

Educational Attainment

Based on calculations using data from the 2005-2009 American Community Survey Estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau, Daviess County has a 32% rate of working-aged (18-64) adults who hold at least an associate's degree. Our region, through the efforts of multiple partners including the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation and the Regional Alliance for Education, have made improving educational attainment at all levels a goal for programming for more than a decade. Working in concert with the local public and private school districts, the Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTC), Brescia University (BU), Kentucky Wesleyan College (KWC), and Western Kentucky University at Owensboro (WKU-O), the groups have supported several initiatives to promote college readiness, postsecondary attendance, and degree attainment.

The Regional Alliance for Education is an umbrella organization which brings together in partnership all of the regional public and private school districts, the four postsecondary institutions, workforce and economic development professionals, early childhood and adult education providers, business and labor representatives, elected officials and foundation executives.

Many different circumstances may prevent a student from achieving a college degree. Some high school students and their families do not see themselves as "college material." They never matriculate. Lack of adequate preparation causes many first-year college students to drop out. And a lack of financial support leads other students to shelve their college careers. In response to these barriers, a three-pronged strategy has emerged. The first involves college readiness. The second addresses the challenges of successfully transitioning to college. The third identifies various forms of financial assistance which can help students stay in school and persist toward a degree. Many of these efforts are the result of several years of collaboration and are based on research into best practices for improving degree persistence.

Readiness

- Discover College is a state and national model which encourages students to explore college courses at OCTC before graduating from high school. Currently 2790 students are taking technical courses, earning college credit and/or exploring advanced areas of interest through this endeavor. Some learn they are capable of college work after all, while others get a jumpstart on the college credits they will need for a four-year degree. The program has helped to improve the on-to-college rate for the region. Owensboro leads the state in the number of high school students dually enrolled in college classes.
- Math readiness courses, developed by high schools in partnership with the local colleges, allow students to take classes in the college transitional sequence as their fourth math credit in high school when their ACT scores indicate they are not prepared for college algebra. This allows them to go directly into credit-bearing classes when they enter college.

- Accelerated and contextualized readiness courses are available through the SkillTrain (Adult Learning) Center in OCTC's Workforce Solutions Division..
- Workforce Solutions, through a community partnership initiative called Training HQ, embeds college readiness skills in several high-demand postsecondary certificate programs designed to allow entry into the labor market and/or further college progression.
- OCTC has recently added a full-time College Readiness Counselor to its staff.

Successful Transition

- Each of the local postsecondary institutions which offer associate's degrees offer orientation for all new students to assist their understanding of both the challenges of college life and the supports available to them should they need help.
- Tutoring and supplemental instruction are widely available.
- OCTC, BU and KWC are all looking at ways to make the transitional courses, taken by students who are not well prepared for college work, more effective and more cost efficient. OCTC has recently been awarded a grant to implement the Emporium Math model which emphasizes mastery learning and saves transitional students time and money.
- The local colleges offer symposia and classes on study habits and introduction to college sessions.

Financial Assistance

- In addition to financial aid (scholarships and loans) on-campus jobs and internships are available at each of the postsecondary institutions.
- Convenient and affordable child care is available on most campuses.
- Off-campus, evening and weekend courses are offered to meet the needs of working adults who are seeking college degrees.
- All the colleges are offering more on-line and hybrid classes to meet the learning styles and time considerations of students so that they can work while earning a credential.
- Some courses, like the Business Administration Fastrack at OCTC, are specifically designed for accelerated delivery.
- The Learning Villa, operated by Audubon Area Community Services, provides affordable housing for qualified college students that offer a variety of financial aid options.
- OCTC will launch Workforce and Accelerated Options Initiatives in January. These will target underskilled, displaced and incumbent workers for industry-driven postsecondary credential pathways.
- More companies are being encouraged to follow the lead of Owensboro Medical Health System in providing tuition remission for their employees to complete degrees.
- OCTC is a finalist for a grant which would enable it to assist the students to receive all the various forms of public assistance for which they might qualify.

Next Steps

- OCTC has initiated the Foundations of Excellence First Year Experience and Transfer Self Study to identify practices to retain and complete students. Representatives of WKU-O and the Regional Alliance for Education are a part of this effort.
- The Regional Alliance for Education will present information to its partners on the many different types of financial support which are available to help students stay in college.
- The Alliance will also provide information to business and industry on the benefits of providing tuition remission for their employees.

With these strategies in place and with the colleges and universities all committed to finding creative ways to help students achieve their degrees, we are confident that Daviess County will meet the national percentage of adults who hold at least a two-year degree.

The postsecondary institutions will not have to assume the total responsibility for this effort. Five years ago the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation, the Regional Alliance for Education and local government leaders identified affordable, public four-year education options as a key goal. As a result, the Daviess County Fiscal Court made resources available to acquire land and to erect the first building on a campus where Western Kentucky University could expand its offerings in Owensboro. The University signed a memorandum of Agreement with the county and the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation which is reviewed annually to target the programming and courses needed for the local economy. The MOA has led Western to focus on local needs, increase the number of classes offered here, hire additional faculty, and create a master plan for campus expansion in Owensboro. Today WKU-O with its new building on a new campus is serving more students than ever before and is partnering with OCTC to ensure successful transition of associate degree holders into baccalaureate programs. This is one example of our community's commitment to improve the lives of our citizens through making higher education available to them. We look forward to creating many more opportunities!