

Expanding Lifelong Learning to Support the Workforce

Initiative Summary Statement:

Promote a flexible and resilient workforce by expanding lifelong learning programs and practices, exposing K-12 students to a broader set of career opportunities, and supporting workers of all ages in meeting the changing needs of the economy.

Initiative Description:

Objective: “Lifelong learning” covers the entire lifecycle of a person, from early socialization and pre-school education through the senior years, focusing on the learning process and the individual needs and skills. At various times in their lives, residents benefit from the ability to gain or advance a diverse set of skills. This can be critically important after a disaster or community shock causes an industry downturn or because a worker’s life goals shift. Providing opportunities to diversify and upgrade skills will require a collaborative search for resources to expand the focus on skill diversity in the K-12 years and further develop adulthood credentialing and “micro-credentialing” programs – training opportunities that allow jobseekers to gain a limited certification in an area without having to pursue higher education or an expensive degree. These efforts will prepare the workforce to weather changes and keep the region’s economy flexible, adaptable and resilient while also enabling a quick recovery and restoration of normal operations.

Across the region, stakeholders have already piloted credentialing programs and programs that focus on skill diversity throughout the education cycle. Program providers, including local universities and Lee County Schools can work alongside employers and economic development officials across jurisdictions to identify and develop new goals for program expansion and ensure programs are accessible in all needed languages and approaches to support the whole community.

Identified target areas for program expansion include:

- Exposing children to career paths early on to prepare for entering the workforce. This includes technical jobs and trades that may not require higher education;
- Aligning technical programs in high school systems with emerging and forecasted industries including but not limited to manufacturing, healthcare, technology, and logistics;

- Investing in micro-credentialing programs (e.g., business continuity, grant research, application development, and management) that upskill and qualify workforce members for in demand jobs in an expedited manner;
- Engaging senior workforce members in new training and educational opportunities; and
- Establishing a clearinghouse to connect employers with employees effectively.

Need: Working residents are the driving force behind economic, social, and cultural vitality in Lee County. The workforce is a catalyst for innovation, productivity, and community growth, shaping the regions' identity and fostering community growth and diversity.

According to Gartner, Inc., an international company with a large campus in the County, over the next 10 years the roles of middle managers will change, and upskilling and digital dexterity will outweigh tenure and experience. That means employees will have to adapt and gain new skills to remain relevant in the workforce. Also, a large number of the region's workforce members are about to enter retirement, highlighting the need to replace the loss of skills. On the other hand, industries needing skilled workforce members can market opportunities to retired and senior community members that are interested in rejoining the workforce. It is important to ensure training and educational resources are available and accessible to all.

The FutureMakers Coalition, a community organization working to qualify workforce members for in demand jobs, reports that more than 60% of jobs in Florida will require education beyond high school by 2025. Postsecondary education is increasingly seen as an important step for obtaining beneficial long-term occupational and economic outcomes. While the region has a participatory workforce, the postsecondary education rates are considered low.

Additionally, local natural disasters ranging from red tides to hurricanes, like Ian, have made evident impacts on the workforce and economy in the Lee County Region. Harmful algae blooms had direct repercussions to the fishing and shrimping businesses compelling that workforce to relocate. Recent hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic also have depressed the tourism and hospitality industry - the region lost nearly 500 jobs between December 2021 and December 2022. These examples highlight the urgent need to provide tools and resources that bridge the gap between employers and job seekers to increase overall sector resilience.

Regional Approach: Regional efforts addressing lifelong learning challenges should be focused on enhancing existing efforts rather than investing in designing new programs.

For example, the FutureMakers Coalition Access & Entry Regional Action Team is focused on getting students into postsecondary through career readiness planning and Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) completion. This cross-sector team works to identify and address challenges to postsecondary access and increase postsecondary enrollment in education programs aligned with local economic/workforce development, including enrollment in technical education programs.

Presently, the Economic Development Administration (EDA) has funded Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) and FutureMakers \$23 million to expand their micro-credentialing programs. Their funding is based upon the success of the micro-credential programs created at FGCU through Lee County's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) support allocation. Replicating or expanding these efforts throughout the region increases reach and contributes to a talented workforce pipeline. Existing programs, like FutureMakers' Navigators, serve as a successful model in assisting community members explore higher education and career advancement opportunities but offer limited support (approximately 1200 people) to the community due to a lack of funding.

A more robust, regional employment clearinghouse could connect employers with the workforce for permanent and temporary work by providing targeted services such as skills training, resume review, and job placement. For example, there are 18,000 workers Countywide between the ages of 16-24 who are neither working nor in school. The need is to identify more opportunity areas such as these, train and educate these workers to address business needs, and connect them with employment positions.

Expanding the existing FutureMakers Coalition efforts to include more industry partners and economic development officials from across the region will enhance goal setting, needs assessment and resource gathering. Further CareerSource of Southwest Florida receives approximately \$16 million a year to support technical training in our colleges and universities and while it serves a 5-county region most of the money is invested in Lee County. CareerSource is recognized by the state as the economic development leader with experience successfully coordinating and convening businesses and career seekers throughout southwest Florida. Expanding their services (e.g., Workforce Development Board, talent acquisition consortium etc.) could increase regional resilience.

Impact: Workers that can flexibly shift career paths as the economy changes or disaster impacts curtail growth, are more resilient to change. Investing in proper training and educational programs can greatly impact the workforce within the region. Not only will it create proficient workers within the different industries, but it will also be an economic return on investment through the retainment of employees. The region's skilled workforce growth is supporting the growth of manufacturers, technology firms, and medical related

firms. With proper lifelong educational and educational programs, the economy of the County can further flourish and become a hotspot for manufacturers and workers regardless of industry.

Key Considerations:

- Identify funding sources that are sustainable and able to support lifelong learning programs in perpetuity.
- Market micro credentialing programs and benefits to establish a shared understanding of the value of upskilling in both traditional and non-traditional roles and employers.
- Work directly with businesses and organizations like the Horizon Council to allow implementers to gain early insights into the needs and concerns of the business community, which in turn allows partners to advocate and act proactively.
- Facilitate career exposure through college internships to prepare students to enter the workforce and develop connections with existing businesses in the region. Also consider mentorships, apprenticeships, and other online educational programs that can accommodate people's economic growth while remaining in the workforce. Marketing available jobs within the region will reassure college students in pursuing opportunities in the local economy.
- Ensure all resources and tools are available in various languages and preferred methods (e.g., in-person vs. remote, literature vs. interactive training) to accommodate the whole community.
- Invest in new technical colleges that match the emerging industries in the area by reviewing successful models within the region. This includes offerings in other languages to support all members of the community workforce.
- Invest in and market career opportunities through regional job fairs to better connect employers with qualified workforce members and job searchers with opportunities.
- Expand existing programs like Project SEARCH, a yearlong out of school program that prepares students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be competitive applicants in the workforce.
- Create a model of at-work training where a local employer willingly gives employees time during work hours to learn and grow in skills and knowledge, and thus show others the benefits of such a model.
- Identify ways to encourage workforce participation in degree completion programs by leveraging existing programs.
- Ensure strategies address community differences in access by promoting alternatives like connectivity options and satellite locations.

- Advance existing industries to increase workforce resilience in the wake of community shocks and stressors. This includes identifying a path to funding new jobs when a specific sector is impacted.
- Identify continuous hotspots of unemployment throughout communities to implement targeted strategies that address the need described in this Initiative.

Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Education & Workforce, Economic Recovery, Planning & Capacity, and Health & Social Services

Stakeholders:

- Nonprofit organizations in the education and workforce sectors.
- CareerSource of Southwest Florida
- Chambers of Commerce
- County departmental experts on economic development.
- School Districts
- Municipal departmental experts on economic development.
- Technical colleges
- Career Counselors
- Community Outreach
- Job placement/recruiters
- Employers
- Post-secondary education partners and training programs
- Local business incubators and centers
- Apprenticeship Programs
- Adult education institutions

Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Department of Education
- United States Department of Labor
- Florida Department of Education
- CareerSource Florida
- Associated Builders and Contractors Workforce Fund