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leading question

Are local college enrollments up now that the economy is down?

>>“Historically, this is a time when folks make a change in their careers,” says Dr. Arthur Keiser, chancellor of the 13-campus Keiser University in Florida. “We’re 31 years old and we’ve seen it in the early ’80s, early ’90s, late ’90s and now. We saw an 18 percent increase in enrollments statewide in 2007.”

In Sarasota, Michele Morgan, Keiser’s campus president, says the increase is explosive. Growth in the culinary program is up 74 percent, enrollment in paralegal courses is up 47 percent, business management is up 500 percent and the elementary education program saw a 100 percent increase in 2007.

Who are these students? Many are real estate agents who already have college

degrees and want to get continuing education or certifications in fields—a several-month certification course in medical billing and coding, for example—as fast as possible. Construction workers, on the other hand, are seeing this as an opportunity to get a degree; and many are enrolled in business management courses that will take years to complete. One of the most popular fields is healthcare, with nursing and radiology taking the lead.

Other local colleges are experiencing the same growth. Argosy has seen a 20 percent increase in 2007-08, says director of admissions Josh Wiener. USF Sarasota-Manatee also has had an increase in undergraduate enrollments and growth in its M.B.A. program in the 2007-08 academic year.

MCC has seen a 12.04 percent increase in its student body in the 2008 spring semester compared to last spring’s. “That’s major,” says Linda Harrington, public information specialist at MCC. “We do think the economy is a factor. People are having a hard time finding an entry-level job. It’s the highest spring enrollment we’ve ever had. The biggest increase is in A.A. degrees, people who are on a university track.”

All of this increased interest should make colleges happy, but it comes at a time when Florida colleges and universities are facing budget shortfalls. “That’s the sad thing,” says USF’s Dr. Arthur Guilford, who adds that, so far, the university hasn’t had to lay anyone off. “Class sizes will mostly likely increase,” he adds. —Susan Burns