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## **Florida-Michigan alliance may attract younger folks**

By SOMMER BROKAW STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

CHARLOTTE COUNTY - A Florida SouthWestern State College/Western Michigan University alliance may turn the tide on the area's aging population.

New opportunities for continuing education that can enhance career paths should draw young families here, according to college officials.

"One has to be open to continuing education and earning more advanced degrees as time goes on," said FSW Dean of the School of Business and Technology John Meyer. "The ability to have that career ladder and be able to get on and off it at various points is exactly the right thing for the younger family."

Academic programs offered through this alliance have been designed based on community need and potential impact on economic development. Western Michigan University announced recently that the Higher Learning Commission approved its request to offer aviation programs and advanced degree and certificate programs in health care in Florida. The HLC is the accrediting organization. Associate Provost Dawn Gaymer of WMU's Extended University Programs said both health care and aviation fields are filled by a lot of people in their late 20s and early 30s. And the goal is to have local jobs for them.

WMU's Extended University Programs operation is for WMU's higher education and professional development beyond the main campus.

More young working families moving to the area can help with not only local economic development, but also growth of secondary schools. The district has grappled with the loss of 2,253 students since 2004, decreasing the amount of state funding per student.

"Any time we can bring in additional programs for our students, it helps us become more competitive with surrounding areas," said Charlotte County Public Schools Superintendent Schools Steve Dionisio.

According to U.S. Department of Labor data, 23,000 pilots and flight engineers are in their mid-20s to early 30s - 16 percent out of 141,000. This is around the average age people have children. Also, 32,000 - about 23 percent - are in the mid-30s to early 40s.

Gaymer added that these are jobs in high demand.

"We look at market demand and job outlook to determine which programs are needed and where and I would say nationally, actually globally, this (aviation) is a very significant need," Gaymer said. "On the maintenance side, some leading experts have indicated that the need will double over the next 20 years."

Meyer added that "for every pilot who retires, you need three to six technicians, so the need for technicians is huge."

FSW Spokesperson Teresa Araque said this need is particularly acute in Charlotte County with Punta Gorda Airport's expansion.

"Especially in Charlotte County, people who maintain and repair planes are getting ready to retire, and same thing goes with pilots," Araque said. "There's not enough people to replace them."

WMU also has more advanced health care degrees, which FSW nursing students can use to advance their careers as nurse practitioners.

"Health care is in high demand, so by being able to offer additional programs in training and education, Charlotte County benefits once again," Araque said.

The alliance announced last October with the unveiling of a sign across from FSW State College on Airport Road in Punta Gorda, included collaboration with county officials.

Chair of the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners Bill Truex spoke about its importance when the alliance was announced.

"FSW has always been a pillar in this community, and with the addition of WMU, our community will reach greater heights," Truex said back in October. "These two strategic, successful universities will help to illuminate our workforce availability, attract businesses and expand our economic development even more."

A major impetus for the alliance was WMU's need to expand its aviation program.

"With our proximity to the airport and our ability to have proximity with a hangar on our campus, it's a win-win for not only the two institutions, but the Charlotte County region," Araque said.

WMU will move forward with its plans to launch aviation flight science and aviation management and operations programs this fall. The aviation flight science program will be offered on the campus of FSW and at the Punta Gorda Airport through collaborative efforts with the Charlotte County Airport Authority. Aviation management and operations programs will be offered online.

For more information on enrollment, visit: [wmich.edu/florida](http://wmich.edu/florida).

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