

Florida Talent Development Council Meeting
Prepared remarks of Laurie Meggesin, Executive Director,
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On behalf of the Florida College Access Network, I am pleased to be here today, and look forward to supporting the Council's efforts to achieve the SAIL to 60 goal.

Let me start with a brief introduction to the Florida College Access Network. We are Florida's first collaborative network committed to ensuring that all Floridians can achieve an education beyond high school and prosper in Florida's dynamic economy.

We believe that building talent is key to the future prosperity of our state, and that achieving a credential beyond high school holds the greatest promise for the economic mobility of Floridians and their families. In fact, we use the term "college" broadly, to refer to the many forms of high-quality credentials beyond high school, including technical certificates and academic degrees.

A few years back we adopted a goal similar to SAIL to 60 as the North Star to guide our work, so we were heartened by Governor DeSantis' call earlier this year to make Florida Number 1 in the nation for workforce education, and we are truly grateful to the legislature for House Bill 7071.

At FCAN, we support the goal in three main ways. First, we publish research and data on evidence-based best practices and policy opportunities to strengthen Florida's talent pool. At the center of this work is exploring how policies and strategies impact real students.

We coordinate a series of statewide initiatives through which schools and communities can support students in continuing their educations beyond high school. At the core of these initiatives is the goal for every Florida student to graduate high school with a plan for college and career.

And we partner with regional public-private partnerships throughout the state called local college access networks comprised of cross-sector community leaders who work together to create solutions supporting local talent development needs.

We are committed to helping the state reach the goal because the proof is in the data: most workers today need education and training beyond high school to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle.

For example, the median earnings for the three million Floridians with a high school diploma alone is only about \$27,500, which is below the state average. And of recent high school graduates who don't continue their educations, only half are working a year after graduation, mainly in minimum wage jobs.

The good news is that we have been making steady progress over the past few years. In fact, we're outpacing the national average. The US Census released new attainment data just two weeks ago, and I am pleased to report today that almost 50% of Florida working-age adults now hold a degree or workforce-relevant certificate, ranking Florida at 22nd in the U.S.

Florida is particularly strong in certificate attainment when compared to the rest of the country, although we are below the national average in terms of two-year degrees and higher.

However, as previously discussed, at our current pace, Florida will fall short of the goal.

And the not so good news is that there are some significant disparities in attainment rates between racial-ethnic groups and Florida counties.

While several Florida counties have over 50% attainment, several rural counties are in the teens, including among young adults between the ages of 25 and 34.

To achieve the goal and close these gaps, we believe it's important to understand who today's college students are, and ensure that our policies and practices are aligned to their needs.

Most college students today don't match the prototypical image of the recent high school graduate living in a dorm on campus. In truth, about three-quarters of college students today juggle some combination of school, work and family, and commute to class.

53% of Florida college students are from low- or moderate-income households and qualify for need-based financial aid. 43% attend school part-time while juggling other responsibilities. 37% are over the age of 25. And 83% of first time in college students in Florida receive some form of state, local, or institutional aid, not including private loans or scholarships.

Community public-private partnerships throughout Florida are resolute in their focus on removing obstacles for today's college students so that they can complete the credentials they need to thrive in their careers. 17 regional networks representing about 82% of the state's population have built partnerships with more than 600 organizations and institutions, spanning school districts, colleges and universities, career and technical colleges, nonprofit organizations, philanthropic foundations, businesses, and local government leaders.

These partnerships strive to better coordinate and align efforts and resources to increase degree and credential attainment in their communities, especially for the most vulnerable students. They also work on developing a collective understanding of the challenges facing students in their communities, then work together on strategies to overcome such challenges.

FCAN supports these regional partnerships with research, data, and information on best practices; we provide opportunities to learn from state and national experts about issues of shared interest; and we serve as an intermediary for community partnerships to learn from and share resources with each other and other regions throughout the state.

I'll share just one example of how they collaborate and align their efforts around common goals. As you know, health care is one of the fastest-growing industries in Florida, and Southwest Florida is no exception. In fact, Lee Health, which is the largest healthcare employer in the region, had a chronic workforce shortage of certified nursing assistants with over 60 unfilled positions at any given time.

Lee Health is a partner of the FutureMakers Coalition, the local college access network in southwest Florida. Through the network, they formed a partnership along with the local technical colleges, CareerSource and the Community Foundation to address the CNA shortage. Together, these partners developed a strategy that in 18 months resulted in 60 chronically unemployed and underemployed adults residing in some of the region's

most disadvantaged neighborhoods earning their CNA credentials and getting full time jobs with benefits at Lee Health.

To achieve this outcome, the partners met frequently, tested and refined strategies, tracked students' progress along the way, and developed new interventions at points where they discovered they were losing students. For example, they discovered that some students completed the credential but didn't get certified because they didn't have the funds to pay for their exam costs. The partners each contributed funds to cover these costs, and CareerSource pulled in additional resources to help overcome barriers such as food and housing insecurity and transportation.

As a result of the partnership, Lee Health's chronic CNA shortage is no more, and scores of residents have earned credentials that put them on a career path in a high demand field. And importantly, all of the partners also made changes to their own ways of work to lower the barriers that were holding these students back. FutureMakers is now expanding this partnership model to other high-demand fields like advanced manufacturing. That's just one example of how you can take a best practice to scale through a multi-sector partnership focused on a shared goal, and by keeping the needs of students front and center.

At FCAN, we believe the key to achieving the SAIL to 60 goal is to ensure that we are all rowing in the same direction through shared goals and metrics and scaling those strategies with the most promise to close opportunity gaps for all Floridians. Throughout the state, organizations, institutions and regional partnerships are committed to strengthening Florida's talent pipeline and building pathways to economic prosperity. Florida has a real opportunity to leverage this broad support through a strategic plan that state and regional stakeholders can all embrace and contribute to its success. At FCAN, we stand at the ready with community partners throughout the state to contribute to and support the goals of this Council.