

EDUCATION DECEMBER 3, 2015

Public technical schools offer bargain career training

HIGHLIGHTS

Public institutions in Miami-Dade offer same training as for-profits

Florida leads in number of certificates awarded

Not all technical programs pay off





BY CHRISTINA VEIGA

cveiga@miamiherald.com

The patient on the operating table was a John Doe — an unknown trauma victim who was rushed into surgery and now needed his stomach removed.

The lead surgeon held out his hand anticipating the precise instrument needed, and it was up to a surgical technologist in green scrubs to decide which sharp, shiny tool would get the job done.

John Doe survived, though he was never really in danger. He was a just a practice dummy for students learning how to become operating assistants at Lindsey Hopkins Technical College — a public, accredited vocational school run by the Miami-Dade County school district.

“This is a career for me,” said Adrian Otero, who played the role of surgeon during the learning exercise.

Conduct a quick Internet search for technical colleges, and you’ll likely come across any number of for-profit schools. With big advertising budgets and aggressive recruiting — not all of it legal — those schools enrolled almost 300,000 students in Florida in 2012-2013. Higher-Ed Hustle, a yearlong Miami Herald investigation into for-profits, highlighted predatory practices at some schools.

Lesser-known are public options like Lindsey Hopkins or Miami Dade College, which offer many of the same programs at bargain prices. A practical nursing certification will cost you \$4,100 through the Miami-Dade school district — about \$2.56 per hour. Similar programs at for-profits can run more than \$26,000.

Just like for-profit colleges, public vocational schools offer accelerated courses that usually take little more than a year and a high school diploma to complete.

“Our goal is to get people ready for work in the shortest amount of time,” said Octavia Williams, vice principal at Lindsey Hopkins.

Technical certifications have been called Florida's post-secondary workhorse. More than 105,000 are enrolled in vocational programs in the state, according to Sean Lynch, a spokesman for Association for Career and Technical Education.

"As businesses have raised awareness of the skills gap, and started to sound the alarm that they've got these opportunities available, students have learned they can get training for these exact careers — and they're learning that these are well-paying jobs that are respected," Lynch said.

Florida already ranks fifth in number of certificates awarded, and has among the greatest number of people claiming a certificate as their highest level of education, according to a 2012 report by the Florida College Access Network.

But it's important to pick a certificate program carefully because not all lead to higher-wage jobs.

A high school graduate in Florida earns about \$20,000. Students who graduate from Miami-Dade's technical programs at the South Dade campus made about \$1,000 more than that, according to data collected by the Florida Department of Education.

On the other hand, a certificate in Advanced Automotive technology from Lindsey Hopkins earned students about \$34,000 — only about \$2,000 less than a first-year graduate with a bachelor's degree from Florida International University might earn.

"Not every college degree pays the same. Your program, your major matters a lot. That's even more emphasized in the vocational programs," said Troy Miller, associate director for research and policy at the Florida College Access Network.

Experts say the real benefit of completing a vocational program is that it can help lead to a college degree. The Miami-Dade school district offers programs that can transfer to Miami Dade College, giving students a head start on their degree. Others use their certification to land steady jobs to help pay for college.

"I would say they offer a very affordable pathway into higher education," Miller said.

Kerry-Ann Peterkin knew she wanted to work in the medical field, so she did research into some local schools and settled on a dental assisting program at a for-profit school called Sanford-Brown.

“I wanted to do something hands-on, something that would give me a career in a short amount of time,” she said.

On the first day of class, the 28-year-old from Miami Gardens was flipping through a brochure and noticed a surprising disclaimer: The program was not accredited.

Without accreditation, students may not be able to sit for certification exams, or they may get stuck with useless credits that don't transfer to other colleges. That happened in October to hundreds of students attending Dade Medical College. The for-profit closed abruptly amid federal scrutiny.

“This is Miami-Dade public schools, so we're not going to close our doors. We do offer financial aid, and our cost is a lot, lot less,” said Houda Elaadi, director of the dental assistant program and Lindsey Hopkins.

Peterkin pulled out of Sanford-Brown, which has since closed, and enrolled at Lindsey Hopkins, where she's learning to mold crowns and take X-rays.

Soon, she'll earn her clinical hours at the community clinic in the same hallway where Peterkin now takes classes, working with real patients under the supervision of real doctors.

According to school district figures, 86 percent of dental assisting students at Lindsey Hopkins graduated last semester. Of those graduates, all but one passed their state certification exams and most have landed jobs.

Other program statistics are less rosy. For example, little more than half of students at Miami Lakes Technical Center passed their licensing exam this year. On the other hand, high passage rates at for-profit colleges can be manipulated by not allowing weak students to sit for the tests.

Jasmine Macedo, a student who recently passed the dental assistant certification exam and is finishing up required clinical hours, already has a job lined up — and has aspirations to become a full-fledged dentist.

“I just got really into it and I guess in the clinic, I saw the potential,” she said.

Miami Herald reporter Michael Vasquez contributed to this report.

Christina Veiga: 305-376-2029, @cveiga