Southwest Florida colleges have rolled out 20 new degree programs in healthcare and information technology.

The additions mean 51 percent of 230 majors offered locally fall within the state’s designation of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Many more, like education majors who specialize in biology or criminal justice majors who study forensics, include elements of STEM.

“Virtually every workforce degree has a STEM component to it,” said John Meyer, dean of business and technology at Florida SouthWestern State College, formerly Edison State.

But how many of those graduating with degrees in STEM fields will stick around?

Southwest Florida is a tourism and agriculture mecca, not a hotbed of research labs and high-tech offices. A Brookings report released in July showed that fewer job openings in the Cape Coral-Fort Myers metro area required STEM skills last year than almost every other such area in the nation.

Only 26.6 percent of jobs advertised in the first quarter of 2013 in the greater Fort Myers area required STEM skills. Among the 20 job titles forecast to have the most vacancies this year, just 35 percent of projected openings are in STEM fields, according to data provided by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

Despite those numbers, area colleges still boast high job-placement rates.

Ron Toll, FGCU’s provost and vice president for academic affairs, said FGCU ranks first in the state university system on a metric that measures the percentage of undergraduates who find a job within Florida or continue their education. Nancy Tedros, president of Keiser University’s Fort Myers campus, said its job placement rates also are extremely high.

All degree programs, STEM or not, must translate into jobs, said Tedros.

“If we find an area that’s more challenging for students to find jobs, we’ll look at whether we want to continue offering that program,” Tedros said.

Much like grocery stores monitor whether customers are purchasing a certain product, colleges monitor market trends to ensure the supply of graduates doesn’t exceed demand, or vice versa. Institutions use advisory boards comprised of business professionals to keep them current with industry developments.

“Employers are very involved with what’s happening in education,” Tedros said. “They are interested in what we are doing.”

**Trends**

Colleges add or delete degree programs each year, and those modifications indicate which careers are trending. Within the past year, local schools have added 11 information technology or computer-related degree programs.

Hodges University started computer networking, cyber-security, software development, digital media and biomedical sciences programs, along with non-STEM marketing and health services administration degrees.
“IT is a field that has a lot of projected growth in the coming years,” said Hodges Provost Kim Spiezio. “There is a demand for it and a need for it, and a shortage of qualified IT people out there.”

Kyle Cebull can attest to that. Cebull, chief marketing officer for Entech in Fort Myers, said the business has hired two new employees within the past month, and the search isn’t over.

“It’s constant,” Cebull said. “It’s literally all the time that we are looking, and others are looking, too.”

Since last year, area colleges also have added nine healthcare-related majors. Hospitals, doctor offices and clinics often have multiple job openings, and Southwest Florida’s older-than-average demographic means the region will continue to need qualified healthcare professionals.

Lehigh Acres resident Kendell Lynom, 30, earned associate degrees in crime scene technology and criminal justice, but during the region’s economic slump, law enforcement agencies weren’t hiring.

“I couldn’t find a job,” Lynom said. “I didn’t realize there wouldn’t be that many jobs.”

So she headed back to school, and this time chose a health care major (diagnostic medical sonography) because of a strong job outlook. After finishing her coursework Friday at Keiser, Lynom starts work Monday with Lee Memorial Health System.

**Here or there**

Everyone from President Barack Obama to Gov. Rick Scott to local college leaders are pushing STEM as the educational wave of the future. In fact, Florida universities are rated based upon the number of STEM graduates it produces.

Local institutions, however, have no immediate plans to roll out aerospace engineering, neuroscience or physics majors just because STEM is all the craze.

“It’s very difficult to make a case for offering a degree if there are no demands for that job locally,” Meyer said.

By law, Florida SouthWestern can only introduce programs if there is a proven local need. Private colleges don’t have that restriction.

Hodges University aims to prepare its graduates for jobs anywhere, whether it’s Naples or Napa Valley.

“Every school in this country, whether they like it or not, is part of a national education system,” Spiezio said.

“We would very much like to keep this talent and these highly educated graduates locally, but at the next level, we’d like to at least keep them in Florida,” Toll added of FGCU.

That doesn’t always happen. Graduates may originally hail from another state or simply are interested in a change of scenery as they start their career, Toll said. If an FGCU alum nabs a job on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley, that’s still good news to Toll.

“I’m very proud of the fact that the quality of education we provide is very high and our graduates can compete in those markets,” Toll said.