

ICUF STRATEGIES FOR ACCESS TO FLORIDA BACHELORS DEGREES

For decades, Florida has chased after its own growth. All that practice should make us better at meeting demand. Unfortunately, today's growth challenge is greater than years prior and tomorrow's challenges will be even greater. Higher education growth is no different. After ramping up enrollment at community colleges, state universities and independent institutions for decades, Florida is not close to finished. For Florida, that has low taxes, good location, excellent transportation and growing markets, investing in higher education may be the State's best economic development strategy.

The state's higher education systems do have a sound foundation upon which to build. The 11 state universities include some of the largest institutions with 6 of the "Top 10 least-expensive public Universities in the nation." The 28 independent colleges and universities complement these state institutions by adding a unique blend of both specialized and general educational institutions. Florida's community college system with 28 regional institutions is the nation's largest. Nearly 50 school districts have vocational centers to boost adult skills and other for-profit schools offer additional specialized training. Currently, the state universities and the ICUF colleges and universities split most of the market for bachelor, master, doctorate and professional degrees. ICUF schools graduate over 50% of the first professional degrees in Florida. At the most affordable public price, a market-based strategy would grow these institutions while offering opportunities to institutions expanding into these degree offerings. Keeping our graduate and first professional degree student graduates in Florida after completion of their degree programs should be as important to Florida as are the goals inherent in the Florida Bright Futures Program. Following are some of the options that we believe will help Florida solve its access needs. We need to maximize the resources available to Florida while also focusing on how to create access, insure completion and create graduate and professional opportunities for Florida students.

1. Increase the Florida Resident Access Grant (FRAG)

For 26 years the FRAG has opened doors to higher education for Florida residents. The record clearly shows there is a direct relationship between the amount of the FRAG and number of Florida students able to take advantage of the opportunity to attend an ICUF school. The record also shows that ICUF institutions step-up recruitment of Florida residents when the FRAG is increased and recruit more out of state students when the FRAG becomes erratic or declines. A substantial and stable FRAG allows admissions officers the ability to craft financial aid packages that make seeking a degree possible. A more stable FRAG also is needed so that institutions and students are better able to count on the assistance throughout their four years. Fluctuations in the amount of the FRAG have hurt ICUF's ability to recruit and enroll Florida students.

This student tuition assistance costs taxpayers approximately 20% of the cost of supporting each SUS student. In addition, since ICUF's average time to degree is 4.1 years, that investment is magnified in comparison to the cost of supporting a student through to completion in the SUS. As demand increases, revenues are stretched tighter, admissions standards are raised by many state universities, and some community colleges and state universities become more hard pressed to find space, the FRAG's importance increases. Many Florida students desiring a bachelor's degree would be left behind by the increasingly higher admissions standards in the SUS if ICUF institutions were not available to accept and foster them toward completion. This year, for \$2,850, 32,129 Florida residents have been able to attend one of 28 fully-accredited independent Florida institutions full time. Increase and stabilize the FRAG and quickly increase access!

2. Provide an Enhanced FRAG for AA/AS Transfer Students

We believe that an enhanced FRAG grant for 2+2 transfer students would stimulate expansion of completer programs at community college sites, still at a far lower cost than direct offerings by the community college or by expanded access at an SUS school. Ten ICUF institutions currently partner with 18 community colleges to deliver bachelor degrees on community college campuses. Several thousand juniors and seniors are completing bachelor degrees on community college campuses, at a far lower taxpayer cost than if this were being done through public systems. Start up costs for these programs are borne by the ICUF institution rather than the taxpayer. The only expense paid from the state budget would be the enhanced tuition assistance for students who are enrolled and have already demonstrated they are prepared to complete the higher degree. Taxpayers would not pay for classrooms, faculty, staff, etc., for students who may or may not enroll. Students would have expanded access to the baccalaureate degree without the expense and related problems of relocating, allowing them to remain in their communities, employed and engaged, while seeking their degrees.

3. Promote and Reward Partnerships

A growing number of traditional, as well as new, innovative partnerships exist in Florida today. The partnerships we highlight here are purpose-driven and student-centered. We believe they have greatly expanded access, capacity and degree-production at a low cost.

- Community College Concurrent Use – Access to baccalaureate degrees offered on community college campuses by ICUF schools extends opportunities to place-bound students, students with limited financial resources that would be strained by relocation expenses or high tuition at four-year institutions, students being left behind by increasingly more restrictive entrance requirements at SUS institutions, and students who simply feel more comfortable in their home communities. As stated above, ten ICUF institutions already offer bachelor's degree programs on 18 community college campuses. This option offers opportunities for both private and public institutions and the students they serve and takes advantage of already existing campus resources. The community-college based University Center model, which is being used on some campuses, is one that should be carefully considered for its obvious benefits. Through partnerships with ICUF institutions, perhaps using the Higher Education Facilities Financing Authority (HEFFA), university centers could be financed privately and built rapidly. These programs and centers offering a menu of bachelor degree options could be made available on every community college campus at a very low cost to the state. This would be an expedited way for the state to offer quality, regionally accredited bachelor programs in every community in Florida.
- Targeted Degree Partnership Programs - The state of Florida has determined that there is a need to quickly increase the production of professionals in the fields of nursing, teaching, engineering and technology. The option of contracting with institutions willing to produce specified degrees at discounted tuition costs to help meet critical state needs should be explored. In addition, a number of innovative programs are in place that should be reviewed for emulation, adaptation or expansion.
- *Succeed Florida* grants have provided a stimulus for the production of professionals in fields determined by the state as essential to Florida's well being. An examination of the outcomes of these grant projects should guide future program guidelines for effective partnering among public and private institutions to reach state goals. By working with public and private institutions offering nursing programs we have learned that access to degrees in this field has become limited by the lack of faculty rather than by the lack of interest among students. The University of Miami, Barry University, Nova Southeastern University and The University of Tampa have

received *Succeed Florida* grant funding to partner with community colleges, delivering them needed nursing instructors to train future registered nurses. The result will be access to nursing programs for the many students who are qualified to enter the programs but have found no seats available. This program in 2005-06 should serve as a model for ICUF/State Community College collaboration. It will create scores of trained and degreed instructors for our community college nursing programs.

- Targeted degree students in nursing and medicine get guaranteed articulation among partnering institutions, such as the recent partnership between UM and FAU or the many partnerships in place between Nova Southeastern University and community colleges across the state.
- Engineering colleges such as Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University partner with high schools and community colleges to provide a guaranteed college path for science and math students.
- To provide more nurses for Southwest Florida, International College provides the general education science prerequisite courses to students who then matriculate seamlessly into the Nova Southeastern University nursing program in Fort Lauderdale. St. Thomas University has a similar partnership with University of Miami to provide more south Florida nurses. Barry University's School of Nursing has a collaborative agreement with Baptist Health Systems in Miami to provide an on-site RN to BSN program for the nurses in their employ with the Baptist Health Systems covering the tuition. In return, the nurse signs a contract to practice with the system.
- Consortium Management - Consortium management offers opportunities to expand access, decrease time to degree and foster degree completion. In this model, public and private institutions in a region allow their students to take courses at other institutions in the partnership. The Volusia County Consortium of Colleges and Universities has developed an "Academic Course Exchange" where five higher education institutions allow students to enroll in and transfer credit from any course offered at the five participating institutions. Consortiums might be fostered in areas of the state where regional demand for higher education is growing. Dr. Grant Thrall at the University of Florida has done excellent research on those patterns of demand.

Conclusion

The 28 members of ICUF vary in size, requirements for admission, and mission. They are innovative and able to respond quickly. They are self-supporting and construct their facilities without state funding. They have been able to raise millions of dollars from private contributions without state matching grant programs. They produce a third of the total degrees beyond the associate's level in Florida each year offering programs at more than 180 sites around the state. It is in this state's best interest and in the best interests of its citizens to include this system in planning the future of higher education in Florida. These institutions have shown a willingness to be strong partners with the state and have responded when the state has offered incentives to focus on helping Florida students obtain baccalaureate and higher degrees. In terms of tuition assistance for students in the ICUF system, the return on investment for the state has been without parallel in higher education, but we can do better. According to the Florida Council of 100 study, "We Must Do Better", through the FRAG the state broadens student choice, supports institutional diversity and leverages state funds by helping to produce about one-third of state graduates with less than 5% of state higher education funding. Greater engagement and partnerships between ICUF institutions and the State of Florida can surely do much to help make Florida a brighter place.