



Trade training offers quicker path to in-demand jobs, with less debt

By Stuart Korfhage
December 3, 2017

In a county with a booming population and almost no unemployment, those looking for a solid career don't necessarily have to cart themselves off to a university for four years.

Instead, a year or two of training can often secure a good job right in St. Johns County.

While the majority of high-paying careers still require a four-year degree and sometimes even a graduate degree, there is plenty of evidence that many jobs are in demand right now for those with specific trade skills that don't require any college credit in calculus or linguistics.

According to career website zippia.com, seven of the 10 fastest growing jobs in Florida this year — and many more in the top 100 — are ones that do not require a bachelor's degree. Many are directly related to the construction industry, which is certainly faring well in Northeast Florida right now.

Other trade jobs are available in fields like automotive repair, welding and various positions in the medical/dental field, among others.

Programs offered locally at First Coast Technical College and St. Johns River State College can fill the educational needs to get started in those careers.

The schools don't promise students to walk off campus in a year or two and get rich immediately. But they can usually put graduates in a good position to become employed without incurring a huge amount of debt.

"The debt is the biggest thing," FCTC diesel engine repair student Taylor Anderson said of his choice for higher education.

And like a lot of the students at FCTC and SJRSC, Anderson is already working in his field of study well before graduation. He's employed by the school district as a school bus maintenance technician.

That's a much easier financial position than going off to traditional four-year university. At Florida State University, for instance, full-time students pay an estimated \$18,000 per year for tuition, housing, fees and books/materials.

A study from lendedu.com said the average student debt for college students in Florida for the class of 2016 was \$24,000.

“Over 90 percent of our students graduate with no debt,” said Chris Force, principal at FCTC.

That was certainly one of the factors for automotive technology student Seth Thomas.

The Nease graduate enlisted in the Marine Corps out of high school and gained some experience in the field. When he got out of the service, he decided a future in the automotive industry would suit his interests and skills.

Like Anderson, Thomas has already landed a job, working for Bozard Ford in the afternoons while taking classes at FCTC in the mornings.

“The results are very, very apparent,” Thomas said of his time at FCTC. “The tuition cost is not outrageous. You can start at any skill level.

“I did not expect I’d be working at Bozard right now. I’ve learned enough for the three, four months I’ve been here that I’m proficient at that job, and I make more money than I’ve ever made before. So it’s been great.”

There’s also the issue that many high graduates just aren’t that interested in traditional school — at least not right away.

Thomas said he’s the kind of person who likes hands-on learning, so the FCTC program is perfect for him.

“Lectures only go so far with me,” he said. “I learn the best from doing it. The majority of the time we spend out here in the lab.”

Force said that’s exactly the type of student who does well at FCTC. And the things they learn are directly and immediately applicable to the career world.

“We have high school students that come here (through dual-enrollment), and they consistently say, ‘This is my favorite part because it’s all hands-on,’” Force said. “You don’t read about welding in a book — you do just to get the basics — but you’ve got to be able to weld.”

Just across State Road 16, SJRSC trains students for careers that might take a little more time than those at FCTC, but it’s still a much more flexible situation than traditional four-year schools. It also has campuses in Clay and Putnam counties.

Anna Lebesch, the school’s vice president for workforce development, said the administration works directly with the business community to train students for jobs that are truly in demand.

Those without higher education are bombarded with advertisements for career training courses that may or may not be useful upon graduation. Lebesch said her school, which is accredited, is very sensitive to that and wants to offer programs that meet a need.

“One of the things we have to continue to work on is helping everyone be educated consumers of higher education,” Lebesch said. “All things are not created equal.”

Many of the programs SJRSC offers can be completed in two years or less, but the school also has options for bachelor’s degrees in three fields of study, including nursing.

Some students obtain associate's degrees while training for certain careers and then come back to get a bachelor's degree later.

"That's one of the beauties of the state and community college system: We're open access," Lebesch said. "We take everyone where they are."