

Guest column: Graduate Memphis helps adults complete college

College degree, advantages in reach

By David Williams, Special to The Commercial Appeal

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On Monday Leadership Memphis launched Graduate Memphis — a free college resource center that will help Memphis-area adults return to college. Designed to have a historic impact on the future of our city and funded through the generosity of the Plough Foundation, Graduate Memphis will offer the 202,000 adults living in the Memphis area who started college but never finished access to professional advisers who will help them complete their higher education.

Why is this important?

The answer is simple: According to a recent article in The New York Times that explored college attainment and its relationship to municipal growth, cities with larger numbers of college graduates are more successful than cities with lower numbers. Memphis ranks 48th among 51 of the nation's largest cities in the percentage of residents who are college graduates. Only 25.1 percent of Memphis-area adults have graduated from college with a four-year degree, while the national metro average is 32 percent.

By comparison, more than 40 percent of the adult residents in cities such as Raleigh, N.C., San Francisco and Stamford, Conn., have college degrees. Double-digit disparities between those cities and cities such as Memphis have a dramatic impact on poverty, unemployment, economic growth and city vitality. Cities with greater levels of college graduates are doing measurably better than others. Think of all the "negative" lists on which Memphis has found itself in recent years, and there is likely a connection to our city's lower education attainment level.

Most of us know someone with a college degree who is unemployed or underemployed. However, research shows us that unemployment rates for college graduates are 2.5 times lower than those with only a high school diploma. College graduates also average longer life expectancies, higher household incomes and lower divorce rates than those with less education.

CEOS for Cities, a national network of urban leaders, reports that educational attainment is the biggest predictor of success for cities and metro areas today. The percentage of college graduates in a city's population accounts for 58 percent of a

city's economic success, as measured by per capita income. The Tennessee Higher Education productivity team predicts that by 2018 more than half of all jobs in Tennessee will require some form of postsecondary credentials. President Barack Obama has made college attainment a national priority, setting a goal to move the U.S. once again to the leading college-educated nation in the world by 2020.

In 2010, Leadership Memphis launched the Memphis Talent Dividend: College Attainment Initiative. In partnership now with more than 100 community stakeholders, Memphis Talent Dividend is working to increase all levels of college attainment. That includes vocational certificates, two-year associate degrees, four-year degrees and advanced degrees.

Memphis Talent Dividend partners include the city's higher-education community, youth-serving organizations, businesses, members of the faith-based community and the local media. Collectively we have a defined goal: To increase the educational attainment level of the greater Memphis area. Adults who started but did not finish college are in the best position to complete their education goals and to embrace the skills that will increase the quality and production of our city's workforce.

We acknowledge that not every person needs a college degree, but we contend it is a waste of human capital and a lost opportunity for our community — as well as the individual — not to pursue postsecondary attainment. Graduate Memphis advisers will emphasize connecting the right education to specific job goals along with a balanced perspective about postsecondary choices, as well as balancing career and life with investments of time and money. For our community, this is a giant step in the right direction.

The Plough Foundation has committed to invest \$1.743 million in Graduate Memphis over the next three years to ensure that adults can talk with trained advisers online, by telephone or in person at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, which houses Graduate Memphis' offices. The center will offer limited hours that will include nights and weekends.

What can you do to help? If you are an adult who never finished college or know someone who hasn't finished college but wants to, contact Graduate Memphis to start the process. If you are an employer and you care about a stronger local workforce, learn more by contacting us online at graduatememphis.org.

Ultimately, Memphis must increase its college attainment rate if our city is to have any chance of one day being ranked among the most successful in our country. Graduate Memphis is a unique and wonderful opportunity to offer our neighbors a chance to get that coveted college degree. And it offers all of us an opportunity for a better future.

