Research confirms what common sense suggests, higher levels of education are associated with better economic outcomes like higher wages and lower unemployment. And by improving health, increasing technology use, expanding volunteerism, and reducing public assistance, higher education levels have long-lasting effects on the economy. Eighty years ago, Kentucky’s per capita personal income was just over 50% of the U.S. average; today it is just over 80%. Kentucky’s educational position has improved significantly over the last twenty-five years, but the state still lags the U.S. in college attainment (23% compared to 30%) and academic achievement gaps continue to mute overall educational progress. According to a 2014 paper by John Fernald at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and Charles Jones at Stanford, around three-fourths of U.S. economic growth since 1950 was fueled by just two factors—rising educational attainment and research intensity. In the global economy, Kentucky’s future economic prosperity will be determined largely by the pursuit of and investment in educational excellence.

The Kentucky Postsecondary Education Act of 1997 is passed and Governor Patton begins his efforts to increase Kentucky’s per capita income to the U.S. average by 2020. UK economists Mark Berger and Glenn Blomquist would later determine that 92% would get the state to the national average because of Kentucky’s lower cost of living.

In 2020, Kentucky’s per capita personal income was 56% of the U.S. average.

By 1950 the state’s population over 25 had a college degree in 1940, compared to 4.6% nationally, per capita income was 65% of the U.S. average.

From 1960 to 1970 Kentucky’s per capita personal income increased from 71% to nearly 78% of the U.S. average. At the same time, the percentage of adults over 25 with a four-year college degree increased from 4.9% to 7.2%.

Kentucky’s per capita income reached 80% of the U.S. average in 1974.

The college degree percentage increases from 11.1% in 1980 to 13.6% in 1990. It then jumped to 17.1% in 2000. Meanwhile, Kentucky’s per capita income hovers around 80% of the U.S. average.

In 2013, Kentucky’s per capita personal income was 81% of the U.S. average. Around 23% of Kentucky adults over 25 have a four-year college degree while the U.S. average is nearly 50%.

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