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## **Career colleges provide focused education**

Published: April 13, 2011

BY KATHY MIZERECK

The more than 370,000 students enrolled in Florida's career colleges are testimony to the schools' vital role in the state's system of higher education.

It is unfortunate that your March 27 story's lead example of career-college problems (Westwood College) is not licensed to operate in Florida and, therefore, not subject to our state's tough regulatory requirements ("Students defaulting on loans," front page).

Florida career colleges meet strictly applied standards at three levels of regulation. To obtain a license, all career colleges must comply with requirements set by the Commission for Independent Education, an agency within the Florida Department of Education. Many schools are accredited by national and regional organizations approved by the U.S. Department of Education, which holds all accrediting agencies accountable to the same rigorous process. Schools participating in the federal Title IV student-aid programs also are regulated by the Department of Education's Office of the Inspector General.

We agree that rising student debt is a serious problem, exacerbated by the current recession. Its reach extends to all schools and universities, public and private. In fact, a Pew Research Center study notes that student debt rose dramatically over the past decade, making it imperative that all students receive counseling about taking out excessive loans beyond tuition and fees.

When student debt is analyzed based on income level, default rates are substantially the same across all institutions. The higher percentage of defaults in our schools is due to the population of students we serve: adults with minimal family support seeking to improve their lives.

Schools do not have any control over how much students borrow or how they use the money. Additionally, career colleges do not receive taxpayer subsidies. All revenues are derived from student tuition, which according to the College Board's 2010 Trends in College Pricing is roughly \$14,000 — well below in-state private nonprofit tuition and out-of-state Florida public school tuition.

Therefore, the Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools and Colleges advocates for a regulatory standard that applies to all institutions of higher education in the federal government's attempt to rein in student debt.

Regarding transfer of credit, we support fair transfer-of-credit policies that do not discriminate against nationally accredited institutions, that work for students and that are

enforceable. The Statewide Course Numbering System works for some and could work for many more students with modifications. We are hopeful that transfer-of-credit issues, as well as accountability for all institutions, will be addressed by the Higher Education Coordinating Council. It was created last year by the Legislature with common goal-setting in mind, for the five sectors of postsecondary education, to better serve students.

Students who choose to enroll in Florida's licensed career colleges do so because they want to be trained and job-ready when they graduate. Awaiting them is a future in growth occupations such as health care, the booming technology sector and criminal justice.

In the health-care field alone, more than 60 percent of the state's credentialed graduates in 2009 — nurses, technicians, medical assistants — came from career colleges. Career-college two-year degree programs successfully graduate 59 percent of their students, compared with the 23 percent graduate rate at community college degree programs, as reported by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences.

Our career-focused programs play a vital role in Florida's postsecondary education system and are the chosen path to independence and advancement for hundreds of thousand of Floridians every day.

**Kathy Mizereck is executive director of the Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools and Colleges, which is based in Tallahassee.**

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