

Pathways to Success: A Successful University/Community College/Public School Partnership

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Abstract

A university, community college, and public school partnership in Louisville, Kentucky is designed to place students into a postsecondary environment where they can best succeed. The partnership is consistent with state legislation calling for a more integrated, seamless system of education that will advance more students through that system in an effective manner. Early results of the partnership are encouraging and lead to new efforts to challenge students to perform at higher levels.

The Louisville, Kentucky metropolitan area, with approximately one million people, contains the University of Louisville, Jefferson Community College, and the Jefferson County Public School system. The University of Louisville (U of L) is a public, doctoral extensive university with numerous graduate and professional schools and an enrollment of approximately 21,000 students (14,500 undergraduates and 6,500 graduate/professional). Jefferson Community College (JCC) is also a public institution with an enrollment approaching 10,000 students on five campuses. The Jefferson County Public School (JCPS) system enrolls nearly 100,000 students—approximately 17% of the public school students in the state. Historically, relationships among these institutions could probably best be described as “benign acceptance.” There exist, or existed, pockets of collaborative ventures (some of which are/were very successful) but most of these were driven by individuals, were of limited scope, had minimal institutional backing, and therefore did not stand the test of time. However, due to multiple factors detailed later in this work, there are concerted efforts now at both the local and state levels to formulate and sustain strong relationships among these educational partners that are ultimately in the best interests of the citizens of Louisville and Kentucky. This paper documents the development, operation, and evolution of one successful partnership directed toward improving educational attainment levels in the region.

Background

Until recently, Kentucky’s reputation in educational arenas was not good; most rankings of primary and secondary education found Kentucky at or near the bottom, and higher education did not fare much better. Some of this is a consequence of geography and historical economic activities in a large state that is predominantly rural. The population of approximately 3.7 million is concentrated in three larger urban

areas (Louisville, Lexington, and in northern Kentucky across the Ohio River from Cincinnati) and a few smaller cities, with a widely dispersed scattering of residents across the remainder of the state. Historically, the state's economic activity was dominated largely by agriculture (e.g., tobacco) and by the extraction of natural resources, particularly coal. Consequently there was little demand for quality public education and few monetary resources to support a strong educational system. Large-scale manufacturing and service-sector activities—and their revenue base—were not in evidence until recently. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kentucky residents, legislators, and businesses began to realize that the state's future economic growth and the well-being of its residents were inextricably linked to its educational system, and that the educational system needed significant improvement.

Public education in this state was transformed forever by the Kentucky Supreme Court's ruling in 1989 that found the state's system of public education to be unconstitutional. The lawsuit that led to that decision charged that the funding for public education was not equitably distributed. Interestingly, another suit was recently filed by the same group that filed the first lawsuit, but in this case they allege that the funding for public education in the state is inadequate. Forced to restructure the public school system, the legislature enacted the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA) that resulted in high-stakes accountability and a standards-based curriculum that now is recognized widely throughout the nation for its successes (Kentucky General Assembly 1990). Less than a decade after that landmark decision, the Kentucky public education system was selected as a winner of the Ford Foundation and Harvard University's Innovations in American Government Award (Commonwealth of Kentucky 1997).

More relevant for the discussion at hand was the passage of the Kentucky Postsecondary Education Improvement Act of 1997. That act, commonly referred to as House Bill 1, created a new role and leadership function for the Council on Postsecondary Education, provided new funding mechanisms beyond the normal state-appropriated funds, and redefined the roles of Kentucky's public higher education institutions. In brief, the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) was established to provide both advocacy for and assessment of institutional effectiveness at the state level. Among other things House Bill 1 called for:

- “a seamless, integrated system of postsecondary education strategically planned and adequately funded to enhance economic development and quality of life;”
- “a premier, nationally recognized metropolitan research university at the University of Louisville;” and
- “a comprehensive community and technical college system with a mission that assures, in conjunction with other postsecondary institutions, access throughout the Commonwealth to a two (2) year course of general studies designed for transfer to a baccalaureate program, the training necessary to develop a workforce with the skills to meet the needs of new and existing Industries, and remedial and continuing education to improve the employability of citizens.”

Significantly, House Bill 1 provided for a stand-alone system of technical and community colleges (previously administered by the University of Kentucky) with a specific charge to focus upon general studies, workforce training, and remedial education. The latter focus was especially relevant for the University of Louisville as a strategic plan was developed that would dovetail with the mandates of House Bill 1 and with the needs of the community. The university's strategic plan is documented within the "Strategy for Excellence: U of L's Strategic Directions 1998–2004" and calls specifically for an enhanced undergraduate experience for all students and development of partnerships and collaborative programs that will leverage resources for the mutual benefit of the university and its partners (University of Louisville 1998).

Following the University of Louisville's entry into the state public higher education system in 1969, the university operated basically as an open enrollment institution with minimal admission criteria for undergraduates. The university had developed its own remedial education program for students who were not yet prepared to do college level work. Those students were enrolled initially through a separate unit not associated with any of the undergraduate colleges or schools, provided remedial coursework based upon various diagnostic tests, and expected to matriculate to one of the undergraduate colleges upon completion of that work. However, for a variety of reasons many of those students never matriculated into the degree-granting colleges and were lost to the higher education system. As the university's strategic planning process moved forward, a decision was reached to begin to increase the minimum admission criteria and, in fact, if possible, to do away with U of L's remedial programs. The undergraduate colleges had previously agreed to accept students directly (either in good standing or in a conditional status), thereby precluding the need for an enrollment unit for underprepared students.

While understanding that a simple declaration that U of L was getting out of the business of remediation would not alleviate that need for some students, it was seized upon by the president and provost of the University of Louisville as an area where we might begin to pursue a more formal collaboration with Jefferson Community College. The University's own data and that provided by the CPE suggested that students taking remedial classes through the JCC system and then transferring to U of L were succeeding in their credit-bearing classes at a slightly higher rate than their counterparts who initially began at U of L. Moreover, we know now that community college students across the state who transfer to four-year institutions are retained and subsequently graduate at higher rates than do those who begin at the four-year institutions (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education 2003).

Following a discussion between the two presidents, a decision was reached to establish a committee that would propose a new model for meeting the remedial education needs of students admitted to U of L—as well as those who were initially denied admission to U of L. Those students denied direct admission to U of L would be encouraged to enroll at JCC, take any necessary developmental coursework and some general education requirements, and then transfer to U of L. In essence, we were proposing an "automatic" transfer mechanism for students who were not yet prepared

to do college-level work, but whom we believed could succeed with some additional preparation. The topic of “dual enrollment” was discussed on more than one occasion but we could never quite agree on how to make it work equitably for both institutions. Many of us still believe that this is still a viable option.

Philosophy of the Partnership

From the outset, committee members agreed that a “successful” strategy must address the educational needs of students at the “appropriate” level. In this case “successful” and “appropriate” are defined as the point on the educational continuum where a student has the best chance to advance through the educational system. In other words, we would not just admit students and hope that they survived; rather we would provide the means whereby students would persist and ultimately graduate. That philosophy was embraced much more readily by JCC faculty and administrators than by their counterparts at U of L. The attitude so prevalent in higher education for many years—that students must either “sink or swim” on their own—was still firmly embraced by many at U of L.

The committee also agreed that students would have a better chance of succeeding in smaller classes tailored to their needs and taught by full-time faculty trained to deliver remedial education—precisely the type of environment offered by JCC. Significantly, we also abandoned the use of the term “remedial” in favor of “developmental.” While maybe not important for some, the use of a more positive adjective did signal to the community college faculty and staff that the university was willing to follow their lead and utilize their expertise in developmental education to establish the partnership.

Although the committee members quickly recognized the philosophical principles that would best serve the students, the process of establishing a working partnership was anything but smooth. Suffice it to say that there were many anxieties, fears, concerns, and emotions—expressed and unexpressed—around the table. On more than one occasion we had to seek advice from the presidents on how best to circumnavigate difficult obstacles. In the end, and with the clarity of hindsight, we recognize now that there were several key principles that were necessary ingredients for this partnership to work. First and foremost, the presidents provided strong leadership; they constantly encouraged and would not permit us to fail. Second, we did not pilot the program. Pilot programs, in this author’s opinion, signal a not-so-firm commitment to program development and implementation, and commitment was essential if this program was to have a chance to succeed. In short, pilot programs are often not implemented. Third, we were able to address problems and find solutions as the program evolved. In fact, we had no choice given the full implementation of the program (i.e., no pilot). Fourth, we remained flexible where possible, especially with our budgets. Finally, we developed a trust in each other’s abilities and expertise. Part of this trust stemmed from a previously established partnership among JCC, U of L and United Parcel Service (UPS) to create Metropolitan College, an innovative partnership that provides tuition, housing, and books for students who work part-time at UPS (Metropolitan College 2003). That partnership demonstrated that we could work together for the betterment

of both students and the local community and provided a foundation upon which the Pathways program could build.

After considerable work, the committee delivered a document to the presidents in August 1999 outlining the necessary resources to implement the Pathways program beginning in Fall 2000. Included in the proposal were faculty, staff, and facility requirements estimated at an annually recurring cost of nearly \$1 million.

The Issue of Access

While almost everyone who was aware of the intended implementation of the Pathways to Success program agreed in spirit with the philosophy of placing students on the educational continuum where they would have the best chance to succeed, there was nonetheless immediate concern expressed from several quarters about the impact on first year African-American student enrollment at the University of Louisville. More accurately, concerns were in fact directed at the University's decision to incrementally increase first-year minimum admission criteria between the years 2000 and 2003. Although an established minimum ACT composite score by itself is not a necessary condition for admission, it usually weighs heavily in the admission decision at U of L, as does the high school GPA. During that four-year period, the required minimum ACT composite score rose from 16 to 20. We do note here that throughout the period leading up to U of L's implementation of the new admissions standards, our Office of Admissions worked closely with counselors in the Jefferson County Public Schools (and other school systems) to ensure that they were kept apprised of the forthcoming changes.

As stated earlier, U of L for many years operated basically as an open admission university that served a predominantly local population. The increase in the ACT requirement was especially controversial given the gap in test scores between white and African-American students both locally and nationally (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education 2003; ACT 2003.) Thus there were, and continue to be, concerns regarding the impact of increased admission standards upon the first-year enrollments of African-American students. However, the president of U of L did state that we would monitor carefully the Pathways to Success program and that we would make changes if significant negative impacts on the first-year African-American students were evident. We return to this issue in a later section of this paper.

Program Implementation

After approval by the two institution presidents, the Pathways to Success program was implemented in academic year 2000–2001. Following is a list of the key elements of the program:

1. Uniform diagnostic testing of students at both institutions
2. All developmental coursework (reading, writing, mathematics) at U of L and JCC taught by JCC faculty skilled in developmental teaching strategies

3. Intensive advising on both campuses
4. Opportunities for JCC students in the program to live in U of L residential facilities and participate in other student activities
5. Guaranteed admission to U of L for JCC students who complete their developmental coursework and at least 12 credit-bearing hours with a 2.0 GPA
6. A streamlined transfer process for those students when they transfer to U of L
7. Continuous assessment and improvement of the program

An expanded discussion of each of these points provides details.

1. Kentucky state statute requires that higher education institutions must provide some form of supplemental assistance or remediation to students who score below an established minimum on the reading, writing, or mathematics sections of the ACT. For the community college system, the system-wide minimum is an 18 and diagnostic tests (currently the COMPASS test) must be used to place students into specific remedial (developmental) courses. The University of Louisville (as permitted by the same state statute) established higher threshold scores and but following the lead of JCC adopted the COMPASS test as our diagnostic tool. We thus placed students on the basis of the better of either the ACT subscore or the appropriate diagnostic score on the COMPASS.
2. Although nearly all students at U of L are required to have a minimum ACT score of 20, many still fall below our required minimum thresholds in mathematics, and to a lesser extent, reading. Writing is now handled in a different manner (see below). The agreement established by the committee called for all developmental coursework to be taught by qualified faculty from JCC, regardless of whether that class was located at JCC or U of L. As per our agreement, the University of Louisville agreed to pay the salaries and fringe benefits for the faculty who were assigned to the U of L campus and to compensate JCC for part of the tuition generated through those classes. In addition, some faculty were assigned to teach developmental courses at one of the JCC campuses. This financial arrangement was questioned by many at U of L, but it was essentially a “deal breaker” for JCC. At the outset, there was considerable sentiment by some at JCC that U of L was interested only in the best students, would deny admission to an increasing number of students, thereby increasing the burden on JCC at a time when resources were already scarce. In fact, our admissions office was denying admission to more students and enrollments were increasing at JCC—but both of these changes were consistent with the new missions of both U of L and JCC and with the legislative mandates in House Bill 1. However, without that financial arrangement, the Pathways program would not exist. To his credit, the U of L president did not hesitate and agreed to the financial recommendations provided by the committee. Ultimately, modifications to the budget were made and the cost of the program continues to decrease.
3. With more students on JCC’s campuses intending to transfer, the university also agreed to provide a U of L advisor for the Pathways students and to maintain a student-to-advisor ratio of 250:1. We now have two advisors stationed on two campuses and will likely need a third person in the near future. These advisors are

- familiar with U of L programs and provide a constant presence that we believe to be a critical piece of the transfer process. JCC advisors and faculty also benefit from a U of L person whom they can utilize as a resource.
4. JCC students in the Pathways to Success program are also eligible to live in U of L residence halls and can purchase student IDs that provide them access to intramural activities, the libraries, and most other student services available to our own students. That ID also provides free transportation on the local bus system that serves the entire county and some adjacent counties.
 5. Formal entry into the Pathways to Success program requires that students sign what we call a “consent agreement,” which basically mandates that students see their advisor on a regular basis, attend classes regularly (although we do not monitor attendance), complete developmental courses with a grade of C or better, and attend informational meetings and orientations when scheduled. Basically, the intent here is to keep in regular contact with these students and to make certain that they stay focused on their goals.
 6. When students, in conjunction with their advisors, determine that they are ready to transfer to U of L, they meet with our Director of Transfer Services who works with them to make certain that all paperwork is completed, that financial aid forms are completed, and that they have properly enrolled for courses. All fees associated with the transfer process are waived.
 7. We continually assess the program, its services to students, the resource requirements, and of course continue to look for better ways to maximize student successes. Several of the modifications to the program are discussed below.

Results

In the first full year of operation, the University of Louisville denied admission to approximately 600 students who we referred to the Pathways to Success program. We should note here that U of L had always denied admission to students but that the increased minimum admission standards, earlier deadlines, and an enrollment management plan that sought to limit the first-year entering class size did result in an increased number of students who were denied admission in 2000 and subsequent years. Those who were denied admission that year were contacted by letter and by telephone and encouraged to join the Pathways program. Ultimately about 200 students signed our “consent agreement” and enrolled at JCC in 2000. For Fall 2003, we denied admission to approximately 1000 students, who we again referred to the Pathways program. As of September 2003 we have 477 signed “consent agreements” from students who are actively enrolled at JCC. Approximately 100 students have transferred to U of L or another four-year institution. During the first three years of operation, African-American students represented between 23 and 28% of those denied admission. Thirty-five percent of the students who transferred to U of L are African-American.

The university subscribes to the services provided by the National Student Clearinghouse and thus we are able to answer the question “What happens to the students who are denied admission to U of L?” We know now that between 75 and

85% of those students who are denied admission to U of L enroll in other institutions of higher education, either in-state or out-of-state. Many, of course, enroll at JCC even if they are not interested in being part of the Pathways program. We are now moving to ensure that more JCC students make contact with us early in their careers so that we can work with them prior to their transfer to U of L. Those efforts are detailed below.

On U of L's campus, JCC instructors began to offer developmental classes in writing, reading, and mathematics. In that first year of operation, U of L's Mathematics Department continued to offer an intermediate algebra course (Math 102) that was preparatory for most other mathematics courses; however, that course did not count as a general education mathematics course, although it could be used as credit towards a degree. That course was subsequently removed from the curriculum in 2001 as Mathematics realigned their curriculum to better integrate with JCC's developmental program. Enrollments in developmental classes at U of L for the four academic years since the inception of the Pathways program are listed in the following table.

Table 1: Initial enrollments in developmental writing, reading, and mathematics by academic year (including summer terms). These numbers reflect the enrollments at the beginning of the relevant semesters and are not the end-of-semester counts.

	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2003–2004
Writing	166	55	0	0
Reading	446	365	198	0
Mathematics	2318*	2128	1818	834 (fall only)

* This number includes 829 students in Math 102 (intermediate algebra).

A few comments are necessary to explain the numbers in Table 1. As one would suspect, increasing the minimum admission standards should reduce the numbers of students in developmental classes—and it has. However, the reduced numbers in remedial writing, we believe, are attributable in large part to a greater emphasis on writing in the K-12 curriculum. Many professors have noted a significant increase in the writing abilities all of our students. Given the smaller numbers of students needing developmental writing, we began to “mainstream” all entering students into the entry level composition course in Fall 2002. We provided two additional full-time instructors to the English Department so that we could reduce class sizes slightly and devote more attention to individual students. The development of the University Writing Center also provided another venue in which students could seek writing assistance. This arrangement now works quite well.

Referring again to Table 1, we note the large—but decreasing—numbers in developmental math courses. In the period of time leading up to Fall 2002, the author and staff worked with the Department of Mathematics and the Arts and Sciences Dean's Office to ascertain if we could begin to whittle down the large numbers of students faced with developmental work in mathematics. Although we do not yet have

data to support our contentions, we believe that there are three basic reasons why so many students are placed into developmental math classes. First, many students complete the required high school mathematics courses during their junior year and thus lose some of their math skills during the senior year. These students need “refreshing” rather than “remediation.” Second, we believe that the COMPASS test has a tendency to place students lower than where we think they should be. Third, discussions among mathematics faculty at U of L, JCC, and JCPS lead us to believe that although the required subject matter may be covered, the pedagogy and testing strategies differ substantially between high school and college. We continue to work with the high schools so that more students will be prepared for college level mathematics.

Following numerous discussions with mathematics faculty, we decided to create six special sections of college algebra for first-year students whose ACT mathematics subscores would have normally placed them into a developmental math class. Those students were invited to enroll in these “enhanced” sections of college algebra, but were asked to sign a “contract” that obligated them to attend class five days per week rather than the normal three; the two additional days were used to review material, work on problems, etc. In exchange, students would not have to attend—or pay for—a four credit hour developmental math class. The savings in time and money were obvious, especially to parents. That experiment produced the following results.

Table 2. Completion and pass rates for first-year students in regular and enhanced college algebra classes.

COLLEGE ALGEBRA	Completion Rate	Pass Rate
Regular Sections	72%	68%
Enhanced Sections	89%	83%

It was immediately obvious to us that attendance, time on task, and possibly the incentive to not be required to take and pay for a remedial class were strong positive factors in student completion and pass rates. This experiment was so successful that the Mathematics Department expanded the number of enhanced sections of college algebra for Fall 2003 and added a few enhanced sections of another general education mathematics course. Of course the author had to come up with the necessary resources to fund those extra sections, but was more than pleased to do so in light of the positive results.

The success of the enhanced sections in mathematics prompted us to attempt a similar strategy for those students who required some form of developmental reading assistance. Without a “Reading” Department, we were forced to alter slightly our strategy. With the help of several people, we devised a plan whereby students whose ACT subscores in reading were 19 or below were placed in general education course sections in either Biology, Sociology, Geography or Political Science. We obtained the instructors’ consent (and the blessing of the Dean of Arts and Sciences) to reserve a certain number of seats for these students. We then assigned instructors trained in reading and reading comprehension pedagogy to work with these designated students

on the two days per week when the class did not meet. While we did not ask the class instructors to participate directly in these extra sessions, we did work closely with them at the outset to ensure that they were well informed about the process. The beauty of this approach is that the students are engaged in developing skills in reading comprehension using texts and articles directly related to their coursework rather than just working on reading skills unrelated to specific subject matter. There is thus direct relevance for the students. We are anxious to see the results at the end of the Fall 2003.

Returning to an issue raised earlier, we continue to monitor progress in assuring that African-American students gain access to the University of Louisville. Table 3 provides information on the most recent six-year period. First-year enrollments peaked in 1999 and the absolute numbers have declined in recent years, although the percentage of African-American students remained above 14% until the last two years. Total undergraduate enrollment of African-American students has steadily increased over the six years, with a slight decrease evident in 2003. The increased percentage of African-American students in the undergraduate student body reflects higher retention rates—approximately 80% for first-to-second year students—and a larger number of transfer students.

Table 3. First year and total undergraduate enrollments for African-American students and all students at the University of Louisville, 1998–2003.

	1st Year Student Enrollment	1st Year African-American Enrollment	%	Total Undergraduate Enrollment	Total African-American Enrollment	%
1998	2,155	280	13.0%	14,647	1,843	12.6%
1999	2,448	360	14.7%	14,710	1,885	12.8%
2000	2,408	358	14.9%	14,477	1,902	13.1%
2001	2,331	336	14.4%	14,131	1,882	13.3%
2002	2,306	309	13.4%	14,475	1,991	13.8%
2003	2,291	294	12.8%	14,762	1,982	13.4%

We also note that in the first year in which admission standards were raised (academic year 2000–2001) African-American students comprised 14.9% (358) of the entering first-year student population of 2,306. Those 358 students represented the second largest number of entering African-American students in the university’s history. That said, we remain concerned about the absolute and percentage decreases over the last two years. Some of this decrease may well be the result of increasing competition for these students and the availability of more scholarship money from other institutions. According to our Office of Admissions, we actually admitted more African-American students than in many previous years, but a higher percentage chose to enroll elsewhere. We are committed to increasing the percentage of first-year African-American and are devising a plan to address that issue in conjunction with the Jefferson County Public School system for Fall 2004 and subsequent years.

Future Directions and Lessons Learned

Beginning our fourth year of operation of the Pathways to Success program, we continue to make improvements to the program in an attempt to advance more students through the educational system and to better prepare them to succeed. If we can ensure that more students are better prepared to persist and to finish their degrees then we will have succeeded in our mission. The University of Louisville, in its efforts to become a premier, nationally recognized research university, will not increase the size of its first-year student populations over the foreseeable future and will not lower its minimum admission standards. In part, we recognize that we simply do not have the capacity to adequately serve a larger number of first-year students. However, we do believe that we have some additional “capacity” at the junior and senior level. Thus the university will be able to admit and serve an increased number of well-prepared transfer students. This is entirely consistent with the strategic plan for higher education in the state.

One of the more glaring mistakes that we made—and there were others—was to not publicize the program sufficiently in the public arena. We did work with high school counselors and teachers, but we know now that other audiences were not adequately informed. Our logic was simple but probably flawed; as we began to raise the university’s minimum admission standards and to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience, we did not wish to send a contradictory message that underprepared students could still enter U of L through this new program. We realize that a clear understanding of the program would have made things easier and that a wider audience is preferable. We are taking steps to correct that error.

We have also learned that it is essential for both JCC and U of L to work closely with the school systems to better prepare students to make the necessary academic transition(s) they face. Recent meetings of mathematics faculties have provided an initial thrust to better align the curriculum, and we are working closely with JCPS to increase our dual-credit offerings in what we hope will better prepare more students for educational and workplace opportunities.

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