

According to a 2011 report put out by the Census Bureau, roughly 42% of adult residents in Washington County have only attained the educational equivalency of a high school diploma. 34% of adults have gone on to accomplish some level of college work, including about 18% who received a degree, and another 23% had not been able to receive a complete high school education.

These figures were the focal point for a series of presentations hosted by the Washington County Community Foundation to spotlight “Education Matters”. The Community Foundation’s Director, Judy Johnson, explained that “Education Matters” is a regional undertaking to raise awareness for adult education programs in Southern Indiana and how vital a college degree is for employers and would-be employees alike in the 21st century job market.

Speakers for the event included Haley Glover, Strategy Director for the Lumina Foundation, Wendy Dant Chesser, President and CEO of One Southern Indiana, Dr. Uric Dufrene, Professor of Business Administration at IU Southeast, and Dr. Rita Hudson Shourds, Chancellor of Ivy Tech Community College.

They were each allowed 15 minute to give a brief presentation to the audience. Glover talked about Lumina’s mission to help people get into and through college successfully. “For a long time we have been giving people fish, now we need to teach people how to fish.” She emphasized that simply offering college courses is not enough anymore. Potential students need to be sought out, encouraged, and given the tools they’ll need to succeed in college.

Chesser talked about what big companies look for in a potential employee and within communities they are considering planting roots in. “Companies look for a reason to cross communities off their lists,” she said. Some of the critical trends Chesser said companies tend to look for are location, workforce availability, and workforce affordability. A steady population of educated workers is a big plus for encouraging job growth, she added. “We can’t move forward without a quality workforce...economic development is a team sport.”

Dr. Dufrene looked at national trends between education level and unemployment rates, citing that people with a high school degree typically faced a steeper unemployment rate and lower personal income levels than people with a college degree in the workforce. He said this proved especially true during the most recent national recession that began in 2008.

Dr. Shourds talked about how Ivy Tech has been adapting and expanding their services to suit the needs of adults who are going back for their college education. “Over 40% of Ivy Tech’s students work full time jobs,” Dr. Shourds explained. This fact has led the Community College to set up classes off-campus sites, such as workplaces and other public spaces, and they’ve taken some unique approaches to traditional services, such as offering class registration at the local YMCA.

She also suggested that dual credit programs are a good incentive to get high school students thinking about their college careers early. Dual credit is a special program available at most high schools where students can earn certain college credits while they’re still in high school. Dr. Shourds said Salem, Eastern and West Washington High Schools all have dual credit programs.

The Community Foundations of Clark, Floyd, Harrison and Scott Counties are collaborating with Washington County’s Foundation to bring awareness of “Education Matters” across the area.