

Florida Trend

The Issues, People and Ideas that Define Florida Business

HIGHER EDUCATION: STATE COLLEGES

A Mission Leap for Florida's Colleges

Is the new Florida College System cutting-edge or overreaching?

by [Cynthia Barnett](#)



Twenty of the 28 colleges have taken the "community" out of their names, and 19 schools now offer bachelor's degrees. The systemwide change in mission came as the result of politics rather than any sort of long-term planning. [Photo: Miami Dade Community College]



When Michael Fernandez decided to return to college for a bachelor's degree four years ago, the emergency-dispatch trainer for the Coral Gables Police Department narrowed his choices to two: A criminal justice degree from four-year Florida International University or a public safety management bachelor's from Miami Dade College, one of the former community colleges that now offer four-year degree programs.

Fernandez chose MDC because its offering was "much more specific to my field." He received his diploma this spring, a member of the only graduating class in Florida with a commencement address delivered by President Barack Obama.

Fernandez's degree -- and the school's ability to arrange a presidential send-off for its graduates -- reflects the ambitions of MDC and the 27 other colleges in what's now called the Florida College System. Over the past decade, Florida's community colleges "have made monumental shifts in expanding their mission," says Deborah Floyd, an education professor at Florida Atlantic University who has written a book about the national trend of community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees.

No state has gone further than Florida in expanding the range of schools that can offer four-year degrees. And other states and their community colleges are watching carefully to see how Florida's experiment works out. "Florida is the bellwether," says Floyd, a former community college president.

The state's "monumental shift" culminates five decades of growth for the community college system, which the state created in 1957 and became the most progressive in the nation. Open to anyone with a high school diploma or equivalent, the community system had at its heart a guarantee called "two-plus-two": A student who earned an associate's degree from a community college could transfer seamlessly to a public university and earn a bachelor's degree.



In 2001, Carl Kuttler, president of what was then St. Petersburg Junior College, convinced the Legislature to allow his school to be the first Florida community college to offer a baccalaureate degree. Kuttler, now retired, argued that the demands of modern workplaces meant the schools needed to offer bachelor's degrees along with associate degrees and vocational certificates.

[Photo: Craig Denis]

Community colleges quickly became the workhorses of higher education in Florida; enrollment increased statewide from about 3,000 students to about 75,000 in 1967. By the turn of the century, the state's 28 community colleges were doing their jobs so well that they were showing up the public universities -- at least when it came to producing degrees. By 2000, Florida ranked third in the nation in the number of associate's degrees awarded but an embarrassing 47th in bachelor's

degrees.

Meanwhile, demand for higher education continued to explode. Along with a growing number of Florida high school graduates, more adults in the workforce began looking for college degrees and training.

The solution seemed clear to some lawmakers and college presidents: Let community colleges offer bachelor's degrees. But many, including James Wattenbarger, founder of the community college system, warned against that move. They believed employers and grad schools would see bachelor's degrees from community colleges as "second class." And they feared that the expense and effort of creating, accrediting and operating four-year programs would shift dollars and attention away from the students who needed community colleges the most.

Leveraging his political connections, former St. Petersburg Junior College President Carl Kuttler convinced the Legislature to allow his campus to become the first to enter the baccalaureate arena. In 2001, the same bill that abolished the Board of Regents lopped the name "Junior" from SPJC and allowed the school to offer bachelor's degrees in nursing, education and applied science.

That law also created a process for other community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees. A few community colleges such as Miami Dade added programs in high-demand fields -- education, health and technology -- but the schools mostly continued to stress their traditional mission of serving workers and recent high school grads looking for two-year degrees.

The systemwide change in the community colleges' mission came as the result of politics rather than any sort of educational master plan to improve access to college in Florida. In 2008, Senate President Ken Pruitt and president-designate Ray Sansom tried to elevate local colleges in their districts by muscling through the Legislature a new higher-ed tier called state colleges. Some other colleges were appalled; amid a scramble, the idea of the third tier evolved into the Florida College System. Community colleges with open-door policies would remain. But the law allowed all the community colleges to change their names and offer bachelor's degrees, based on need and approval from the Department of Education. So far, 20 of the 28 colleges have removed the "community" from their names. Some call themselves "state colleges," others just "colleges," while others have kept the "community." Will Holcombe, chancellor of the Florida College System, acknowledges the semantics have led to some "tremendous misunderstandings."

Nineteen schools now offer bachelor's degrees. Most new degrees are approved with support from the local university. But the proliferation of four-year programs has led to friction when a university thinks a community college is intruding on its program turf.



Michael Fernandez chose Miami Dade College over Florida International University for a bachelor's degree because, he says, MDC "had the perfect program" to fit his law-enforcement training goals.

Florida International University is opposing Miami Dade College's bid for a bachelor of science in biological sciences, for example, arguing that FIU has offered the degree for years. FIU says it has long worked with MDC to ensure every student who successfully completes an associate degree can transfer into its program. The degree at MDC "is unneeded, completely duplicative of what is currently offered in Workforce Region 23, and not a wise use of scarce state resources," FIU President Mark Rosenberg wrote this spring in a letter to the Division of Florida Colleges, which must approve new bachelor's degrees.

By the Numbers

➤ **28** Schools in the former community college system, now known as the Florida College System

➤ **19** Former community colleges now offering bachelor's degree programs

➤ **20** Community colleges that have removed "community" from their names

➤ **887,073** Florida College System enrollment in 2010

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón counters that every MDC bachelor's responds to a specific local workforce need, in this case the biotechnology and biopharmaceutical training needed for employment in the University of Miami's new Life Science and Technology Park.

Padrón also insists that "every single criticism" leveled against community college baccalaureates has been disproven. Anecdotally, graduates' salaries and graduate-program acceptance don't indicate the degrees are "second class." Michael Fernandez, the recent MDC graduate in public safety management, was just accepted to George Washington University's master's program in security and safety leadership.

The job placement rate for MDC's baccalaureate graduates was 94% in 2008-09, compared with 91% for FIU, 86% for the State University System as a whole, and 74% for members of the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida. At the same time, the cost of MDC's bachelor's degrees was roughly half that of a public university and a quarter that of a private institution.

Florida College System campuses are clearly still the workhorses of higher education in the state. Enrollment has risen sharply since the start of the recession, with a record 887,073 students last year -- the vast majority in lower-division courses seeking associate's degrees. In fact, a gap is beginning to widen statewide between the number of community college graduates seeking to transfer into state universities and the number of admissions the universities can handle.



Florida's transition to four-year community colleges "is the bellwether," says FAU professor Deborah Floyd, who has written a book about the national trend. [Photo: Scott Wiseman]

Floyd says researchers and policy-makers need more data to be able to assess Florida's experiment. For example, how do Florida's best MBA programs view the business administration and organizational management bachelor's degrees offered at many of Florida's colleges?

Cost also remains a question. Holcombe says the system has been able to offer bachelor's degrees with no additional cost to taxpayers. But another FAU researcher, doctoral candidate Allen Bottorff, who is also assistant dean of facilities at Indian River State College, recently found that state funding isn't keeping up with the cost of the system's baccalaureate degrees. "The funding is coming from somewhere -- the colleges are using other sources," Bottorff says. "We need to find out what those are."

While the system may be in flux, some things haven't changed: Florida still ranks low in producing bachelor's degrees -- 41st in the nation. Says professor Floyd at FAU: "We are not at risk of overeducating Floridians."



The brain behind the creation of the Florida Community College System was a University of Florida professor named James Wattenbarger — himself a graduate of Palm Beach Junior College. Before his death in 2006, he opposed allowing community colleges to grant four-year degrees. Colleges should "stick to what they do best," he wrote.

[Photo: University of Florida]