postsecondary education.

### **Addressing Barriers to Completion**

In response, the four mayors are leading initiatives to address some of the greatest barriers to college completion. One major obstacle is a lack of college readiness. In Louisville, three-quarters of students at Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC) require remedial coursework. Of the 70 percent of

students who graduate from Memphis City Schools, only four percent of those students are considered to be ready for college. Salt Lake City public schools serve a growing and increasingly diverse and mobile student population in a state that ranks last in per pupil education spending.

Cities are working to improve college readiness in a number of ways. The development of Community Learning Centers – full-service community schools that coordinate health services, early childhood development programs and adult education – is one key element of a lifelong learning partnership that Salt Lake City schools, local government and the University of Utah are in the process of building. In presenting Berkeley’s case statement, Mayor Bates discussed the value of increasing college awareness, offering early college programs for high school students and encouraging students to take rigorous courses that prepare them to meet postsecondary academic standards.

Those who enroll in college face other barriers that stand in the way of degree completion. “We don’t have a ‘college-going’ problem,” said Mayor Fischer. “We have a ‘college-finishing’ problem.” In trying to balance work, school and family responsibilities and manage financial challenges, many students “stop out,” or take a break from their coursework before completing their degrees. By doing so, they run the risk of not finishing. A JCTC professor found that adult students with these multiple responsibilities often take too heavy a course load at first, become overwhelmed and eventually drop out. As Louisville aims for a goal of half of its working-age adults with associate’s or bachelor’s degrees by 2020, helping adults with some college experience return to complete their degree is one of several priorities for strengthening the birth-through-college educational pipeline. A Business Leaders for Education group organized by the local chamber of commerce engages employers and employees in the Degrees at Work program, in which company-based College Advocates provide information and support to employees pursuing postsecondary education.



Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer (right) discusses his city's 55,000 Degrees initiative.

Mayors’ Institute participants discussed the need to strengthen connections among secondary schools, colleges, workforce development agencies and businesses as both a significant challenge and an area in which mayors can play vital leadership roles. Through his leadership on the East Bay Green Corridor Partnership, Mayor Bates has helped Berkeley High School partner with Pacific Gas and Electric to support a new Green Academy that prepares students for college and career pathways in environmental science and technology. Mayor Wharton held up the example of a local brewery struggling to find qualified workers that partnered with a Southwest Tennessee Community College to offer specialized training that met their employment needs.

More broadly, mayors can generate community support for college success initiatives, as exemplified by Mayor Becker’s leasing of space to University Neighborhood Partners, which is located in and has reached out to residents in Salt Lake City’s less advantaged west side neighborhood, and Mayor Fischer’s “Count Me In!” campaign to engage the community in the Louisville’s 55,000 Degrees initiative. Several cities also called attention to a lack of common metrics and data systems for tracking

employer needs, aligning them with postsecondary and job training programs, measuring performance and bringing successful practices to scale. The [data dashboard on Louisville's 55,000 Degrees website](#) offers one example how cities can assess progress by school districts, postsecondary institutions and the city as a whole.

"The mayor should be the conscience of the community when it comes to educational attainment," said Mayor Fischer.

### Support for City Leadership

The faculty who brought their expertise to bear in response to the mayors' case statements represented a broad range of organizations, including the U.S. Department of Education, State Higher Education Executive Officers, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, **The Graduate! Network, Inc.**, the City of Riverside (Calif.), and the City of Denver, as well as Lumina Foundation and NLC.

In addition to providing direct follow-up assistance to Mayors' Institute participants, the YEF Institute will continue to support city efforts to boost college completion. Berkeley and Memphis are among the 15 cities that belong to the Postsecondary Success City Action Network, which is part of the YEF Institute's Municipal Leadership for Postsecondary Success initiative supported by Lumina Foundation. Louisville is an affiliate for the Communities Learning in Partnership initiative supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for which the YEF Institute serves as managing intermediary. In total, the Institute is working with more than 20 cities to identify and advance effective city strategies for postsecondary success.



Mayor Michael Hancock welcomes Mayors' Institute participants to Denver.



Memphis Mayor A C Wharton, Jr. (left)

**Details:** To learn more about NLC's postsecondary initiatives, contact Marjorie Cohen at (202) 626-3052 or [cohen@nlc.org](mailto:cohen@nlc.org).

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