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PRESS RELEASE  
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## **FCAN and local college access networks share examples of community collaboration during Florida House panel on postsecondary attainment**

*Footprint of local college access networks has grown from 50 percent to 75 percent of the state*

Florida College Access Network (FCAN) [led a panel discussion](#) before the [Florida House of Representatives Post-Secondary Education Subcommittee](#) on November 16 about the many ways communities throughout the state are collaborating to boost postsecondary attainment.

FCAN [previously presented in front of the subcommittee on the same topic in January](#) alongside representatives of local college access networks **LEAP** and **Earn Up**, which serve Tampa Bay and Northeast Florida, respectively. LCANs are multi-sector, strategic alliances of leaders and institutions that work together to improve educational access and attainment beyond high school in their communities. Joining FCAN were representatives of local college access networks **Achieve Escambia**, **Central Florida College Access Network** and **FutureMakers Coalition**.

**Laurie Meggesin, FCAN executive director**, remarked that the work of such cross-sector initiatives that support postsecondary attainment has grown considerably since early 2017: “Since we presented to you back in January, the footprint of local college access networks has grown from 50 percent to 75 percent of the state.”

Meggesin presented alongside representatives from three LCANs and **Nicole Washington, higher education policy consultant for Lumina Foundation**.

“Education is the strongest indicator of economic prosperity in healthy communities,” Washington said. She added that while Florida joins about 40 states in the country now working towards an attainment goal, the movement isn’t about just picking a number and ‘checking a box.’

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“Attainment is not about producing more degrees for the sake of producing more degrees. It really is about meeting the workforce demand.”

Lumina has partnered with the **Florida Higher Education Coordinating Council (HECC)**, which [last year unanimously voted to adopt an attainment goal](#), called “RISE to 55,” for 55 percent of working-age Floridians will hold a high-quality postsecondary credential by 2025. The partnership to boost postsecondary attainment also includes **Helios Education Foundation, Florida Chamber Foundation, and Florida Philanthropic Network**, along with FCAN and local college access networks from regions throughout Florida.

The highlight of Thursday’s panel discussion was examples of collaborative initiatives from LCANs serving Northwest, Central, and Southwest Florida.



**Jennifer McFarren, community development representative for Pensacola-based Gulf Power Company**, spoke about **Achieve Escambia** and how changes in technology have impacted the energy industry in recent years compared to previous decades.

“For our company and for our industry, we simply don’t hire unskilled workers,” said McFarren, whose company employs about 1,400 in the region. “Our careers require a variety of levels of educational attainment for entry. Some with a high school diploma with an industry certification, a two-year degree, a four-year degree, a master’s degree and even Ph.D.’s for some of our jobs.”

McFarren asserted that better outreach and more collaboration is what is needed to sustain a qualified and diverse workforce.

“We need pathways that encourage and empower people to pursue attainment and career progression with a variety of on ramps and off ramps. Attainment isn’t simply a ladder. It often looks like a jungle gym sometimes. But, we can only accomplish this through strong partnerships.”

Enter Achieve Escambia, the community's first cradle-to-career collective impact effort. McFarren said that in addition to the expected participation from the area's education and nonprofit sectors, Achieve Escambia has succeeded by enlisting leaders from law enforcement, the military, and the faith-based community.

"Our understanding and approach toward attainment has been a journey," McFarren said. "We're working in a structured way, first anchored in data and empowered by that cross-sector leadership."

**Jessica Kleinberger** represented **Central Florida College Access Network (CFCAN)** on the panel. She is the **manager of Destination: Graduation**, a partnership between CFCAN, **Heart of Florida United Way**, the 211 social services community, and **Seminole State College** that seeks to help low-income and veteran students in Central Florida complete their college educations.

"The number one predictor of student success isn't grades...it's parental income," Kleinberger said.

Destination: Graduation, which helps students overcome non-academic barriers such as financial emergencies, has assisted almost 800 students since launching its pilot program in 2015. Kleinberger said the average age of students served is 31, and the majority of them are minorities, female, and balancing multiple responsibilities.

"This is not an 18 year old with parental support and a safety net," Kleinberger said.

The project has so far produced impressive results. Of the 798 students they have assisted, 83% have persisted to their second year, higher than the rate for all Seminole State College students (71%).

**Michelle Zech**, **human resources business partner for Lee Health**, spoke about teaming up with Southwest Florida-based **FutureMakers Coalition** to address a need in her industry and in the LCAN's five-county coverage area.

"We were losing the battle in finding and retaining certified nursing assistants, and technical colleges were struggling to fill those classes," Zech said.

To address that need, FutureMakers partnered with **Lee Health**, **CareerSource Southwest Florida**, **Southwest Florida Community Foundation**, and **area technical colleges** to provide better coordination, funding, and other resources necessary to bolster the CNA program. To that end, the county hosted an informational event in January 2016.

"Fifty seven individuals showed up, which blew our minds because we were expecting four," Zech said.

Zech added that the number of open CNA positions at Lee Health fell from 90 to 13 after a year and a half. In describing the reasons this particular initiative succeeded, Zech also encapsulated the spirit of all statewide efforts to improve postsecondary attainment.

“We have found that collaboration is key,” she said.

The presentations were well-received by the committee members, who commented on the need in Florida to improve student outcomes through the kinds of community partnerships the panelists described.

“I want to congratulate the four of you for an outstanding presentation today to us,” said **Rep. Charles Clemons, R-Newberry**. “As a college administrator, I’m always moved and touched by some of the very compelling stories of our nontraditional students who face many, many more obstacles than our traditional students do. They are working, they have children, they have illnesses, they have \$500 cars that is their only form of transportation to their job, which is the key to their education.”

“Government is not meant to be the answer to everybody’s problem,” said **Rep. Mel Ponder, R-Destin**. “I love that you’ve taken the reigns to set the standard for your region to bring about transformation.”

“First of all I want to thank you all for your presentations and the overall concept of breaking down silos and integrating partnerships that have measurable outcomes, [which] can be a significant challenge,” said **Rep. Ramon Alexander, D-Tallahassee**. “I appreciate you all doing that.”

A [video recording](#) of the presentation can be viewed on the Florida Channel website, with [slides available through the Florida House of Representatives archive](#).

*Pictured (left to right): Laurie Meggesin, Executive Director, Florida College Access Network; Jennifer McFarren, Community Development Representative, Gulf Power Company and Achieve Escambia partner; Michelle Zech, Human Resources Business Partner, Lee Health and FutureMakers Coalition partner; Jessica Kleinberger, Destination Graduation Manager, Heart of Florida United Way and Central Florida College Access Network partner; Nicole Washington, Higher Education Policy Consultant, Lumina Foundation.*

### **About Florida College Access Network**

The mission of the Florida College Access Network is to create and strengthen a statewide network that catalyzes and supports communities to improve college and career preparation, access, and completion for all students. Our Big Goal is to increase the percentage of Florida residents who hold a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential to 60% by the year 2025. For more information, visit [www.floridacollegeaccess.org](http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org).

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