



THE **INFLUENCER** SERIES

With tuition and debt rising, vocational education must be a higher priority in Florida

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The Florida Influencers Series

This election year, the Miami Herald, the Bradenton Herald and El Nuevo Herald are driving a conversation on the important issues facing our state. We've assembled a panel of 50 influential Floridians to offer their views.

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As tuition rates and debt levels continue to rise, Florida colleges and universities need to place a greater emphasis on providing learning opportunities outside the classroom for students to prepare them for a competitive job market.

That was the primary takeaway from the latest survey of the Florida Influencers, a group of the state's leading voices. Asked to rank a variety of proposals to improve higher education in Florida, a plurality (44 percent) said increasing post-secondary vocational training should be the top priority for state officials.

“Our expensive educational system keeps producing more college graduates with thousands of dollars in student loans while ignoring a growing need in the business community for skilled, vocational education graduates,” said Brian Keeley, the president and CEO of Baptist Health South Florida.

Jaret Davis, a co-managing shareholder at Greenberg Traurig's Miami office, even proposed replacing the final year of undergraduate and postgraduate programs with internships or externships to save students money and provide them with real-world experience.

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“In order to make higher education both more accessible and more impactful, I think it would help to have less time in the classroom,” Davis said. “This would be a good first step towards democratizing higher education and increasing the availability to reach a wider demographic market.”

Miami Dade College president Eduardo Padron said providing more funding for the Florida College System would help with that.

“Our colleges not only provide affordable and job-focused degree programs, but also invest in the development of short-term specialized workforce training programs, such as apprenticeships,” Padron said. “Our State Colleges are the ticket to the middle class for the majority of our state’s citizens.”

Ahead of the the November elections, the Florida Influencers are sharing their ideas on how to address policy concerns facing the state and responding to questions from readers of the Miami Herald, Bradenton Herald and el Nuevo Herald.

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After vocational training, 27 percent of the Influencers said increasing performance funding was the most effective way to improve Florida’s higher education system, while 19 percent said capping tuition and 9 percent said raising taxes to allow students to graduate debt-free.

In the governor’s race, Republican Ron DeSantis has pushed for more vocational education and performance funding, while Democrat Andrew Gillum has advocated for a debt-free college proposal.

The Influencers also stressed the importance of maintaining universities that can compete with the best in the country. Of the top 100 public universities ranked by U.S. News and World Report, five were from Florida. The University of Florida was the highest-rated in the state, at number eight.

“Florida deserves even better,” UF president Kent Fuchs said. “Having at least one premier university lifts up the entire system, helps keep our best and brightest here, attracts the next wave of transformational jobs to our state, and fuels research that benefits every corner of Florida.”

But Jorge Perez, the chairman and CEO of the Related Group, expressed concern that Florida was lagging behind other states.

“We need to try to be at level of California, Texas, New York, Michigan, Illinois, North Carolina and other states that have great universities,” Perez said. “Great research universities not only produce a more qualified labor force but help attract corporations with higher paying jobs.”

Other Influencers said Florida needed to ensure that Florida’s historically black colleges and universities did not get left behind.

“There needs to be a greater balance of funding allocated across all of Florida’s public universities and not just skewed to two to three universities while the others suffer for lack of state investment,” said Fabiola Fleuranvil, the CEO of Blueprint Creative Group.

Readers who participated in this week’s conversation using the “Your Voice” online tool posed the following question: “How can we make higher education available to everyone who qualifies without making them take out crippling student loans?”

Some Influencers said Florida should prioritize making more need-based scholarships available rather than merit-based ones.

“The system is designed in a way that excludes many underrepresented populations,” Padron said. “Our state, and our nation, simply cannot afford to lose talented and dedicated students because it’s too expensive to go to college.”

Shelley Katz, the vice president of Lutheran Services Florida Health Systems, suggested that schools partner with employers who could provide benefits such as tuition reimbursement or student loan payment to fill open positions. She also floated the idea of creating a fund to provide loan forgiveness to students who accept jobs in high-demand fields.

While they saw plenty of room for improvement, many of the Influencers also applauded Florida’s current efforts on higher education.

“I believe Florida is a tremendous leader in access to affordable higher education and while we need to look for additional cost-effective mechanisms, we are doing really well in this issue area,” said David Mica, the executive director of the Florida Petroleum Council.

With three weeks to go until the midterms, the Influencers were asked how well they think candidates running for office are focusing on policy solutions. Here’s how they responded:

- Very well: 0 percent
- Fairly well: 34 percent
- Somewhat well: 43 percent
- Slightly well: 23 percent
- Not at all well: 0 percent
- Too early to say: 0 percent

This is the 12th of a series of surveys the Miami Herald will conduct with 50 Influencers through the November elections to help focus media and candidate discussion around the policy issues of most importance to Floridians. Look for the next report on Oct. 22 when Influencers will talk about the minimum wage in Florida. Share your thoughts and questions about the state's important policy challenges and solutions here.

For more reaction from our Influencers on higher education, look for their quotes on Tuesday's Opinion page.

George Haj contributed reporting.

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 COMMENTS ▼