



Posted on Wed, Mar. 29, 2006

INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

Education for all

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Echoing through the halls of the Capitol this session are concerns over higher education costs and available access for students from low- and moderate-income families in Florida. Some believe that the answers lie in increased focus on expanding state-funded universities and community colleges. However, solutions already in place in Florida's Independent Colleges and Universities are being greatly overlooked.

In a report released by The Institute for College Access and Success, members of the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida score far better than the state's public institutions for percentage of students receiving federal Pell Grants, a need-based income program, as well as students with combined family incomes less than \$60,000.

Individual ICUF institutions enrolled as many as 84 percent of their students receiving Pell Grants while no state universities reached more than 47 percent.

For example, the University of Florida and Florida State University report the percentages of students receiving Pell Grants at 21 percent and 24 percent respectively. Sixteen of the top 20 on the list for students receiving Pell Grants are ICUF schools.

In South Florida, the independent colleges and universities are doing an outstanding job of reaching out to students from low-income families. Five ICUF institutions -- Florida Memorial University, Nova Southeastern University, Barry University, St. Thomas University and Palm Beach Atlantic University -- enrolled a higher percentage of Pell Grant students than any of the major state universities.

In the area of family income, ICUF institutions compose 18 of the top 20 institutions with the highest percentages of enrolled students from families with incomes less than \$60,000.

ICUF institutions enrolled as high as 81 percent of their student bodies in this category and had 18 schools at or above the median of 32 percent for all Florida institutions. Again, by comparison, the state's public universities fell short of what one might have expected, with eight of the 10 included in the study falling below that median score.

What does this mean? Florida's independent sector is simply doing an excellent job at providing access to those students most in need of opportunities for higher education.

While the Legislature is considering special funding programs for college students, it makes sense to include those schools most likely to be enrolling students who are the first in their families to attend college, the Florida independent, not-for-profit colleges and universities that make up the membership of ICUF.

A common myth about private colleges and universities is that they are not affordable for the average family, much less for lower-income or nontraditional students. As highlighted in a recent report by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, thanks to grants, scholarships and institutional aid, many students pay a fraction of the published tuition. Further, the large majority of financial aid offered to undergraduates by the institution is based on financial need.

The bottom line: Florida needs to look no further than the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida to find the access and opportunities we need for to make Florida a brighter place.

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