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OVERWHELMED COMMUNITY COLLEGES ADD “NEW LARGE URBAN COLLEGE”

(Lake Worth – September 25, 2007) Alarmed by a historic crush of more than 50,000 new students -- equivalent to a large urban community college -- Florida’s Council of Presidents is calling upon the governor and legislature in the upcoming special session to support the colleges that educate most Floridians and bring growth to the state economy.

“Something has to give,” said Jackson Sasser, president of Santa Fe Community College and chair of the Florida Community College Council of Presidents. “By inclination, tradition and on mandates from the state, we provide opportunity to all students and build the economy.”

“We have pledged to work with state government, but we cannot continue this way without its support and commitment,” Sasser said.

Florida law requires community colleges to admit students through the open door policy, which has bestowed upon them the name “people’s colleges,” and advance economic development throughout the state. Open admissions have resulted in a statewide enrollment increase this fall of 50,554 students.

However, the current four percent reduction in funding statewide would force community colleges that have always taken in students to restrict admissions, the presidents said.

“We are stunned by the enrollment boom,” said Bill Law, president of Tallahassee Community College. “More than 50,000 new students is like bringing a Hillsborough or Broward Community College online in one year with no support from the state.”

Florida’s community colleges are the national leader in degrees produced. In its latest annual report, Community College Week lists four Florida community colleges in the nation’s top 5 in associate’s degree graduates. Fifteen of the state’s 28 community colleges are in the nation’s top 100.

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Ed Massey, president of Indian River Community College, said community colleges are essential for a thriving Florida economy, which in turn provides revenue to fund governmental services statewide. Four of five graduates from state community college workforce programs find work in jobs that boost economic growth.

“It does not make economic sense to limit our ability to educate students that are needed for growth in existing and new fields of employment,” Massey said. “Community colleges are not a speculative investment in the Florida economy. They have year in and year out proven that their graduates are the key to healthy growth.”

A tight job market also drives students to community colleges to learn skills needed for new employment, Sasser said.

“It is well established that there is an inverse relationship between the economy and community college enrollment,” he said. “When jobs become scarcer, more students come our way. Then they graduate to find jobs and the economy rebounds.”

Law said enrollment caps at Florida public universities drive denied students to community colleges, which are required by state law to prepare them for transfer into those universities. More than a third of all state university bachelor’s degree graduates started in Florida’s community colleges.

“The universities have kept their commitment to community college transfer,” he said, “but lacking state support, community colleges are hard pressed to keep their end of the bargain.”

Massey said Florida’s community colleges report on their performance, which proves that funding pays off in job placement, university transfer and “student retention,” or how well they keep students from dropping out of school.

“We are asking the governor and legislature to rebuild their partnership with community colleges that educate all Floridians and are necessary for economic growth in the state,” Massey said.

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