Over the decades and crossing two centuries, Polk — the fourth-largest county in Florida by area — was broadly rural. Nonetheless, it attracted institutions of higher learning.

Florida Southern College, the state's oldest private college, was founded in Orlando in 1883, then moved to three other Central Florida communities before landing in Lakeland in 1935.

Webber International University in Babson Park, in 1927, was the first private college chartered under Florida's then-new educational and charitable laws.

Southeastern University was founded in New Brockton, Ala., in 1935, moved to Atlanta in 1940 and to Lakeland in 1946.

Polk State College opened in Bartow in 1964.

Warner University, five miles south of Lake Wales, was founded in 1968.

Florida Polytechnic University is scheduled to open in August in northeast Lakeland as the 12th state university.

The names of all these institutions have changed from their beginnings to today, as has the makeup and focus of most of them.

Keiser University, a Fort Lauderdale-based institution, established in 1977 as a for-profit career college, opened a campus by Lakeland Linder Regional Airport in 2000. It moved to Interstate Business Park, alongside Interstate 4, after purchase of a 12-acre campus parcel in 2006.

Demand required a second building of 24,000 square feet to be added in 2010 to the original 42,000-square-foot building. Keiser became a private university in 2011.
Officials with Keiser University met with the Editorial Board on May 7.

Industry in Polk County plays a substantial role in attracting higher education, said Keiser Lakeland Campus President Rebecca McDonnell.

RELATIONSHIPS

Upon her arrival in Polk County in 2002, McDonnell said, "I felt overwhelmingly there were really strong relationships with what was then the community college and major industry." However, she said, "Florida Southern and Southeastern had their niches, but the other institutions were really outliers and not part of that conversation.

"Over the years, I've really felt the community change and respond to higher education," McDonnell said.

Now, she said, the institutions are "more agile, becoming more responsive." She cited Polk State College President Eileen Holden and her "vision" for the service the college can provide. "And you see something like the polytechnic, which I think is just going to completely change the scope of this community in a very good and positive way."

SEPARATE PATHS

Variety among institutions has lessened competition. In Polk County, she said, "the pie is big enough for everybody to have a slice."

Keiser's Lakeland campus has become the university's second-largest among 15 in Florida. It has developed two new programs — a master's degree in nutrition and a bachelor's degree in social media communications — which other Keiser campuses may use.

Social media communications is a "hybrid between a business and marketing and advertising degree, but it also has elements of graphic design — both online and in print — and communications focus, i.e., public speaking, public relations," McDonnell said.

As the campus attracts more students straight from high school, she said, some find with the social media program that "this is their life already. 'Hey, I didn't know I could make a career out of something I do for fun.'?"

There is demand for such expertise. For entrepreneurs, McDonnell said, "being able to fill that gap is critical."

Higher education continues to adjust to the needs of business, industry and, of course, students in institutions throughout the county. This broadening of higher education's offerings continually prepares Polk for future generations with an ever-brighter outlook.
[ Note: A podcast accompanies this editorial at TheLedger.com/podcast. Listen to the Editorial Board's full interview with officials from Keiser University. The podcast will play on a personal computer. Or download it free at the iTunes Store for use on an iPod or similar player; search: Ledger Editorial. ]

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