







THE FLORIDA INFLUENCER SERIES

Workforce education, tourism and hemp will boost economy in 2019, Influencers say

BY SAMANTHA J. GROSS

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From creating new vocational high school programs to supporting a fledgling hemp industry, lawmakers passed a number of measures this year that are designed to spur jobs and help boost the economy.

In a new survey of the [Florida Influencers](#), a group of 50 prominent political and policy figures from across the state, more than half listed vocational education as the top accomplishment of the Legislature when it comes to job creation and economic growth.

There was also strong support for the Legislature's decision to continue funding Visit Florida and its decision to take the first steps toward a potentially lucrative hemp industry.

The vocational education bill asks schools to place a stronger emphasis on jobs training and requires courses for middle school students to learn about potential career options. The bill tasks schools with training students who are interested in high-skilled, well-paying jobs that are in demand and gives students the ability to use vocational and technical courses to help them meet high school graduation requirements. High-schoolers will also be able to use computer science courses as math and science credits.

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The skills-based classes typically center on subjects such as agriculture, cosmetology, information technology or manufacturing. Ideally, students would earn industry certifications for jobs that don't typically require college degrees.

Gov. Ron DeSantis [made workforce and technical training programs a priority](#) after his inauguration in January, challenging Florida to go from No. 24 to No. 1 in the nation for its workforce and technical training programs by 2030.

He then issued an executive order asking Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran to audit Florida's current offerings of career and technical training and begin making annual recommendations to make sure they are "in line with market demand."

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Lenore Rodicio, vice president and provost of Miami Dade College, said vocational pathways will help create "seamless" transitions for students to attain more economic and social mobility by helping them get linked with associate degree programs at state colleges.

"Creating new vocational education pathways for our high school students is an important step in our work statewide to get students on the right track for a successful future," she said.

Vocational programs are also important to fill job opportunities that come in tandem with Florida's exponential population growth, Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce COO Karen Arnold said.

"Students understanding that there are excellent job opportunities in construction, healthcare and hospitality will be key to those in high school," she said. "Workers are in such demand that wages are reaching levels that are not sustainable."

The second-biggest issue Influencers ranked as important to the state economy was the [continued funding of Visit Florida](#). It will be funded for one more year, with just two-thirds of its previous budget. The amount was a compromise between the Senate and the House, where Speaker José Oliva, R-Miami Lakes, said he wanted to kill the state's tourism marketing arm outright.

He said he saw it as a waste of money when companies like Disney already do their own marketing for Florida.

Carol Dover, president and CEO of the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association, called Visit Florida a "critical" arm of the state when it comes to economic stability and was pleased that it survived.

"[Tourism is] the largest contributor to the state's budget and the number one employer," Dover said. "It would only take a small hit in the tourism numbers to have a significant impact on our state's economy."

The third-most important piece of legislation to Influencers when it comes to spurring job growth is [the hemp bill](#), which gives the state's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services the authority to create a state hemp program.

The push for a hemp program in Florida has been a largely bipartisan one, and it plays into a national trend of following what some call the "green rush" of financial opportunity. Following Congress' passage of the 2014 farm bill, hemp growing became allowed under certain circumstances by research institutions and state departments of agriculture. The 2018 farm bill removed prohibitions on industrial hemp in place since 1937, and authorized states to create hemp programs beyond the university research setting.

University of West Florida President Martha Saunders said the hemp bill was "a tad late," but will finally bring Florida into an industry that is growing quickly in other states. She said the job growth surrounding hemp will reach further than just those in the agriculture field.

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"The measure offers opportunity for balanced growth," Saunders said. "While cultivating and processing is getting a great deal of attention, the real growth opportunities may lie in ancillary support industries such as medical tracking software or commodity sales exchanges."

When it comes to other economy-boosting legislation, the Influencers were not so keen on [eliminating certificate of need programs](#) to encourage more hospital competition and limiting local governments' ability [to set affordable housing rules](#).

"Limiting local government from facilitating affordable housing is least helpful and shows the influence [and] lobbying of developers over the will and needs of the people, many of whom are in need of subsidized or affordable housing," said Victoria Kasdan, executive director of We Care Manatee.

Influencers also did not approve of the bill signed by DeSantis Friday that gave a green light for new toll roads in mostly rural parts of the state.

"The proposed toll roads are extraordinarily expensive," said Julie Wraithmell, executive director of Audubon Florida. "DOT and task forces have previously evaluated what is needed to relieve congestion. ... It wasn't adding toll roads through rural areas."



LaunchCode's newest program will be an 18 week full-time course that will teach work-readiness skills, computer science and web development. LaunchCode also has partnered with Miami Dade College's Idea Center on coding courses.



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