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In lieu of new state universities, more public-private partnering

By ED H. MOORE
FLORIDA VOICE

We are beginning to hear rumblings about the possible need for a new state university, built at a high cost out of taxpayer funds. Before Florida policy makers make the decision to build another state university, they should first make every effort to accommodate any growing student population by maximizing use of existing resources.

The possibility that the state will need to build a 12th state university, and possibly a 13th, was raised by State University System Chancellor Mark Rosenberg in a recent meeting with newspaper editors.

The day when Florida needs another university may well come, but building new universities from scratch is the most expensive way to increase enrollment. Before state leaders commit to a massive investment in a new university, they should take full advantage of opportunities offered by linking the 28 community colleges with the 28 independent colleges and universities and 11 existing public universities. By virtue of their distinct and diverse missions and statewide reach, these institutions are better suited to serve a substantial share of a growing student population than a regionally focused new university.

Yes, Florida is producing more high school graduates year after year, but 18-year-olds transitioning directly from high school to college are no longer the driving force in creating higher education demand. In today's higher education environment, policy makers must accommodate a large and growing population of older students who are returning to college or starting it later in life than the 18-year-olds.

Returning students reflect in part the changing nature of the employment market in Florida. Workers are needed for jobs not even thought of a decade ago. What the state needs is flexibility and entrepreneurship in creating higher education offerings, skills available within our current higher education resources.

A new university built along traditional lines will likely not be the right choice for older students whose jobs and families make it difficult for them to relocate as easily as the 18 year-olds. The state should expand and develop programs that meet the needs of those students and also appeal to recent high school graduates who are seeking options to the universities. A comprehensive program of public-private partnerships will make room for more students now, and most likely will delay the inevitability of a new state university.

Several independent colleges and universities already offer the last two years of bachelor's degree programs at 18 community colleges at a minimal cost to the state. The state should expand those programs, which are based in existing facilities, by increasing its assistance to participating students. With the wide dispersal of facilities the 28 independent schools and 28 community colleges can work together to create facilities for baccalaureate degree completion and for expanded graduate programs closer to employers and families.

Florida should expand competition in the higher education marketplace by soliciting proposals from state universities and independent colleges and universities interested in operating targeted degree programs at community college sites. The programs could be aligned in conjunction with other offerings to create true university center models, serving to increase both access and quality for Florida residents.

The state can best meet its needs by developing innovative partnerships that cross artificial administrative barriers. It should contract with the private institutions to operate degree programs that are important to the state on their campuses at no capital cost to the state.

Creative partnerships such as the medical school campus the private University of Miami operates at the public Florida Atlantic University campus ought to be an integral part of the state's plan to accommodate growth, increase access and meet needs. Current Succeed Florida grants are being used to produce new nurses and teachers in Florida using collaborative models that combine the resources of the three major sectors in higher education in Florida.

Florida is uniquely positioned to expect continued population growth. With this growth comes increased demand, but not

necessarily the traditional demands of the past. Florida policy makers must be innovative in their approaches by seeking to provide the highest quality options at the best cost to taxpayers, while making sure that the current missions of each sector are enhanced and improved.

Unless other Americans and immigrants suddenly stop flocking to Florida, the day may undoubtedly come when the state will need to build another university. In the meantime, however, state leaders should ensure that public and private institutions collaborate by doing what each does best to provide access to success for a growing student population and lead the state into a brighter future.

Moore is executive director of the Independent Colleges & Universities of Florida.

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