

## Can Data Drive Student Choices in Louisville, Ky.?

Colin Wood | May 23, 2013



Officials in Louisville, Ky., are looking to data to help students make better decisions about their futures. Their hope is that more informed decisions will not only benefit students, but also drive economic development. A partnership between local universities and package delivery powerhouse UPS provides a way for part-time blue-collar workers to pursue higher education. Economic development officials are doing their part by providing their partners with local job data.

Though its name may be confusing, Metropolitan College (MC) is not a physical college, but rather the name given to a partnership between Jefferson Community and Technical College, the University of Louisville and UPS. George Poling, executive director for the partnership, explained that it began as an incentive for UPS to expand their operation in Louisville.

UPS employees who work part-time are eligible through the program to pursue higher education in any field they choose, as long as they pass their courses with grades of C or higher. “The goal is to provide a better-educated workforce in the long run,” Poling said. “UPS needs people to work part-time at night in this operation and an incentive to keep people on the job is this program.” The program is mutually beneficial, he said

– UPS gets a consistent part-time workforce, Louisville gets a more educated populace and the workers get a degree for free.

Having skilled workers is an integral part of a sound economic development plan, but the way most students decide their focus of study is not informed by real data, said Ted Smith, director of economic growth and innovation for Louisville. “Most people talk to friends and professors,” he said. “The sources of information that most people use are not summarized statistical trends. If you think about the kind of guidance that’s given to any college student today, it’s not necessarily shaped by hard data. So we’re really just trying to open this up so that it has an element of reality to it.” Students who attain liberal arts degrees and are then unable to find work aren’t just hurting themselves, then, but the local economy as well.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides data that organizations like MC can use to help students decide what to study, Smith said, but those projections are not as accurate as what local officials can provide about job conditions right now. “We have a neat little system in place right now where we’re checking daily job openings by category in our metro area,” he said. “So we’ve been doing that for the past year as a sort of pulse check.” The data they provide, he said, could push students toward better career decisions.

The operation, admittedly low-tech, consists of gathering job data from CareerBuilder.com and putting it into a spreadsheet. By watching that data every day, Smith explained, they can see what kinds of jobs are available locally right now, trends over time, and also keep tabs on which companies hire the most positions.

In addition to a breakdown of what types of jobs are available, Smith said they also break down the top 20 hiring companies by sector each month.

About six months ago, they started sharing that data with MC, as well as other metropolitan agencies. They can use the data however they please, Smith said, but he hopes they present it to their students in an easy-to-understand way so it can eventually drive economic growth.

“We want to understand that gap between the number of people unemployed and jobs open with the elusive goal that if we really had our stuff together, we could close the gap,” he said. “It’s not just about graduating at Metropolitan College, it’s about the longer term benefits. As a government, that’s why we invest in that program. The best leverage of the tax dollar thinks about that longer view.”

*Louisville City Hall photo from Henryk Sadura, [Shutterstock](#).*