FutureMakers Coalition focuses on increasing the region's college and career-ready workforce

By Carolyn Rogers

As a business leader, you're faced with challenges every day such as navigating economic insecurity, keeping and developing a customer base, sustaining strong financials, strategizing your next steps, and more. In the midst of all of this, you know the value of a great team. You know how important it is to have skilled and engaged employees helping your company thrive. And, you also know that you're not alone. Every business leader and owner is looking for great employees. The newly formed FutureMakers Coalition understands this too.

FutureMakers is a coalition working to increase the education and preparedness of Southwest Florida's workforce, and that's good news for Naples businesses and the regional economy.

Increasing the quality and quantity of Southwest Florida's workforce ensures companies will find the right people and the right fit for their team – today and tomorrow. That's what the FutureMakers Coalition is doing with a long lens looking to the future of business and economic development in the region.

The coalition's goal to increase the percent of working-age adults with post-secondary school certifications and college degrees from 27 to 40 percent by 2025 will help strengthen business and industries of all sizes from small entrepreneurial startups to large manufacturing. It will help employers find qualified and career-ready individuals for its hard-to-fill positions, and create more locally owned businesses.

The cornerstone of FutureMakers focuses on increasing education and training opportunities for students and the underemployed in the five-county region. And it will create an economic spinoff within the business community that will contribute to regional growth and stability plus prosperity for individuals, families and businesses.

To get there leaders say it will require involvement from every facet of the community – businesses, colleges, tech schools, political, civic and nonprofit leaders, pre-kindergarten to 12th grade students, and everyday citizens.

At stake is the future of Southwest Florida's 1.2 million residents. Globally, the U.S. lags significantly behind other countries in the percent of its populace earning at least an associate's degree, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development.

FutureMakers signers

Performance Poet and FSW student Chejai Onumbu opened the FutureMakers Coalition Rally with her own words

In Southwest Florida, only 27 percent of the population (working-age adults) has earned a college degree; the number of residents with technical school or specialized training certifications is still being determined. Nationally 36 million adults have some college education but did not earn a degree, according to Lumina Foundation, the Indianapolis-based nonprofit group backing the FutureMakers Coalition as one of its 75 national Community Partners for Attainment.

The local effort will provide a cradle-to-career support system to ensure students and career-advancing adults identify, pursue and complete college, specialized training and certifications that improve their marketability and desirability to local businesses.

Companies like Arthrex Manufacturing, a Naples orthopedic medical device company and one of Fortune's 100 best companies to work for, recognize the importance of improving the quality of Southwest Florida's workforce. Employees are active in the FutureMakers Coalition, according to Mike Boose, human resources director.

"We are able to share insights into the local and regional needs to support growing a locally sustainable workforce," Boose said. "FutureMakers is able to leverage a great deal of information and networks formed by the Workforce Now project." (note: The Workforce Now project is a partnership between Hodges, FGCU and FSW to compile research on the workforce needs and resources of the region led by economists from each institution and supported by stakeholders from across the region)

The company's workforce needs cover the educational spectrum – from high school or GED graduates for entry-level positions to PhDs for research scientists and physicians. Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, or STEM, courses "are key to many of our positions, as well as successfully demonstrated teamwork and a commitment to improving the community," Boose said.

Part of the coalition's work is identifying the skills and expertise business throughout Southwest Florida will need in 2025. Some will be county

Ann Hughes of Community Foundation of Collier County and Carolyn Rogers of SWFL Community Foundation

FutureMakers Coalition

specific. For example, rural Glades and Hendry counties are more likely to benefit from agribusiness programs.

"The best thing we can do is to identify students' strengths early and set them on a path," said Angelo Biasi, CEO and founder of Massive U, a Naples educational technology company transforming traditional textbooks to virtual project-based learning to appeal to children raised on technology. "Students need to be engaged in self-discovery education and introduced to occupations and explore the careers of their dreams. We know that 64 percent of our children who will graduate 10 years from now, their jobs haven't been created yet."

The Lumina Foundation Difference

The FutureMakers Coalition was launched during a March rally by the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, which is serving as the initiative's anchor organization. The rally was attended by more than 80 of the region's stakeholders including leaders from Collier County Public Schools, Champions for Learning, Naples Chamber of Commerce, The Immokalee Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Florida College Access Network, and more.

Being part of Lumina's national campaign to increase the breadth and depth of America's workforce – through technical training and college completion – is a major achievement. Lumina Foundation administers about $50 million in grants annually and links communities to the brainpower of leading national and international experts. It qualified the region after learning about the community foundation's inaugural FutureMakers program, a two-year focus that successfully increased the number of high school seniors completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, FAFSA, and receiving money for college.

Lumina will help the FutureMakers Coalition develop and implement creative and collaborate methods to increase post-secondary enrollment, retention and completion, emphasizing the importance of region-wide involvement from businesses, educators, nonprofit groups and other stakeholders.

Susan McManus, Joy Mahler, Sarah Owen

Haley Glover, Lumina's strategy director, said Southwest Florida was invited based on recommendations by the Florida College Access Network and the Helios Foundation.

"We worked with FCAN and Helios to determine cities in Florida that were ready to work with us," she said. "In Southwest Florida, we saw community partnerships for attainment already in place and that work already happening. Because of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, we know Southwest Florida can go broader and deeper and quicken the pace that's already been established. We invest in communities that have proven themselves already. We can come in, give them a shot in arm, help them accomplish goals and watch it take off in a big a way."

So far more than 100 FutureMakers stakeholders have answered the call, working on regional action teams that best utilize their skills, whether it's instilling excitement for learning in elementary school children, mentoring struggling high school and college students to persist and overcome obstacles or offering on-the-job internships or certifications that businesses need. These coalition experts include area businesses, civic leaders, education advocates and philanthropists committed to investing in students and working-age adults by improving their education and career qualifications.

"FutureMakers is about developing tomorrow's business leaders, today," said John Gamba, president of Massive U, and board member of the community foundation. "We know that students with post-secondary degrees and certificates will have a positive impact on the economy and well-being of our local community."

Massive U also developed the initial FutureMakers' Grad App, a mobile smartphone application providing users

with comprehensive information about career opportunities, including skills and education requirements for a variety of careers, education-planning resources, available scholarships and financial aid.

From Cradle to Career

The coalition has created six regional action teams to work with schools, businesses and nonprofits to align with existing programs and expand, maybe even, change their scope. These groups are charged with developing and deploying strategies providing a smooth transition from "cradle to career" with the ability to borrow from successes in other Lumina Foundation communities and make it relevant to Southwest Florida.

The process begins by reaching children early, creating excitement for learning, and providing constructive and positive support with the message that college and technical school are possible regardless of demographic or financial barriers. The original FutureMakers program reinforced those ideals by guiding high school seniors to the FAFSA and the $100 million in Pell Grants the Florida College Access Network reports are unclaimed annually.

Each team has a specific purpose, and will develop protocols, programs and networks of people to encourage, guide and help learners persist and complete degree or certification processes.

Although nearly 70 percent of high school graduates enroll in college within two years, only 40 years complete their post-secondary education.

The typical college student is no longer the four-year student whose family pays for their education. Nontraditional students account for 75 percent of college enrollment, including many balancing family and work obligations.

The coalition's persistence and progress team will address potential college and post-secondary dropout triggers, often the expiration of freshman scholarships, increasing family obligations or a waning lack of preparation or interest. Current and future efforts will focus on steering these students to reapply for financial aid and possibly providing transportation and child care.

Again, Lumina's expertise and track record will help Southwest Florida find its way. On the national level, the foundation is working with colleges and other institutes to improve persistence and degree completion. Life experience is also relevant, said Glover.

"We're always looking for institutions that work with the 21st century student who is self-paced and often a nontraditional student," she said. "What we want to see are more institutions accepting skills and knowledge for credit, regardless of where the student learned their skills. A good example is the military. It's the largest training organization in the world, and what soldiers learn in the service should be applicable to a postsecondary credential."

Credit acceptance would entice more adults to return and complete their degree at a lower cost. "We can never downplay the cost of college; that's something Lumina grapples with all the time," said Glover. "We need to make it more affordable for low-income students and those currently not well served. But

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US Under Secretary for Education Ted Mitchell with Sarah Owen

equally important is ensuring that all students who go to college complete a credential."

The Importance of Technical Training

For companies like Arthrex, jobs requiring specialized training are often the most difficult to fill.

"They are typically related to technical manufacturing skills like CNC machine operators, maintenance technicians and specific engineering applications as well as IT business analysts and supply chain buyers," Boose said.

Locally, technical colleges and institutes offer career-specific classes for well-paying jobs. In some instances, fast-track classes allow participants to complete technical certifications, considered the equivalent of an associate's degree, in as little as six months.

Certification-required positions such as auto mechanics, air-conditioning and pool repair service providers, healthcare technology and machine operators will always be in demand. Completion enhances an employee's opportunities and wage-earning potential.

Stephen Tracy, an assistant engineer at Entech Computer Services, a Fort Myers company specializing in information technology for businesses from Naples to Tampa, earned a bachelor's degree in IT from Florida State. But completing certification in advanced firewall solutions offered through Dell made him more marketable and bumped up his salary.

In turn, that certification benefits Entech. "Certifications help businesses a lot," Tracy said. "Through partners like Dell and Microsoft, certification adds prestige for a company. I strongly believe in getting certifications not just for the sake of getting them but to back up and expand on work experience."

Prior to its May acquisition of a similar business in Bradenton, most Entech employees were jacks-of-all trades, according to President Jake Spanberger. "We've been around since 1998 and as the company matured we've put more emphasis on the need for certifications. Our employees need to stay up to date and going forward we will need more specialized engineers."

On-the-job Career Development

The FutureMakers Coalition is also trying to gage the extent companies provide internships and those career advancement opportunities from within, similar to Entech.

Arthrex's benefits package includes tuition reimbursement for employees pursing a college degree. Other employees who complete the four-year Arthrex Manufacturing Apprentice Program, which provides on-the-job and classroom instruction, receive a state certificate and advancement opportunities within the company's manufacturing division, Boose said.

Additional programs include language learning skills for the company's growing global clientele; online and in-house training in power tools, robotics and programmable logic controllers; and continuing education and professional development through a variety of programs and opportunities such as leadership courses for managers and the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People course for all employees.

Entech also offers an internal career development program, pays for learning tools and education and even provides mentors in its efforts to promote from within.

"We sit down with each employee to learn their interests and put them on a path to further their education to certification," said Spanberger. "We want people to enjoy what they're doing. We pay for certification testing and offer an increase in pay once they receive certification."

Local businesses understand the importance of the FutureMakers Coalition for their viability and future success.

"If we can do this in our own backyard, we can become a beacon for the rest of the country," said Biasi. "We have such a huge opportunity here and I think my own children are so lucky."

Become part of this regional coalition to make our community stronger and improve the quality of life for everyone who lives, works and plays here. Visit www.FutureMakersCoalition.com and sign the wall, join the action.