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Grant gives students opportunity to learn

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Florida's 28 independent colleges and universities, their students and alumni are celebrating a major milestone this year, the 30th anniversary of the Florida Resident Access Grant, designed in part to help Florida resident students have a choice regarding higher education.

From humble beginnings the FRAG has grown into one of Florida's best investments in higher education, producing hundreds of thousands of graduates who are contributing to Florida's well-being in a plethora of ways.

Lawmakers enacted the FRAG in the spring of 1979. In the first year, 3,518 students received grants. This year more than 32,000 students will receive awards of \$2,529. The grant has truly expanded access, capacity and choice for Florida students.

Today, members of the Independent Colleges & Universities of Florida produce nearly one-third of the degrees awarded in the state and lead the state universities in the proportion of their students who are minorities, come from lower-income backgrounds and are the first members of their family to attend college. One in three ICUF students receives Pell Grants, the primary federal aid program for lower-income students. At state universities it's one in five.

Nearly 44 percent of ICUF students are minorities. .

The FRAG is critically important in helping those students pay their tuition bills. About 80 percent of ICUF undergraduate students receive financial aid from the schools they attend. Coupled with financial aid programs, the FRAG gives those students the extra assistance they need to afford a college education. FRAG creates access to success for Florida students.

There is a downside, however, for the independent colleges and universities celebrating the 30th anniversary of the FRAG — the grants, which peaked at \$3,000 two years ago, have been reduced by \$471 over the last two years because of the budget crunch. That reduction makes it tougher for some students to attend ICUF institutions. If they have to transfer to Florida's public institutions, it will cost the state far more in state subsidies to provide access.

Restoring the FRAG to a higher value should be a high priority of legislators to ensure that Florida takes full advantage of the opportunities and capabilities provided by its independent colleges and universities and to assist students in having improved access to success for Florida.

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