



Colleges lag in developing hot majors

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The jobs of tomorrow will require an education today.

And that's a problem.

Colleges typically don't jump on the trendy train by creating new academic programs based on hype. Instead, institutions like FGCU opt for traditional degrees, such as education, business, health care and other career tracks with a proven history.

"Higher education in general doesn't try to predict the market five, 10 or 15 years out," said FGCU provost Ron Toll. "We tend to damp out any oscillations in the industries."

Employment forecasts are little more than educated guesses, a stab at the economic cycle at some point down the road. U.S. News & World Report, for example, listed 11 "hot college majors that lead to jobs" in a special report issued last month. On the list were biometrics, computer game design, robotics, cybersecurity and other technology-driven majors.

Once those so-called "experts" deem a profession in high demand, a year or two — sometimes three or more — can elapse before a college gains board approval, develops a curriculum, hires faculty and recruits students. That first cohort of students then takes four to five years to complete a bachelor's degree.

At that point, a new major may not be "hot" anymore.

Health care is hot right now. Lee Memorial Health System, for example, lists 231 positions on its job board, 136 of which are categorized under the nursing tab.

Colleges, however, are not factories that simply can speed up the assembly line to crank out more graduates to fill job vacancies. Education takes time.

And time isn't on Southwest Florida's side. The region's economy still is staggering after being slapped when the housing market collapsed. That was followed by a national recession that thwarted tourists.

Community leaders sought avenues to diversify the economy, but creating high-wage, high-tech positions starts with education. Therein lies the problem: colleges won't create majors if the jobs aren't here, Toll said, and businesses are hesitant to relocate or expand here if the labor pool is inadequate.

"You don't get either one of them without the other," Toll said. "The demand and supply need to ramp up in concert with each other. If we produce too many of one type of major, I could almost guarantee those students will leave Southwest Florida, which we don't want, or leave the state of Florida, which we don't want."

By 2020, 58 percent of jobs in Florida will require postsecondary training, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. U.S. Census data, however, show just 25.2 percent of Southwest Florida's 25 and older population has a bachelor's degree or above.

Adding majors

Southwest Florida's 11 accredited colleges and universities offer a combined 306 majors, an amount equivalent to the nation's top institutions. However, many are duplicate programs, and that number really hasn't changed much in recent years.

The five most common majors offered locally are accounting, criminal justice, business administration, nursing and management. Meanwhile, the five largest industries in Southwest Florida are retail trade, health care, accommodation/food services, construction and educational services, according to the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

Tying new college majors to the local economy, and getting it done quickly, is no easy task.

FGCU, for example, began looking at a real estate major at the height of Southwest Florida's building boom. By 2008, the university started moving forward by including the major in a five-year plan submitted to the Florida Board of Governors. The program wouldn't focus on the act of selling homes, rather the market in general, brokerage,

leasing, property management, construction, appraisals, mortgage, land-use planning, environmental protection and investment.

In 2010, faculty and staff submitted a market analysis, developed a sequence of required courses and spelled out the need for additional faculty. It was slated for approval in 2012, but the university didn't pull the trigger; funding concerns and a recessed economy were to blame. A year later, FGCU flipped on the safety and tucked its real estate major back in the holster.

The latest projection shows tentative approval in April 2015. If — and that's a giant "if" — that happens, the first cohort of real estate graduates wouldn't earn their degrees until 2019, 11 years after the university deemed a real estate major important enough to put it in writing.

Not every major takes that long to reach fruition. Within a year's time at Hodges University, faculty conducted a needs analysis, developed a curriculum and gained approval from trustees for two new majors. After a quick marketing push this summer, the university enrolled 20 students in its new information systems business analyst baccalaureate program and 11 in its master's in accountancy major.

Being nimble

Hodges President Jeanette Brock said the university moves quickly if it has some assurance graduates will put their degrees to work.

"We have to make sure there are jobs out there for these students," Brock said. "If the research shows there are no jobs there, or just three jobs, we won't do the program."

In a competitive higher education market, the most nimble colleges get the most worms — students. If one institution doesn't act quickly to establish a new program, another one will.

"When the need comes up, somebody else could swoop in and meet those needs," said Nancy Tedros, Keiser University's Lee campus president.

Keiser's newest programs include an associate degree in hotel and resort operations, and a bachelor's in social media marketing.

All colleges have access to the same employment and workforce data, but the primary concern isn't if too many colleges create similar programs; it's if none of them take action.

"If their needs aren't met, those employers could look elsewhere," Tedros said. "We want to grow our own and develop folks that are already here in Southwest Florida."

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