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Guest Column, Belinda Keiser: Working, adult students well served by private schools, state grants

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As higher education in Florida struggles with severe budget cuts, tuition hikes and enrollment caps, modest state tuition grants continue to prove effective in helping an important but sometimes over-looked class of students, working adult learners. The grants also provide the state's workforce with people trained in high-demand fields, stimulate the economy and help save the public's tax dollars.

A prime example is the \$4.4 million state ABLE (Access to Better Learning and Education) grant currently assisting more than 3,700 working, adult learners who are pursuing the American dream of a better life for themselves and their families.

In today's deeply challenged economy, the ABLE grant saves taxpayer monies in that for every dollar invested in private education, two dollars are saved in taxpayer funds. State tuition grants go directly to the students to spend at the school of their choice; most private schools are not subsidized with state funding.

This year's annual ABLE grant award is a maximum amount eligible of \$1,182 per student.

Meanwhile the average taxpayer subsidy to a student attending a state university is approximately \$44,000 per student over four years, or roughly 10 times the amount to Florida residents who choose to attend Keiser University.

At Keiser University three of four students work full or part time, and most are 25 to 35 years old. ABLE grant recipients are often the first in their families to attend college.

As regionally accredited institutions, the 13 ABLE recipient schools meet the same standards as Florida's public universities. Students are prepared for careers in critical workforce shortage fields in Florida such as biotechnology, nursing, healthcare, elementary education, criminal justice, and information technology.

Keiser graduates have an overall placement rate of approximately 90 percent, as do other ABLE recipient schools.

As the need to compete globally and nationally increases, private, career colleges will continue to play a critical role in job creation, economic impact and talent development to meet this challenge. Employment and enrollment continues to climb in this educational sector. The ABLE schools each pay tens of millions of dollars in local and state taxes. Keiser University alone has a \$542 million overall impact annually in the state's economy and supports over 19,000 jobs.

It is also clear that the working adult learner plays an important role in Florida's economy, and that they are a deserving group of students who should have the right to choose where to pursue their education and in extension, a stable future for themselves and their family.

Belinda Keiser, as Vice Chancellor of Community Relations and Student Advancement for Keiser University, is responsible for community outreach programs, charitable giving, public relations and government affairs. Keiser also serves as the vice chair of Workforce Florida, Inc.'s Board of Directors.

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