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Career Colleges Help Build Fla. Talent

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Career colleges and universities continue to play an important role in the effort to create the framework for developing the world-class talent in Florida needed for the state to compete economically on a global basis.

Florida's Legislature faced innumerable challenges in 2010, almost all rooted in a poor economy and shortage of funding. In 2007, the Washington Economics Group estimated that an increase of \$8.1 billion in operating expenditures for the state's public colleges and universities would be needed through 2012, and that figure would be even higher without enrollment growth at Florida's private colleges and universities.

A new report released by the Florida Council of 100 in partnership with the Florida Chamber of Commerce, "Closing the Talent Gap," calls for the state's educators and business leaders to work together to build "a seamless talent-development system," in Florida. Gov. Charlie Crist has made clear his expectation and commitment to bolstering collaboration and taking partnerships to an unprecedented level of cooperation that delivers results.

While leaders from the career-college and university sector are participating in this effort, legislators and other decision makers should continue to endeavor to build these crucial state resources into the talent-development framework, and to also support students' choices to attend them.

The vast majority of career colleges and universities are licensed and accredited. Keiser University, for example, is regionally accredited and meets the same standards as Florida's public universities. Students are prepared for careers in critical work-force-shortage fields in Florida such as biotechnology, nursing, allied health care, elementary education, criminal justice, information technology and culinary arts. As the state's universities face billions of dollars in shortfalls over the next few years, the contribution of these schools becomes more essential than ever.

Year after year, career colleges and universities produce high graduation and job-placement rates while serving populations with risk factors such as attending college later in life, having dependents and maintaining full-time jobs.

Private career colleges and universities are educating up to 25 percent of the state's postsecondary students. More than 265,000 students attended career colleges in Florida in 2007-2008, when those schools graduated more than 86,000 students. Included were 63 percent of the state's graduates in computer sciences and IT, and 54 percent of the state's graduates in allied health and medical studies.

Americans value the factors that characterize the career-college experience, including career assistance, student-support services and internships, according to a recently published survey commissioned by the Career College Association. The national survey results said 84 percent of Americans across the nation's demographics feel postsecondary education should focus more on real-world career training and 67 percent feel at least one year of postsecondary education is needed for America to compete on a global basis.

While one year or two years of postsecondary education is helpful in closing the talent gap, one cannot underestimate the state's priority in increasing baccalaureate-degree production.

Since 2003, Florida's legislators have wisely funded a key educational tool called the Access for Better Learning and Education grant, which provides financial assistance to an underserved student population, primarily comprised of adult learners. Often the first in their families to receive postsecondary schooling, the ABLE grant is one of few available benefits for this deserving population.

ABLE was enacted by the Florida Legislature to assist bachelor-degree seeking college students who are Florida residents to attend one of 13 private, regionally-accredited, postsecondary institutions in the state.

Legislators this year voted to fund ABLE at approximately \$4 million for 2010-2011. It will provide \$945 per student, helping 4,289 projected students attend private schools for their bachelor's degrees instead of taxpayer supported public institutions.

The Florida Legislature would be well-serving their constituents to continue their support of the ABLE grant and to provide other such opportunities to provide the best possible access to postsecondary education for all the state's citizens. We must be inclusive and call on all of our educational resources to meet the state's global economic challenge in developing world class talent.

[Belinda Keiser is the vice chancellor of community relations and student advancement at Keiser University. The private, for-profit university is based in Fort Lauderdale, with 13 additional campuses in Florida, including Lakeland.]