

Labor market data crucial as Florida CC adds four-year program

When Palm Beach Community College began to investigate adding what would be its first-ever bachelor's program, it made sure to pick an offering that would meet the needs of a high-growth regional industry. After surveying industry trends and their associated workforce needs, PBCC opted for a four-year applied science program in supervision and management.

Situation

In 2002, Florida community colleges gained clearance from the state legislature to offer four-year degrees in selected fields. Since that time, 14 two-year state schools have taken advantage and diversified their offerings to include bachelor's degree programs.¹ Palm Beach Community College, centered in Lake Worth, became the latest to develop a four-year program after sufficiently answering one overriding question: "What's the area's greatest need?"

Challenges

The first step in the program development process for Dr. Ginger Pedersen, Dean of Curriculum and Planning Research at PBCC, was to examine up-to-date labor market and education information for the college's service region. With EMSI, Pedersen narrowed her data search to industries and occupations that were in high demand and required a bachelor's degree. "The first thing I looked at was the data," she says. "A lot of times I can use the data to argue down a program that data shows will have no [interest]. This isn't the time to start niche programs and hope they take off."

Pedersen's research made it clear that a program targeted at business management and other supervisory positions was most in need and would have the strongest enrollment. The college went forward with the plan, which required a lengthy application period before getting the BAS program approved. PBCC had to get the go-ahead from the state of Florida, the state board of education, and the college's accreditation agency. According to Pedersen, "The most critical piece of the state application was demonstrating need, and that's where the data come in. We relied less on spot surveys [and] more on the data. The data are much better. To me, it's a real solid, empirical way to look at a situation."

Outcome

The supervision and management program gained approval in 2008, and since then there's been "an incredible outpouring of interest in the program," Pedersen says. As of mid-April, there were more than 200 applicants for the degree, which will open in the fall of 2009 with online and traditional classes.² One reason for the very high interest level is that students who have an associate's in science or applied science in Florida typically can't transfer their credits to a four-year university. Now after completing the new 60-credit bachelor's program, they will be equipped to move into management positions in business administration, health administration, and public safety administration.

Since the BAS degree was approved at PBCC, Pedersen and her colleagues are researching four more bachelor degrees as potential additions to the college's offerings. Momentum has also picked up to change the name of PBCC to better reflect its standing as a two- and four-year institution. Possibilities include Palm Beach College and Palm Beach State College. Other schools in the state have made the switch in recent months.

¹ http://www.fldoe.org/cc/students/bach_degree.asp

² http://www.palmbeachpost.com/search/content/local_news/epaper/2009/04/19/0419pbccdegree.html



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