



NEWS

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES KEY PLAYER IN FLORIDA'S WORKFORCE NEEDS

TALLAHASSEE — Florida's 28 community colleges are playing an increasingly vital role in preparing young people to enter the workforce and in retraining adults to qualify for the fastest growing jobs in Florida, most of which require community college degrees, not university degrees. That's the finding of Florida TaxWatch in a new research report released this morning that details benefits to the students and the state's economy from a community college education.

"The students benefit from higher wages and Florida and its taxpayers benefit from the resulting higher employment, enhanced tax revenues, lower social service costs, and increased gross state product," said Dominic M. Calabro, President & CEO of the non-profit, non-partisan government watchdog group, at a news conference at the Capitol. The news conference included presidents from four community colleges and members of the Florida Academic Team, a group of community college students who are top academic performers.

The research, prepared by the Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability, also notes additional advantages to the state through avoided costs of crime, welfare, and unemployment benefits. The report utilized sophisticated forecasting and simulation models to examine the direct, indirect, and induced impacts of a community college education on Florida's economy in terms of output, wages, and employment.

Among the key findings:

- 8 of the top 10 fastest growing jobs in Florida will require an associate degree or postsecondary vocational certificate.
- Community college graduates are paid more than high school graduates, with additional annual earnings of \$112 per credit hour taken or \$3,926 for each full-time student.
- Community college graduates with an Associate in Arts Degree earn \$220,000 more in their lifetime and those with an Associate in Science earn \$480,000 more than a high school graduate.
- Through their resulting increased spending power, those graduates will create 2.6 new jobs for Florida's economy.
- Public funding of community colleges more than repays itself in economic growth by a 13.3 to 1 ratio.
- Florida's community college students enjoy a good return on investment as well, outperforming on average their national counterparts and enjoying a 34% return on investment, compared to the national average of 25%.

"The Florida TaxWatch report offers hard numbers to document the positive feelings that our community colleges enjoy. Economic benefits, civic benefits, and individual benefits are demonstrated in ways that should make all of us feel good – and proud," said Bill Law, President of Tallahassee Community College.

Florida's community college system, created to respond to community needs for post secondary academic and technical degree education, had an enrollment of 800,000 students last year, most of them part-time with an average age of 27 years old.

Tuition increases at universities and tightening financial aid, have driven more students toward community colleges after high school. The Florida TaxWatch report notes that 60% of high school graduates who go on to college do so at community colleges. Fulltime enrollment rose 25% from 1999 to 2004, and is expected to surpass 320,000 students by 2007.

"We've been an efficient and productive system in providing opportunities for an increasingly diverse and growing number of Florida students while providing a crucial workforce to support the state's growing economy," said Chuck Mojock, President of Lake Sumter Community College in Leesburg.

Last year, the Florida Legislature appropriated \$849 million dollars from General Revenue and another \$99 million from the Lottery to community colleges. Student fees provided another \$459 million. The Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability recommends that further research be done to determine what, if any changes, should be made to state funding and how best to use the community colleges to meet current and future student and workforce challenges.

"The trend in enrollment is up, up, up," said Law. "We want officials to understand that it's now time to build the capacity of the system and leave behind the 'boom or bust' mentality of planning enrollment." Law said half of the 28 community colleges would release less than a 2.5% increase under a proposed Senate budget.

Kara Groom, a recent graduate of Pasco-Hernandez Community College, said she decided to return to school at age 30 to get an education, after working 2-3 jobs. "I found the community college to be a personable, welcoming environment that encouraged me to pursue my dream of a better job."

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The Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability produces research and makes recommendations regarding issues pertaining to educational policies/practices and fiscal accountability toward improved financial and student performance in Florida's pre-K-12 schools.