

# THE BEST-KEPT SECRET IN FLORIDA EDUCATION

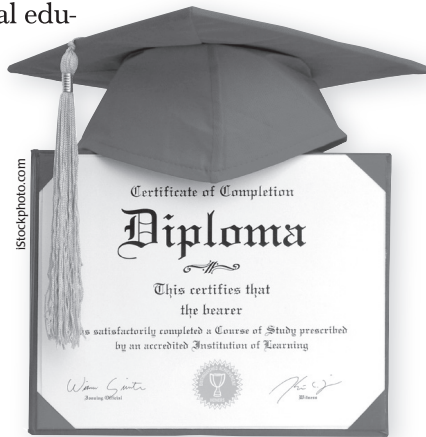
BY KATHY MIZERECK

Career schools and colleges are the best kept secret in Florida education. One in ten Florida students attends a degree-granting or non-degree granting career school or college whose mission is to provide students with appropriate, practical education and workforce preparation to succeed in Florida's diverse marketplace. This sector offers extremely varied programs ranging from Major League Baseball umpiring to nursing and from seamanship to teaching. It includes innovative institutions such as Everest University, ITT Tech, Sunstate Academy, Keiser University, and New Horizons Computer Learning Center.

Florida's 800 career schools and colleges address Florida's workforce priorities by training and placing students into jobs. Because of this, these schools produce the largest share of graduates to fill Florida's top growing

occupations—information technology, allied health, transportation and legal support. In 2006-2007, Florida career schools and colleges produced the following percentage of total credentials:

- ▶ 64 percent of information technology, computer animation and computer science
- ▶ 55 percent of health and allied health
- ▶ 34 percent of paralegals and court reporters
- ▶ 25 percent of education Ph.D. degrees



Our graduates are the backbone of Florida's workforce. So, exactly who are Florida's career schools and colleges and what role do they play in the state's higher education system?

## The Role of Career Schools and Colleges

For more than 50 years, Flor-

Florida career schools and colleges have provided a critical source of career-focused education that upgrades and refines work skills for Florida's front line workers. Our students look to us to teach them relevant skills necessary to adapt and succeed in Florida's dynamic market place.

Today, Florida's 300+ degree granting and 500+ non-degree granting career schools and colleges prepare more than 270,000 students each year for employment in more than 200 occupations. Our schools offer students certificates, associate degrees, baccalaureate degrees, master degrees, and even Ph.Ds. More than 90 percent of the degree-granting institutions are either regionally or nationally accredited, meeting standards set forth by the United States Department of Education. In 2007-2008 these schools produced 86,382 graduates; 86 percent were placed in jobs, joined the military, or continued with higher education. These institutions are businesses, and they are in the business of meeting student and workforce needs.

### **Regulatory Oversight and Accountability**

There is sometimes a public perception that career schools and colleges lack regulatory oversight and accountability. Stories occasionally surface about schools sprouting on street corners, luring unsuspecting adults with promises of high paying jobs. This is not the case in Florida because of our tough regu-

latory statutes and state oversight enforcement.

Florida has one of the most thorough and toughest private postsecondary regulatory systems in the country. We are often cited as a model for other states seeking to improve their systems. All Florida private career schools and colleges must be licensed and annually reviewed by the Florida Commission for Independent Education (CIE), a seven member board appointed by the Governor that serves as the state's regulatory agency. A strict oversight process is set forth in statute and rule, and institutions that do not adhere to these state standards risk penalties ranging from improvement plans to fines to license revocation.

Any career school or college seeking to add or modify an educational program must seek approval from CIE via a formal review process. In 2007-2008, the CIE staff conducted 448 on-site visits to evaluate schools' physical facilities, student record storage, catalog and student contract, class schedules, tuition charges, placement and counseling services, faculty qualifications, advertising policies, and other standard areas in rule.

In addition to the CIE, the schools' accrediting agencies and the federal government conduct their own oversight reviews. The U.S. Department of Education has investigative authority to protect students in those schools that participate in federal financial aid programs. Accrediting bodies oversee self studies, conduct on-site visits, and review faculty,

## Comparison of the Production of New Graduates by Occupational Cluster 2006 – 2007



**Career Colleges  
& Schools**

**Community  
Colleges**

**Technical Centers**

**State University  
System**

**Independent  
Non-profit Colleges**

**Total Graduates**

	<b>TRANSPORTATION DRIVING &amp; REPAIR</b>	<b>IT &amp; COMPUTER SCIENCE</b>	<b>HEALTH &amp; ALLIED HEALTH SCIENCES</b>	<b>LEGAL COURT REPORTER, PARALEGAL</b>
	74.14%	63.93%	54.72%	34.04%
	6.04%	16.27%	19.9%	24.9%
	19.82%	3.53%	9.2%	4.51%
	0.00%	10.41%	10.6%	19%
	0.00%	5.85%	5.5%	17.55%
	5,514	9,487	60,865	1,795

curriculum and other aspects of each institution.

Despite our history, performance and accountability requirements, Florida’s career schools and colleges are often overlooked as a viable resource to achieve the state’s higher education objectives – employability, production, and access for Florida’s students. These schools currently contribute and could collaborate with the state’s higher education community to achieve those objectives at higher levels.

### **Employability: Meeting Florida’s Workforce Needs**

Florida’s career schools and colleges are already meeting this challenge. An important

difference from traditional institutions is approach – we seek excellence through an entrepreneurial approach, focused on responding quickly to employer’s needs and placing students in jobs. This has resulted in an extremely diverse set of programs that produce a huge range of employees. Programs include sea captains, lawyers, Major League Baseball umpires, teachers, chefs, nurses, X-ray technicians, motorcycle mechanics, information technology workers, and business people. As shown in the table above, using self-reported data from all sectors, we currently produce the majority of graduates in Florida’s fastest growing occupations.

Our schools are engaged in high quality education as measured by

the marketplace—our students and the employers who hire them. With an average placement rate of over 70 percent, we have a proven track record of success.

Florida’s career schools and colleges are held accountable for completion and placement rates. This focus on production and meeting workforce needs in a highly competitive environment causes our schools to be creative. We offer small classes that are tightly focused on helping students complete their programs and improve their job status.

This focus is one reason we are the fastest growing sector in higher education. Our schools are outcome based, and many students come to us because they know exactly how long it will take them to earn a credential, and where they will go when they finish. We educate a far greater percentage of minorities and working adults than other segments of postsecondary education do, thereby helping those underserved by traditional higher education.

When institutions are driven by student needs, they are flexible about meeting those needs.

Online education offerings, creative scheduling, faculty with real work experience, night and weekend programs, hybrid models that combine online and face-to-face are all part of our landscape. Because our schools are not dependent

upon state tax dollars, we can add programs, facilities and instructors to meet employers’ demands. And we eliminate programs, or curtail enrollment, if there is no demand for those graduates.


**Access:  
Focus on Students**

Policy debates in higher education on the issue of access often revolve around institutions. How much money is there? Who will get those funds? Who has authority to award degrees? Who should set tuition? Who should determine which programs are offered or eliminated?


Perhaps we should reframe the debate to focus on students. What if funding went to students, who then chose the institution that

best met their needs? In a competitive marketplace, everyone would be more responsive to students and employers. If the state needs nurses and teachers and scientists, perhaps the state should “purchase” those graduates through competitive funding opportunities.

If students are eligible for state financial aid, shouldn’t they have the choice to attend the institution that best meets their career objectives whether it is a state university, community college or career college? As of now, students attending regionally or nationally



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accredited career schools and colleges receive 3 percent of the state financial aid budget. This is equivalent \$74 per student. Contrast that with the state's direct per-student subsidy to community colleges (\$6,000+) and universities (\$22,000+) per student.

Clearly the access that our schools provide and our production is a tremendous bargain for the taxpayers. Moreover, Florida's career schools and colleges pay income taxes, property taxes, and sales taxes. Unlike the public colleges and universities, our schools do not receive any direct state subsidies. Rather, we pay out a total of \$131 million in federal, state, and local taxes, plus we save the state an estimated \$1.2 billion in public funds that would otherwise be needed to educate the 265,000 students attending Florida career schools and colleges.

Another issue that defies common sense is the acceptance of credit among institutions. Denying transfer of credit without an analysis of courses is a barrier to student access and success—and costly to everyone involved. Even among the public institutions, courses occasionally will not transfer. And the Statewide Course Numbering System, designed to facilitate transfer of credit, is not enforceable. So a student who attends a state-licensed institution also accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency, in an LPN program approved by the Florida Board of Nursing, who passes the national nursing exam,

is told that he must start over at the local community college in order to become a registered nurse. Access is limited, the student pays twice, and the taxpayers pay for all those repeated courses.

### **A Collaborative Future**

Partnerships are limited only by our willingness to work together. Our schools and colleges have resources that do not require additional tax dollars. Expanding public programs throughout the state is costly and time consuming. Instead, public and other private institutions could work together to improve transfer of credit, share facilities, partner to offer unique programs, and target efforts to meet employers' needs. There are many opportunities to collaborate that could save taxpayer dollars while increasing student access.

Florida's career schools and colleges are proud of our contributions, and stand ready to work with our colleagues. ∞

Kathy Mizereck is Executive Director of the Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools and Colleges, a statewide organization with offices in Tallahassee.

### **Sources**

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