

## Workforce Readiness

By Janet Ware - 10/1/2007

Florida is serious about growing a well-educated workforce, and recent developments are the proof. At all levels, Florida's educational system is working hard to prepare the next generation of workers for the challenges and opportunities they will face.

### Getting the Jump on Careers

Florida lawmakers have given the green light to making sure that all Florida high school students receive the kind of rigorous, relevant education that is most responsive to business needs and which will translate into jobs following graduation.

Signed into law by Gov. Charlie Crist in July 2007, the Florida Career and Professional Education Act requires every school district in Florida to:

- Develop a five-year strategic plan to address emerging labor market needs with appropriate coursework and industry certifications by June 2008
- Have at least one career and professional academy operational by the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year

While these new requirements may sound like a tall order, it's not as if most Florida school districts will be starting from scratch; career education has long been an integral component of Florida's education system. For example, the A++ Plan, which takes effect at Florida schools in fall 2007, calls for increased emphasis on career planning and related coursework at the middle and high school levels, as well as tougher reading and mathematics requirements for all.

In addition, high school students must earn at least four of their eight elective credits in a Major Area of Interest such as a career and technical program or academic content area. Beginning in 2011, Florida high school diplomas will show a specific major, not as a certificate of mastery but as a visible indication of a higher-than-average level of expertise in a particular subject or skill such as culinary arts or computer programming.

And many Florida high schools already offer career academies — small-group learning opportunities in which students receive firsthand exposure to a particular career field.

### Taking it up a notch

The Florida Career and Professional Education Act takes workforce preparation to a new level by ensuring that core courses are specifically designed to address emerging academic and labor market needs and to meet the requirements for industry standards. In addition, career and professional academies have new muscle. The curriculum they offer must now be industry-specific and aligned directly to a priority workforce need as identified by the regional workforce board. Students who complete the rigorous academic curriculum offered at career and professional academies receive a standard high school diploma, the highest available industry certification and opportunities to earn postsecondary credit.

### CHOICE Makes a Difference

Do career academies work? You bet. Just take a look at Okaloosa County School District in Fort Walton Beach. Since 2001, Okaloosa's CHOICE Institutes have been helping students make a positive transition from high school to high-paying jobs through career academies that combine rigorous coursework with hands-on, practical skills.

The programs offered by CHOICE — that's short for "Career High-Skill Occupational Initiative for Career Education" — focus on the very industries where qualified workers are needed most. Okaloosa students may currently enroll in one of six career institutes — aerospace, construction technology, creative arts, hospitality, information technology and allied health. Courses (pre-institutes) are also available in automotive service, manufacturing and utilities.

Curriculum varies depending on the industry focus — students in construction technology, for example, spend three days a week building real houses — but the end result is the same. In addition to high school diplomas, CHOICE students earn college credits and professional industry certifications, all at the same time and at no additional charge.

CHOICE graduates who elect to go on to college already have a head start on their credits; those who head directly for the workforce go armed with the kind of nationally recognized certifications that garner better-paying jobs. A recent study by the University of West Florida's Haas Center reveals that CHOICE graduates — even those who don't choose college — can expect to earn at least \$298,000 more in their lifetimes than traditional high school graduates.

Several school districts throughout Florida have already replicated the CHOICE program for their students. And now, thanks to a \$1-million grant from Workforce Florida Inc., to establish the "Employ Florida Banner Center for Career Academies," the Okaloosa County School District will soon be assisting many more. The new center's mission is to create standards for all of Florida's career academies and to serve as a resource for school districts seeking to re-engineer their career and technical education programs to better meet the workforce demands of high-growth industries in their communities.

### Community College Clout

Since the first Florida community college — Palm Beach Junior College — opened its doors in 1933, community colleges have been a driving force in Florida's career and technical education effort. Whether preparing young people for further education or direct entry into the workforce, or retraining adults to assume new jobs in such fast-growing industry sectors as information technology and life sciences, the 28 community colleges that make up Florida's Community College System today play an increasingly vital role in workforce preparation.

More than 900,000 students are served annually by Florida's community colleges at 61 campuses and 171 sites. The majority (63%) are part-time students, with an average age of 25, who fit classes in between work and family responsibilities. Full-time enrollment tops 320,000.

Florida community colleges offer close to 800 associate in arts and associate in science degrees and some 500 certificate programs; several even offer four-year degrees. While some students use the credits acquired at a community college as an interim step toward earning a bachelor's degree at a four-year college or university, many more seek skills and technical training for direct workforce application. Florida's community colleges awarded a total of 66,341 degrees/certificates in 2005-2006.

### Public and Private Higher Education

At 11 public universities, dozens of private colleges and universities and hundreds of technical institutions, Florida's workforce of the future is busy today acquiring the knowledge and skills that will be needed tomorrow.

Enrollment at Florida's public universities tops 280,000; another 120,000 students attend private, independent colleges and universities in Florida. In 2006, public universities in Florida awarded more than 64,000 degrees. The state boasts four major medical schools; a fifth at the University of Central Florida in Orlando is working its way through the accreditation process with plans to open in 2009.

The Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF) is an association of 28 private, accredited and not-for-profit schools that are Florida-based. With classes at more than 180 sites throughout the state, ICUF schools turn out one-third of all college degrees awarded in Florida, including 26% of baccalaureate degrees and 56% of first professional degrees (doctors, lawyers, dentists, pharmacists, optometrists and podiatrists).

Additional educational options are available at career schools and nonpublic colleges, many of which are affiliated with the Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools and Colleges.

### Research Rules:

In 2006, research spending at 13 Florida universities rose \$36.5 million from the previous year to reach a total of more than \$1.6 billion.

- According to a survey by Florida State University, Florida researchers were issued 156 U.S. patents in 2006 compared to 132 in 2005, and the number of licenses generating revenue for Florida universities increased to 337

from 321 a year ago. At \$47 million, the total licensing income for Florida universities in 2006 was up more than \$3.7 million from 2005.

- Participating in the 2006 survey were 10 Florida public universities, and the private University of Miami, Nova Southeastern University and Florida Institute of Technology.

Prepping for on-the-job success

Florida's new Ready to Work Credential program can help take the guesswork out of hiring. Here's how:

**Students or other job seekers sign** up for the program at a designated assessment center, then complete a series of self-paced tutorials/assessments in three key Ready to Work areas — Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics and Locating Information. Each assessment is scored on a scale from 3 to 7; the higher the score, the greater the applicant's ability to perform more complex skills. The Ready to Work Credential is awarded at one of three levels — Bronze, Silver or Gold — depending on individual scores in each key area.

**A work-readiness component**, which measures such personal qualities as dependability, assertiveness, self-management and honesty/integrity, and interpersonal skills such as communications, customer service, teamwork and leadership, also is available.

**Since Florida's Ready to Work Credential program** is administered by the Florida Department of Education and funded by the Florida Legislature, there's no cost to students, employers, schools or other partners. But the value is huge. Employers can be assured that the applicants who arrive with a Florida Ready to Work credential in hand have the skills necessary for successful on-the-job performance.

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