

LOUISVILLE BUSINESS FIRST

Digital Transformation Academy: Why UofL and Lincoln Foundation forged a new partnership

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Nearly 60 high school juniors and seniors went to University of Louisville this week, but it wasn't for some kind of campus tour.

The students were there to learn about analytics, website building, artificial intelligence and the basics of technology and entrepreneurship through the inaugural Digital Transformation Academy. The academy, a part of the community outreach at UofL's Digital Transformation Center, was created in partnership with the Lincoln Foundation for the nonprofit's Whitney M. YOUNG Scholars.

This isn't the first time UofL and Lincoln Foundation have teamed up for summer programming. Prior to the launch of the academy, the organizations teamed up for Project BUILD, a "mini MBA" program that introduced students to the world of business through college-level courses in accounting, economics, finance, statistics, entrepreneurship, management and marketing.

Yet after the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, a change was needed in the 30-year-old program to make sure the scholars were on the leading edge of technology while also getting prepared for college, said Marshall Bradley, president of the Lincoln Foundation.

"This initiative in large measure was moved forward by our experience with Covid-19," he said. "Our Whitney M. YOUNG Scholars Program®, which celebrated its 30th anniversary last year, was a program that was tried and true. We had a proven curriculum and



Whitney M. Young Scholars are pictured in a University of Louisville School of Business classroom as they attend the Digital Transformation Academy, which aims to enhance students' understanding of the many ways data and technology are transforming business and organizations.

we were very happy with it, and then all of a sudden on March 13, 2020, we had to shut our offices down and then when Jcps closed schools that was the end of our face-to-face encounters."

Lincoln Foundation went through its own digital transformation, shifting from an analog, in-person format to a virtual one. Meanwhile, Dr. Nat Irvin, assistant dean for thought leadership and civic engagement, management and entrepreneurship at UofL, was leading Greater Louisville Inc.'s Business Council to End Racism Education Workstream.

Within that workstream, Irvin and 30 to 40 other Louisville business leaders discussed the digital divide in underrepresented communities and what could be done to create more accessibility. The workstream participants wanted to make an impact by ensuring multicultural students were getting exposed to tech-centric careers and curriculum, said Dana Johnson, senior director of diversity, equity and inclusion at GLL.

"This is about trying to prepare thought leadership for the future and not just workers," Dr. Irvin said. "We need young people, particularly in this group, to be prepared. I think the city of Louisville really has an opportunity and an obligation to this community to do this – it's in our own self-interest, it's not something that you know you do it to be nice. This is the future. These young people are the future

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Professor Randy Whetstone Jr., center, works with Yaara Aleissa, right, during the Digital Transformation Academy at the University of Louisville College of Business. The academy, which is run through a partnership between UofL and the Lincoln Foundation, aims to enhance students' understanding of the many ways data and technology are transforming business and organizations.

and I think a lot of times people don't understand how brilliant they are."

The Digital Transformation Academy is being held from July 6 through July 16 and is led by three UofL faculty: Dr. Randy Whetstone Jr., Dr. C Shaun Owens and Ashley Triplett. Together, they have been teaching Google Analytics, Wix website development and how to build AI-equipped chatbots.

Whetstone said in his short time with the Whitney M. YOUNG scholars so far, he's recognized they are a special group of kids that aren't just entrepreneurially-minded, but also have a heart for the community.

"These young people understand the power of the mind and the power of their ideas," he said. "Come the end of this program, I see them being even more empowered, encouraged

and confident to take what they've gained from here and keep building on it for the future."

Irvin described the Digital Transformation Academy as a beta-test for how to get young people engaged with the critical skills needed for the future, and he expects it to expand to upwards of 100 students within its next cohort.

"We want kids to be successful academically, but through our programming and through this multi-year commitment [UofL] made to our program, we want them to be leaders," Bradley said. "This is why this Digital Transformation Academy is so important to us because we feel like that we are taking a leadership role with the University of Louisville and taking kids who may not otherwise have this opportunity and putting them on the cutting edge of what the future of business is going to look like."