

## **A HIGHER DEGREE OF SUCCESS - FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES ARE GAINING IN POPULARITY IN FLORIDA**

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They cost more and often get less respect than public universities and community colleges, but corporate-run colleges are finding a growing niche in Florida's higher education market.

The number of for-profit, degree-granting institutions in Florida has grown from 238 five years ago to 313 this year, according to the Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools & Colleges, the schools' professional organization. Enrollment was about 135,000 in 2006-07, a 23 percent increase over the previous year.

The state university system serves about 300,000 students, and the state community college system about 800,000.

Among the biggest for-profit players in South Florida are Keiser University, the University of Phoenix, Everest University, formerly Florida Metropolitan University, and the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale.

For-profit schools say they've tapped into an important market: older working students looking for focused career training instead of a traditional college experience. Most have no sports teams, student unions or fraternities or sororities.

Many have been pioneers in the arena of online learning.

"These schools have a very different approach than a traditional liberal arts college or community colleges," said Kathy Mizereck, executive director of Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools & Colleges. "Classes are held in the evenings and weekends, so people working and raising families can take them."

Yet the for-profit industry has suffered an image problem over the years. Some critics question their quality and recruitment efforts. Some national players have been the subject of congressional investigations.

The growth of for-profits has exploded nationwide. A recent U.S. Department of Education report found that for-profits issued 15 percent of all associate's degrees in 2005-06, up from 9 percent a decade before. The schools issued about 4 percent of bachelor's degrees and 8 percent of master's, up from 1 percent in each category a decade ago.

Their popularity comes despite higher tuition. They charge about \$7,000 to \$15,000 a year for full-time students, considerably more than community colleges, which charge about \$2,200 a year, and public universities, which charge \$3,600 to \$4,000.

Erin Peters, 25, of Pompano Beach, said she took classes at Broward Community College, now Broward College, but now she is pursuing an associate's degree in vascular sonography, a medical technology field, at Keiser College in Fort Lauderdale.

"At BCC, the class sizes are too big, and I need something more focused," she said. Most classes at Keiser have a dozen or fewer students.

Tuition at for-profits is cheaper than more traditional private nonprofit universities, such as Nova Southeastern University in Davie, which charges about \$19,000 a year, and the University of Miami, which charges about \$35,000. And for-profits say they provide a great service to the state: educating students at no expense to taxpayers.

"If the state university or community college system had to educate all the students currently enrolled in for-profit colleges, it would cost taxpayers billions of dollars," said Lynn Mulherin, vice president and director of the University of Phoenix's Florida campuses.

The University of Phoenix opened its first Florida location in 1996 and now has 15 campuses statewide.

Critics say some for-profits use unethical recruiting methods to drive up the numbers. There have been documented cases where admissions personnel have worked on commission, an illegal practice, said David Hawkins, director of public policy and research at the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Officials of for-profit schools say they don't use such tactics.

"Are there individual persons within individual schools who might do something illegal or unethical? Yes, just like there are in public institutions," Mizereck said. "But on the whole, this is a very regulated industry."

Hawkins also questions the quality of education at schools where profit is the primary goal.

"We hear stories of students who feel like they're holding a piece of paper and a large amount of debt and don't have the job prospects they expected," he said. "I don't know that the for-profits have the same kind of credibility that the traditional not-for-profits have in the job market."

Arthur Keiser, founder of Keiser University, disputes such claims, saying the school has high job placement rates and rigorous programs. "There's no difference in our academic programs just because we pay taxes," Keiser said.

Keiser is accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the same as most Florida community colleges and traditional universities. But some are accredited by a national agency that specializes in for-profits, Hawkins said.

David Armstrong, president of Broward College, said there is plenty of business to go around for community colleges, state universities, nonprofits and for-profits.

"It is a free market place," said Armstrong, the former chancellor of the state community college system. "Students just have to be good consumers and decide if it's the right fit for them."

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#### INFORMATIONAL BOX:

A growing market

What is a for-profit college?

For-profit colleges, also called proprietary colleges, are schools run by private companies, organizations or individuals.

How many are in Florida?

About 300 degree-granting and 460 non-degree granting licensed institutions.

How many students are enrolled in Florida?

About 242,000 students are enrolled in these schools, with about 135,000 enrolled in degree programs.

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For-profit college Q&A

Do they receive government support?

Accredited institutions are eligible for federal student loan money, and in some cases state financial aid. Students who attend some for-profits are eligible for state Access to Better Learning and Education, or ABLE, grants, which are \$1,182 per year.

Can students use Bright Futures?

Yes, if the schools are accredited and meet eligibility standards outlined by the Florida Department of Education.

Can students use pre-paid tuition plans?

Students who attend some schools that meet certain state-required accreditation standards can use pre-paid. It varies by institution.

Is a degree from one of these schools as valuable as one from a traditional university?

There is disagreement about this. The schools do not have the same prestige as traditional universities, but they report high job-placement rates.