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OP-ED

Students need a faster, affordable path to jobs. Miami Dade College is leading the way |Opinion

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*Miami Dade College students at their graduation ceremony in May.. MATIAS J. OCNER
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We call Miami Dade College the “community’s college” because our mission is grounded on our commitment to provide opportunities for young people, by expanding access to quality education and meaningful employment. Our hard work and dedication have had a laser focus to deliver on these important outcomes.

Recently, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed House Bill 1507 (REACH Act) into law, further expanding these opportunities for young people. It is a bold step to modernize the pathway for students into the future of work, while providing a new framework for greater collaboration between high schools, community colleges, workforce agencies and industry. House Speaker Chris Sprowls led this effort to establish a blueprint for Florida's workforce programs to ensure that the state has the talent it needs to remain competitive in the new global economy with the delivery of a talented workforce.

This law, and important funding that comes with it, will allow students as young as high schoolers to start apprenticeships and other job training, and eventually enter Florida's high-demand job market. As these students gain invaluable exposure to the jobs of the future while in high school, they will enter our campuses with a clearer vision of how they want to leverage our institution for their initial and life-long learning.

Equipped for life

Students who aren't exactly sure where they fit into the future of work will have guided pathways and support teams at MDC to help them select their career tracks.

As these students enter the workforce, they must also be lifelong learners to keep up with rapidly evolving technology and innovation. The investments we are making in groundbreaking learning technologies and artificial intelligence today will pave the way for them to receive quality, accessible and low-cost continuing education while maintaining full time employment. We see our role as not just providing the initial preparation for students entering the workforce, but to keep them equipped for life in an ever-changing job market.

I have long advocated for workforce agencies, colleges and industry to converge to create a uniform set of credentials and skills that align education and training to specific workforce needs. The REACH Act is a major step toward this goal by requiring Florida's workforce agencies to collaborate with business and industry leaders to create a state-approved list of rapid credentials that align training with workforce demands. As the MDC staff and I collaborate with important industry leaders on the specific applied knowledge, life and digital skills our learners will need to succeed, our innovative faculty will bring their pedagogy as the mission-critical asset to the table. As coursework is aligned with workforce needs, and delivered in an environment of inclusion and equity, great things will continue happening in Florida.

We have a long tradition of key industry partnerships at MDC with more than 200 top business leaders serving on our workforce advisory boards. I started my own educational journey at Miami Dade College and have experienced and observed the outcomes that a college like MDC can provide to build highly competent and well-equipped employees, leaders and entrepreneurs. To continue to deliver on that promise, we need more open dialogue, and more integrated curriculum development with the companies that will hire our students. At MDC, we welcome these conversations that foster greater collaboration with businesses around the state and country because we know this cooperation will yield a better qualified, more engaged, and stronger workforce.

Strengthen the workforce

One of our key partners is longtime collaborator Career Source that we again joined with recently to launch an innovative automotive technician apprenticeship program, offering free tuition, health insurance, books and tools to students. Like us, Career Source is also a partner with the county mayor's Renew305 initiative to upskill and retrain workers in Miami-Dade County to drive the region's pandemic recovery while meeting the demands of industry.

We are fortunate to have partners here and in the Legislature who continue being committed to leveling the playing field and providing economic opportunity to the next generation workforce. A stronger workforce in Florida means a stronger Florida, and we will do our part to ensure the REACH Act serves as a case study that can be replicated nationally.

A large segment of the student population today needs a faster and more affordable pathway to good jobs. There is no institution better positioned to deliver on this need for rapid credentials and to maximize the goals of the REACH Act than Miami Dade College. As always, we are ready to meet this challenge and continue serving as the engine of our workforce and economy.

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