

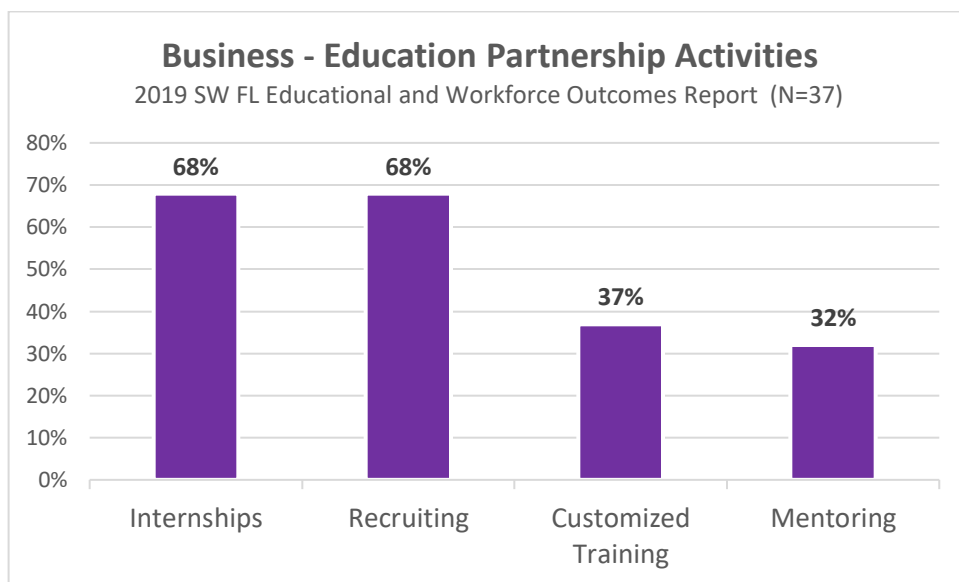
The more things change...

There is an old saying: The more things change, the more they stay the same. Even during the current economic uncertainties resulting from the COVID-19 health crisis, the workforce needs of Southwest Florida businesses are very similar to their pre-crisis needs.



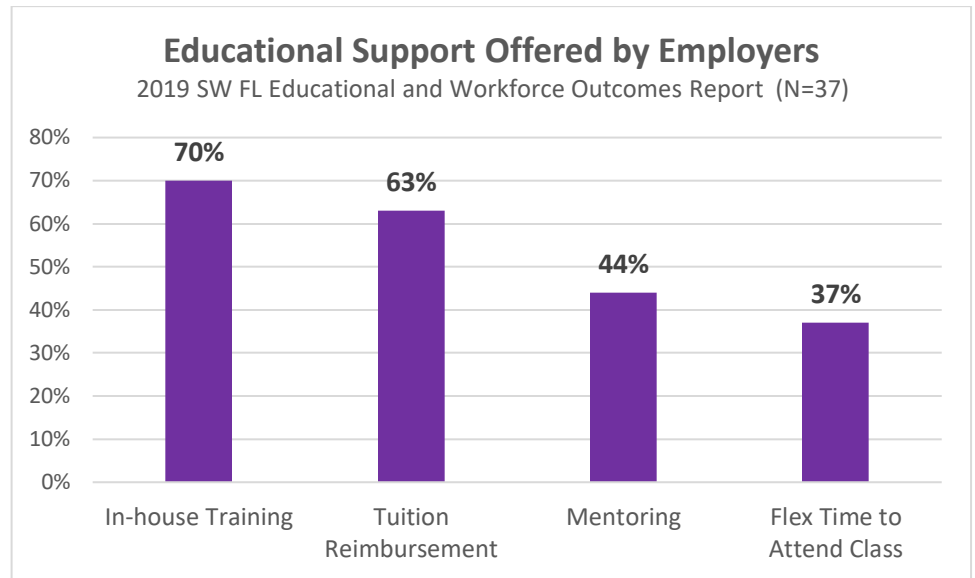
According to a poll of Southwest Florida Human Resource departments conducted in May-June 2020, approximately 36.2 percent of the responding businesses indicated that finding, hiring, and training a qualified workforce during relaunch or within the subsequent 6-12 months is their biggest challenge. It is important to note, however, that these responses were given early in the pandemic before Florida's COVID-19 spike in the July-August 2020 timeframe. Unfortunately, the pandemic's course is still highly uncertain as 2020 comes to a close and as employers hope for better times in 2021.

How are businesses addressing this ongoing need for a qualified workforce? According to the 2019 Southwest Florida Educational and Workforce Outcomes Report, 68% of businesses reported that they partnered with educational institutions to offer internships or targeted recruiting activities before the 2020 pandemic. Customized training and mentoring programs are also available, although to a lesser extent.



Data from before the pandemic also show that employers offer

their employees educational support as part of their benefits packages. In-house training and tuition reimbursement are the most common (70% and 63% of employers, respectively) along with mentoring by more senior staff and flex time to attend classes.



It is perhaps too early to fully understand how employers will adapt to the ever evolving COVID-19 health crisis as they continue to search for qualified employees. Furthermore, future data from the public federal and state databases may not inform the entire story. **More local and timely sources of data and specific case studies from among the Coalition’s network partners may be needed to better develop the most effective workforce development strategies for the Southwest Florida region post COVID-19.** In addition, not all employees are experiencing the pandemic in equal ways. Those employees who have been able to work from home are coping much better than those workers in the restaurant, hospitality, tourism, and retail sectors, for example, who have had to endure lockdowns and other business restrictions. These highly impacted workers may decide to pursue a quality credential in order to weather future economic storms. In any event, the FutureMakers Coalition and its network partners should be prepared to be nimbler and even more innovative through and after the COVID-19 pandemic as we continue our journey toward 55%.