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My Word: Higher education that works

Scores of young adults in Florida crossed the threshold from high school to the real world this June.

In **Orange County**, the nation's 10th largest school district, some 10,000 high-school students are taking their education to the next level in some way — to college or the military, or training for health care, business and technology vocations that are the backbone for companies headed to such places as the Medical City at Lake Nona.

Those who provide that education must work together to ensure students' access. Members of the emerging work force need to know education fitting their ambitions and lifestyles will be available even as they read about rising college enrollments and cuts to public funding.

Recognizing this need, the **Florida Legislature** created the Higher Education Coordinating Council to unite the sectors of higher education to better serve students and meet the state's need to produce a qualified work force.

The demand for skilled workers to fill emerging jobs will far exceed the capacity of taxpayer-subsidized public colleges and universities. The gap already exists, as is evident by the 370,000 students enrolled annually in 900 licensed career colleges in Florida that provide real-world learning.

This progressive collaboration between public universities, state colleges and career colleges couldn't come at a better time. The HECC meets next month to continue working on these issues. Important directives include improving accountability of all institutions and streamlining the transfer of credits between schools in all sectors.

As it stands, methods of calculating performance vary widely, not only by sector but within each sector. It's time for all higher education to be accountable for the outcomes of our institutions, specifically for the success of our students. This includes consistent measurement of graduation and job-placement rates across all sectors. Performance calculations also must allow for comparison with other states, as Florida ranks 42nd in the nation in the production of baccalaureate degrees.

Needing immediate attention are the many issues surrounding transfer of credit between institutions. Any time a student repeats a course at a public institution, it costs the student and the taxpayer. We urge HECC to recommend student-focused improvements to our current system.

The Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools and Colleges encourages all sectors to solve the problems facing Florida's students. The ultimate goal is for students to choose the programs they want, graduate in a timely manner, and get to work for Florida.

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