With a tight job market, schools are trying to narrow the gap between academia and the work world, Page 12

LEARNING FOR DOLLARS

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THE ECONOMIC TIME MACHINE

Well, ya gotta eat...

Miami-Dade’s dining resurgence continues, at least fiscally.

The latest report on restaurant taxes in Florida’s largest county
doesn’t bode well for local residents, regardless of
the economy.

Miami-Dade is the only county to charge a special tax on
restaurants not attached to hotels, making the levy (which funds
county homelessness programs) a unique window into local eating
habits.

Record spending in Miami-Dade restaurants

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This chart tracks a 12-month average of monthly collections from
2007, with each month compared to peaks hit during 2007 or 2008. As you can see, the non-hotel restaurants first hit a record in
the spring of 2007 before the recession hit, then regained peak
sales in May 2010.

For hotel restaurants, sales continued growing through 2007 as
the hotel industry avoided the damage done to local spending. But
a much sharper fall came as business travel, tourism and
conference spending took a dive in 2008 and 2009. A sharp
recovery arrived at the end of 2011, pushing collections back to
record levels.

Both taxes are limited to the Miami-Dade mainland. Oceanfront
cities, including Miami Beach, have their own restaurant taxes.

SOUTH MIAMI BUSINESS PROFILE

'FUEL REVOLUTION'

South Florida’s Wise Gas Inc. operates the
region’s only compressed natural gas stations
open to the public.

10 BIZ BYTES '101

PLAYING THE GAME

Adding game features to marketing techniques
makes doing business with your company more fun.

11 SMALL BUSINESS

CLEANING UP 'DIGITAL DIRT'

Some companies specialize in cleaning up
“digital dirt” — or at least sweeping it under the
rug.

12 COVER STORY

LEARNING FOR DOLLARS

Schools are narrowing the gap between academia and the workplace.
The cover photo of Gabriel Piacaro, left, and Benjamin Eisenman, right, at
Miami Dade College’s School of Science is by Herald Staff photographer
Peter Andrew Beach. Below, the photo of Barbara J. Bryan, North Campus
president at Broward College, is by Joe Rimkus Jr., Herald Staff.
Learning for dollars

With a tight hiring market and tuition spending under pressure, schools are trying to narrow the gap between academia and the working world.

BY DOUGLAS HANKS
dhanks@MiamiHerald.com

The glossy brochure promoting Miami Dade College's School of Science begins with the expected burst of lofty language about teaching students to question, investigate and formulate conclusions about the natural world.


"That's what the students care about right now," Dean Heather Belmont said. "Before, students always felt that when they graduated, they could get a job."

High unemployment and battered household finances have college working harder to tie their classroom offerings to job offers. From creating courses to accommodate a new industry to customizing a curriculum to a specific employer's hiring criteria, schools are pushing to narrow the gap between academia and the real world.

It's a long-running trend that has accelerated during the recession and limp recovery, at a time when many employers refuse to hire candidates without the exact skills needed for a position.

"How do you become marketable with a degree in management?" asked Robert Sellani, an associate professor of operations management and accounting at Nova Southeastern University in Davie.

"It's not easy."

Sellani presides over NSU's new supply-chain masters program, which is designed to train students on the nuts-and-bolts of moving goods for companies. He said the program came in part from looking around at businesses poised for growth in South Florida, despite the wobbly economy.

"It's very obvious with the deep dredging of the Port of Miami, more cargo is going to be ready to move north," Sellani said of the effort to prepare Miami docks for ships serving a deeper Panama Canal, which is also being dredged. With the cargo industry already growing, Sellani said supply management looked ripe for funneling students into jobs at some of South Florida's top employers.

"We've had interest from City Furniture. We've had interest from Office Depot," he said. "We've had interest from Royal Caribbean."

No field is too narrow. The University of Miami now offers a postgraduate course on real estate development, and Florida International University is rolling out a course of study on medical paperwork.

'We've had interest from City Furniture. We've had interest from Office Depot. We've had interest from Royal Caribbean.'

— Robert Sellani, associate professor of operations management and accounting, Nova Southeastern University, Davie

Sometimes, the push for marketability can go too far. NSU had hoped to focus its supply-chain offerings even more with a masters in logistics. But Sellani said the school dropped that for lack of demand.

The shifting winds of the economy can be problematic, too. When gambling was Topic A last year in Tallahassee, Miami-Dade College administrators reached out to would-be casino developers in Miami about funding a training program for casino workers. Those talks were put on hold after a gambling bill died in the Legislature earlier in the year, said Provost Rolando Montoya.

Designing courses directly tied to the private sector needs also touches on a sensitive topic in Florida. Gov. Rick Scott raised the ire of some in academia last fall when he said in a radio interview that Florida doesn't "need a lot more anthropologists in the state."

"I want to spend our dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, math degrees," he continued. "So when they get out of school, they can get a job."

The downturn has put a bigger focus than ever on the role education plays in not just landing jobs for students but also improving their wages. With about 3.7 million job openings nationwide — the highest since 2008 — experts see a "skills gap" as a main reason for an unemployment rate topping 8 percent.

The Obama administration this year proposed $60 billion to train 2 million people in community college programs aimed at industries where skilled workers are lacking. Federal dollars funneled through the $800 billion stimulus program has already funded training programs for so-called "green" jobs, including $3 million for a solar-panel installation certification at Coconut Creek's Atlantic Technical Center.

With a tough job market, more students are opting to skip a paycheck and pursue their own business ideas. That's given an opening for the University of Miami's Launch Pad program, which pairs "venture coaches" with UM students and alumni who have an idea for their own businesses.

The program started in 2008, and has attracted national attention. Now UM is expanding it across the country, under the Launch Pad brand it owns. Two years ago, the charitable arm of the Blackstone equity fund partnered with Launch Pad to expand the program to universities and community colleges in Detroit, then the Cleveland area.

Blackstone paid UM licensing fees to set up the new programs, with UM serving as a headquarters overseeing the ventures under the new Blackstein Launch Pad label. Two more cities will be added this fall, said Amy Sturgisberg, director of the Blackstone Foundation.

"Two-thirds of all the jobs this current generation of college students are going to hold, they're going to have to create themselves," she said. "Entrepreneurship really is a viable career path."

When it comes to college-educated...
ed residents, Miami-Dade County ranked last in a list of 15 similar metro areas in a 2011 study used to craft the county's One Community One Goal economic blueprint. The poor showing helped explain why the long-range plan, commissioned by the Beacon Council, cited workforce education as a top need.

But which lessons to teach? School administrators say they've been pressing their business contacts, part-time faculty and various industry advisory councils for insight into the lessons that would be the most valuable — and marketable.

Broward College this summer launched its new manufacturing program at a time when the industry is experiencing a long-awaited comeback in South Florida. Manufacturing jobs have been growing since May 2011 in Broward, after four straight years of decline. Miami-Dade's manufacturing industry hasn't hit bottom, but the losses have been narrowing since early 2011.

Confident that Broward's cluster of medical manufacturers and other light-industry producers will continue needing workers, Broward College is investing $100,000 on equipment simulators for a lab that will let students practice on an industrial compressor, a mock electric motor, a pump and other devices found along assembly lines.

"Obviously the economy isn't doing well. We need to get things going that are going to benefit our students," said Geraldine Klonardis, associate dean of the engineering program, which includes the new manufacturing classes. "Manufacturing is really kind of a no-brainer when you look at it. These are good jobs."

The manufacturing program follows the spring launch of a program at the Broward community college directly tied to a local employer. The Citrix TT Academy teaches students how to use the software and operating systems designed by the Fort Lauderdale-based company. Broward College President David Armstrong began pushing for the program shortly after taking the top job at the community college in 2007. He said Citrix was threatening to leave Florida.

### THINKING AHEAD

**STIMULUS EFFORT:** Lewis Irvine and Kenneth LaCue install a solar panel at Coconut Creek-based Atlantic Tech Center, where the Minority Builders Coalition is training workers for green jobs with stimulus money.

**HANDS-ON:** Gabrielle Pacareau uses an infrared spectrometer in a lab at Miami Dade College's School of Science.

**TURN TO EDUCATION, 145**
Education pays in college classes aimed at career choices

If you can't afford to get your PhD, you can get a job as a lab technician.

— Gabriel Pacreau, Miami Dade College student

'...a student...

Education from 12G

to leave Broward in part because it has so much trouble filling tech positions.

"A trained workforce has..." says Citrix, Armstrong said. "...and now Broward expects about 400 students a year certified to operate the company's systems, which are used in businesses around the world. Derron Stewart, 32, works in the school's IT department but hopes to land a job at Citrix someday. He sees Citrix as a leader in cloud computing, and the Broward course as his best shot at landing a job there.

"It's one of the biggest companies in the IT industry," Stewart said. "To be able to take a course at the college that actually has a connection to them is very appealing."

Along with tech schools, colleges are looking to capitalize on other growth sectors. South Florida's healthcare industry expanded throughout the recession — the medical industry in Miami-Dade saw its 14th month of job growth in July, according to statistics released Friday. Colleges are looking for new niches that could make their offerings more attractive for the already popular field of study.

Florida International University this month launched a master's program dedicated to managing medical paperwork. Called "Health Information Management," it has attracted about 25 doctors, nurses and office managers trying to get a leg up in digital records.

"This is very much a growing field," said Nancy Borkowski, director of healthcare management systems for the state school. "Once you have all of this data, how do you manage it?"

As the recession began in

Geared to Citrix: Broward College professor Mohammad Dabbas, engineering program manager, talks with students learning the firm's software and operating systems in the college's Citrix IT Academy.

degrees.

As the largest community college in the country, Miami Dade plays an outsized role in workforce training throughout the region. Florida Power & Light funds a program at MDC to train plant workers for its Turkey Point nuclear facility in Homestead. The Federal Aviation Administration runs an active internship program at MDC to replenish its ranks of air-traffic controllers at Miami International and, while both University of Miami and Baptist hospitals use MDC to accelerate nursing training to fill shortages.

One flight of stairs up from Leon's lab, Gabriel Pacreau and his two white-coated colleagues each gingerly handled flaky white clumps of what looked like bleached ashes. They were actually the remains of corn cobs, pulverized and treated in an effort to create a cheaper water-filtration material than the current favorite, charcoal.

Pacreau, 22, said he planned to use his MDC courses as a way to transfer to a four-year university and then pursue his studies in the post-graduate level. But he was happy to have options from his training.

"If you can't afford to get your PhD," he said, "you can get a job as a lab technician."