



Area Technical Centers: Supporting Postsecondary Skill and Credential Attainment in Florida

Lumina Foundation’s Stronger Nation initiative finds that just half of Americans hold a credential beyond high school.¹ There is great disparity by race and education level in who has access to the skills and credentials needed to transition into new careers or advance in current ones. In response to this need, Lumina Foundation set a national goal of equipping at least 60 percent of the working-age population with a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025, challenging each state to set its own postsecondary attainment goal; — and most have. States have many resources they can leverage to achieve their postsecondary attainment goals, including area technical centers (ATCs).

ATCs can play an important role in helping learners equitably access and attain postsecondary education and related credentials of value. ATCs are institutions that are focused on Career Technical Education (CTE). They serve learners from across multiple geographies, offering sub-baccalaureate-level education and training. These institutions are nimble enough to respond to changing labor market conditions and provide learners with the skills they need to obtain credentials leading to high-wage, in-demand employment.

Florida is leveraging its ATCs through a “market-driven curriculum” and resources to support the statewide goal that 60 percent of Florida’s workforce will have a postsecondary credential by 2030. Florida’s 48 ATCs, known throughout the state as technical colleges, exclusively serve postsecondary learners for the purpose of upskilling, reskilling, or providing learners with the essential skills that lead to a credential of value in high-wage, in-demand occupations.² Florida’s policy environment supports equitable access to its technical colleges and is structured so that programs are stackable, meaning learners can take the credentials earned and build on them as they move along a career pathway.³

FLORIDA’S TECHNICAL COLLEGES

Florida is one of the few states in the country whose ATCs exclusively serve postsecondary learners.⁴ However, these institutions can be hard to place in the administrative hierarchy of education and workforce development in Florida. Despite being defined by state law as

postsecondary institutions and serving exclusively postsecondary learners, Florida’s technical colleges generally operate under the governance of the local K-12 school districts and their school boards. The one exception is Lake Technical College located in Lake County, FL, just outside of Orlando. Lake Technical College is the only technical college in Florida that is a charter school

— and the only known postsecondary charter school ATC in the country.

Despite being part of Florida’s K-12 education system, technical colleges are primarily funded by the state’s workforce development fund and tuition, further complicating their placement in the education and workforce development hierarchy. In FY19-20, the state appropriated more than \$370 million to support its technical colleges.⁵ Additionally, by being part of the local K-12 school districts, technical colleges may receive some funding from the Florida Education Finance Program, which is the principal funding source for K-12 school districts. Florida’s technical colleges are also accredited by the Council on Occupational Education (COE), ensuring that learners have access to federal Pell Grants.⁶ Lastly, the state invests some of its federal funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act into its technical colleges, although these funds are

FLORIDA TECHNICAL COLLEGES AT A GLANCE

- In the 2019-2020 academic year, 179,112 students were served across Florida’s 48 technical colleges.
- Collectively, these colleges reported over 9,000 earned industry certifications and over 14,400 full program completers for the same year.
- Latest available data show that, statewide, 74% of CTE program completers were found employed.

Sources: Florida Department of Education; Division of Career, Technical, and Adult Education

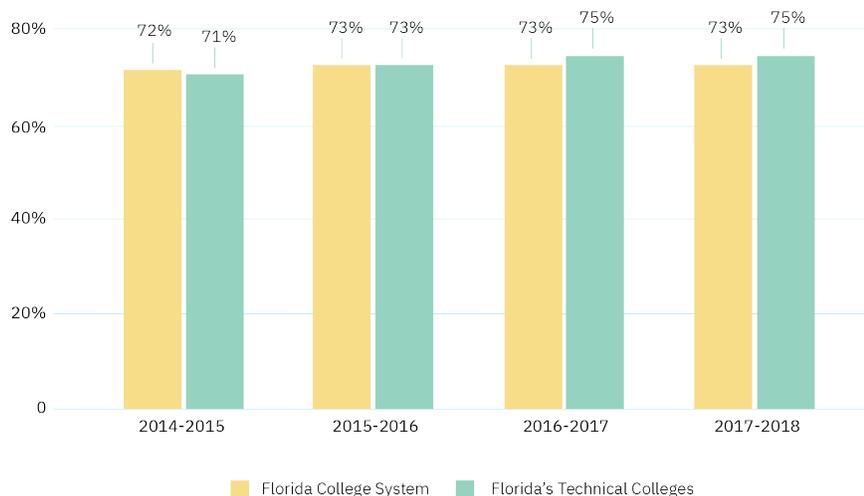
Program completion data may include duplication of individuals who have earned more than one postsecondary credential; i.e. Applied Technical Diploma, Apprenticeship Program, and/or Career and Technical Education Certificate

<http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7592/urlt/PSEC1718StatewideProgram.pdf> - 2018-19 placement data for 17-18 CTE program completers.

largely supplemental.

Once enrolled, a learner can choose a high-quality program of study in any of the state’s 17 career pathways.⁷ These programs of study are locally developed, based on a curriculum framework provided by the Florida State Board of Education and developed in collaboration with representatives from industry and the secondary and postsecondary sectors.⁸ The technical colleges consult with advisory committees of business and industry leaders for each program

Postsecondary Employment Rate by Sector



Source: Florida Department of Education (<http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7734/urlt/DataStrategicPlanMeasures.pdf>)

to not only develop programs of study but also evaluate programs, provide feedback to help improve programs and support instructors. Florida’s business and industry leaders also engage with the technical colleges by offering work-based learning opportunities, sponsoring scholarships for learners, and serving as talent pipelines by providing job opportunities to graduates of programs.

Graduates of Florida’s technical colleges have comparable success in the labor market compared to graduates of Florida’s college system. According to data provided by the Department of Education, the percentage of program completers from technical colleges who find employment is consistently on par with program completers from the Florida College System.⁹

SUPPORTING THE STATE’S POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT GOALS

Florida’s technical colleges are leveraged by state leaders to support the state’s ambitious postsecondary attainment goal in many ways. Florida’s Get There Florida campaign promotes the state’s technical and state colleges as “an exciting and affordable option to the traditional university pathway.”¹⁰ The Get There Florida campaign is designed to encourage Floridians to earn stackable postsecondary credentials that lead to a high-wage, in-demand career. This message is further supported by Florida law, which requires technical and state colleges to create regional career pathway articulation agreements. Under the law, each certificate program offered by a technical college must be aligned with an associate degree offered by a state college that serves the same region.¹¹ Additionally, state colleges must guarantee that clock hours at the technical college are credited toward the aligned associate degree.

Florida’s technical colleges must meet and exceed

the state’s postsecondary attainment goal to maintain accreditation. COE, the accrediting body, requires that each institution it accredits maintain a 60 percent learner completion rate, 70 percent learner employment placement rate, and a 70 percent licensure exam pass rate. Because many, but not all, short-term certificates and industry-recognized credentials are counted toward the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, meeting the benchmarks set by COE directly contributes to the goal.

Lastly, the Florida Department of Education partners with CareerSource — the state’s workforce policy and investment board made up of business and government leaders — to connect learners with programs at the state’s technical colleges under Title II of WIOA, known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. Through their WIOA funds, recipients must work with their local CareerSource board to ensure that their integrated education and training programs are aligned to labor market demand when selecting a CTE program offered by their local technical college. The state’s integrated education and training program simultaneously enrolls postsecondary learners in a General Educational Development test preparation course



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and a career and technical certificate program, thus contributing to the state’s postsecondary attainment goal.

ENSURING ACCESS AND EQUITY

At the state level, Florida has worked to remove or limit institutional barriers to access for learners. Florida’s technical colleges are generally open enrollment. Although some specific programs may have other requirements defined in law, for the most part any learner can apply for and be accepted into the program of their choice. Additionally, state law sets the tuition rates of technical colleges relatively low — \$2.33 per contact (clock) hour for programs leading to a career or certificate.¹² And by having all of their institutions accredited by COE, eligible learners can apply for federal financial aid to cover the costs.

Removing or limiting common institutional barriers benefits most of Florida’s learners; however, more support could be offered to undocumented immigrants, who make up 3.8 percent of Florida’s population (the third largest share of a state’s population in the country behind California and Texas).¹³ Florida’s entry requirements have made accessing the technical colleges easy for undocumented learners. To gain admission, learners only need to meet the state’s residency requirements, which can be accomplished by

presenting a utility bill or a driver’s license. However, undocumented learners cannot access federal financial aid, and the state offers no alternative financial assistance.

While the state has removed or limited some barriers to access, much of the work to support access and success comes at the institutional level. Florida’s technical colleges offer academic support such as tutors and career advisers. These institutions also offer wraparound services to learners who need them. For example, Miami-Dade Technical Colleges partners with the Miami-Dade Transportation Authority to provide learners with bus passes at a reduced cost. Miami-Dade Technical Colleges also partnered with Comcast to provide learners with WiFi and laptop computers after the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the digital divide that exists across the country. And since learners at technical colleges are often adults with jobs who are taking care of families or have other responsibilities outside of school, the technical colleges try to be accommodating by offering classes that go late into the evenings and/or on the weekends.

One of the biggest barriers to access to technical colleges can be the perception that potential learners have about their value. Like many CTE advocates, leaders in Florida have been working to challenge the stigmas that are too often associated with CTE by promoting their value and potential to lead learners to high-wage, in-demand careers. Florida’s Get There Florida campaign not only has the effect of encouraging Floridians to pursue a postsecondary credential but also raises the awareness of short-term, high-value CTE programs. Get There Florida promotes CTE as being on par with the traditional university pathway, a viable onramp to a postsecondary degree and greater economic security.



Through their names, Florida’s technical colleges have also been raising awareness and positioning themselves as postsecondary peers to Florida’s state or community colleges and four-year universities. Although they are referred to as technical colleges, state statute names these institutions “career centers.” After unsuccessfully petitioning the state to amend the statute and recognize the institutions as “technical colleges,” their leaders found a workaround. Since the institutions are part of the local K-12 school districts that have the authority to name schools under their purview, institution leaders went to their local school boards and requested their names be changed. Now, most career centers have changed or are planning to change their official names as a way to “give validity to the status of [their] career certificates and ... help parents and students understand articulated college credit, which is already a part of [their] certificate programs as well as the industry certifications that [learners] earn.”¹⁴

ABILITY TO BE NIMBLE AND FLEXIBLE

Florida’s economy is heavily dependent on small businesses,¹⁵ hospitality and tourism and agriculture.¹⁶ These sectors have been devastated by the coronavirus pandemic, leaving the state with a 7.6 percent unemployment rate as of September 2020.¹⁷ With so many unemployed or underemployed, Florida’s technical colleges’ nimble design has allowed them to step in to support the upskilling or reskilling of learners for high-wage, in-demand occupations. These institutions can work with local industry to quickly develop programs of study that respond to the changing needs of their regional or state economy. Also, being connected to the state’s local K-12 school districts allows learners to seamlessly transition from secondary to postsecondary education. Because of this design, Florida’s technical colleges have become known statewide as institutions that provide easily accessible and affordable training aligned to the state and regional economies. As such, the state is leveraging these institutions to support its economic recovery efforts.



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One way Florida is leveraging the nimbleness of its technical colleges to support its economic recovery is through the state’s Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds — a \$2.2 trillion economic relief package passed by Congress to support states in their economic recovery. The state is using these funds to establish rapid credentialing grant programs. Grant recipients can use the funds to develop or increase the capacity of one- to 20-week credential programs that lead to a short-term certificate or industry-recognized certification.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Florida demonstrates how states can leverage ATCs to upskill and reskill their workforce, contribute to their postsecondary attainment goals and revitalize their state's economy. By requiring articulation agreements between technical and state colleges, removing or limiting institutional barriers, ensuring their ATCs are eligible for funding authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act so learners can access federal financial aid, and investing in the promotion of ATCs and CTE more broadly to encourage learners to consider these programs as valuable career pathways, Florida has created a statewide policy environment that has made ATCs a central part of its education and workforce development system.¹⁹



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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2020/#nation>
- 2 For the purposes of this report, the term “postsecondary learners” includes adult learners.
- 3 https://careerpathways.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/10/20/10/11/Enhanced_Career_Pathways_Toolkit (Career Pathways Resources)
- 4 http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=1000-1099/1001/Sections/1001.44.html
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