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The James Madison Institute

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CONTACT US

Mail The James Madison Institute The Columns 100 North Duval Street Tallahassee, FL 32301
Phone 850-386-3131 **Email** jmi@jamesmadison.org **Website** www.jamesmadison.org

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Powering Florida's Economy: A Modernized Workforce Development System to Sustain Growth

Katie Adams & Mukta Pandit

Florida's economic trajectory tells a story of dynamism and possibility. Over the past decade, the state has outpaced the nation in population growth, business formation, and GDP expansion. New residents arrive at a rate of more than 1,000 per day, motivated to move to the Sunshine State by economic freedom, favorable taxes, and quality of life. Yet beneath this

prosperity lies a growing tension: Florida's labor market is tightening, skills gaps are widening, and the trifecta of AI, automation, and global economic shifts is accelerating the need for industry-informed educational pathways and workforce training able to produce the "future-ready" workers required to sustain the state's growth.

The question facing Florida

policymakers is not whether the state can continue to grow, but whether that growth is moving in the most competitive and sustainable direction. Strategic investments toward preparing more Floridians for the high-demand jobs emerging across manufacturing, healthcare, logistics, and technology need to be accelerated to avoid ceding ground to other similarly competitive states.

Florida's Labor Market: Strength at the Surface, Friction Below

On paper, Florida's labor market appears remarkably strong. The state's unemployment rate is hovering near 3.8 percent, below the national average. Non-agricultural employment has exceeded 10 million jobs this year, and private-sector job growth continued to outpace the U.S. overall.¹

However, headlines can obscure a more complex and longer-term challenge. Employers in nearly every region report persistent difficulty finding qualified workers. According to the Florida Department of Commerce, more than half a million jobs remain open statewide, concentrated in sectors that require advanced technical, healthcare, or digital skills.²

Meanwhile, labor market participation has plateaued even as population growth continues. Florida's labor-force participation rate, at roughly 59 percent, lags the national average, a reflection of both an aging population and a growing number of working-age adults who lack post-secondary credentials or relevant training.³

The result is a mismatch between economic opportunity and workforce capacity. Businesses continue to expand, but employers in the state's top industries are

having difficulty filling jobs efficiently while too many Floridians are unaware or unprepared to fill those roles.

The economic consequences of these disconnects can be substantial. Industry analysts such as CEB Gartner estimate job vacancies cost employers on average \$500 per open role per day, with surveys indicating more than \$800,000 in annual lost productivity costs shouldered by employers struggling with prolonged vacancies in the tech sector alone.⁴ For individuals, the costs are equally high. According to the Florida College Access Network's 2024 "State of College Access and Success in Florida" report, slightly less than half of all Florida residents (45.5%) aged 25–64 lack a post-secondary credential.⁵ Individuals without postsecondary training or credentials are often underemployed, working in roles below their potential earnings capacity and not fully contributing to local economic strength. Without accessible, flexible pathways to upskill, and clarity around career pathways for in-demand jobs and industry-valued credentials, they face declining opportunity in a labor market that increasingly rewards specialized knowledge and technical proficiency.

REACHing for a More Aligned Future, Producing a Future-Ready Workforce

Florida has long recognized the importance of linking education to work. However, producing a strong, skilled, and work-ready talent pipeline depends on a large and often disconnected web of stakeholders across what is broadly defined as the workforce development system – namely

postsecondary education providers, local workforce boards, economic development agencies, human services providers, private training providers, and employers. Recognizing this, the state made a structurally significant investment towards improving alignment across the entire workforce development system through passage of the REACH Act in 2021. By establishing the REACH office within the Executive Office of the Governor, system leaders are strongly incentivized to collaborate across a fragmented architecture.

Today the initiative is utilizing a combination of approaches and tools to dramatically increase transparency, collaboration, accountability, and agility aimed at building a future-proof and work-ready talent pipeline for Florida employers. Three highlighted aspects of that work include:

- **“No Wrong Door”** – Students, career seekers, parents, employers and even providers face a maze of choices about where to begin interacting with the workforce development system. Through the “no wrong door” approach, agencies are mandated to ensure that those customers don’t have to visit multiple agencies to get immediately connected to the right service. Using a “one intake, one case management” framework saves people time, but also increases visibility and accountability across service providers to ensure no duplication of services and that taxpayer resources are being fully optimized to get people the best, most appropriate training and to ensure that employers have a motivated pool of employees.
- **REACH Online Data/Dashboard** – To maximize federal and state investments in workforce development and more quickly and efficiently produce the workforce employers need, the REACH Act established a requirement for an online data dashboard that clearly visualizes labor market, training, credential and program outcome information. While the state is building toward a truly unified, comprehensive publicly-accessible dashboard, the state’s workforce system – CareerSource Florida – is significantly increasing transparency by providing information via their Analytics site such as:
 - Letter grades – each local workforce board is given a letter grade based on performance metrics tied to the REACH Act;
 - Board performance dashboard – showing each local board’s outcomes relative to REACH goals which are also aligned with their federal Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) performance metrics;
 - Funding dashboard – showing funding by source for each board;
 - Business and workforce dashboard – tracking how the state’s boards and partners serve business (through producing needed talent supply) as well as individuals (through job placements) aligned with in-demand occupations;
 - Barriers to Employment dashboard – highlighting the most common hurdles cited by jobseekers across

all local workforce boards as compared to the state average;

- CLIFF (“Career Ladder Identifier and Financial Forecaster”) tool – to help individuals receiving or eligible for public assistance understand how age changes, job changes, and training affects benefit eligibility and budget planning.
- **Credentials Review Committee** – The mandated committee is not only ensuring a common, easily understood definition of “value” for both academic and non-academic credentials, but is also providing a highly visible “Master Credentials List”⁶ of credentials that align with in-demand jobs and meet wage criteria. This is critically important for educators, students, parents, and even employers. Educators need to know what credentials matter to hiring employers and their students. Students and their parents want to know which pathways will move them from the classroom into a career. This list provides that clarity.

This work also means that the state’s accredited Title IV providers will be well-positioned to access the new federally approved Workforce Pell Grant set to launch in July 2026. The new program extends the Federal Pell Grant to shorter term workforce-aligned training programs. Eligible programs must be between eight and 15 weeks long and provide enrolled students with 155 - 600 hours of instruction.”. These programs must be approved by the Governor as being aligned to high-skill/in-demand sectors,

meeting employer hiring requirements, leading to recognized, stackable credentials and counting for academic credit.

Building a Modern, Market-Aligned System

The state has made significant investments toward building a modern workforce development system that can move to meet market demands, ensuring state economic competitiveness and growing opportunities for Floridians. However, that work needs to be sustained and accelerated. The goal is not to centralize control, but for stakeholders to collectively determine and work collaboratively toward core “north star” imperatives driving forward-looking education and workforce development planning.

1. AUTHENTICALLY ENGAGING EMPLOYERS AS CO-PRODUCERS OF TALENT

Ensuring economic growth and growing individual opportunity requires viewing employers not as consumers of the educational system “product” (e.g., high school or college graduates) but as invested partners in educating and skill-building their future workforce who are sitting in today’s classrooms. Florida’s commitment to Registered Apprenticeship expansion is a clear and promising model. Registered Apprenticeship programs combine classroom instruction with paid on-the-job learning in high-demand occupations. The “earn and learn” model allows apprentices to gain critical skills, industry-valued certifications and often academic credit or even degrees while simultaneously providing employers with a model of talent development that

DOL has cited as delivering 44.3% return on investment for apprentice productivity, or \$144.30 in total benefits for every \$100 invested by an employer.⁷

The state has exponentially grown its apprenticeship opportunities since 2022 alone:

- The number of **new apprentices has grown by 67.03%** from 5,823 in FY 2022 to 9,726 in FY 2025.
- The number of **active apprentices has grown by 51.39%** from 13,043 in FY 2022 to 19,746 in FY 2025.
- The number of **completed apprentices has grown by 57.71%** from 2,100 in FY 2022 to 3,312 in FY 2025

In fact, the state was one of the first in the U.S. to develop a sustained apprenticeship grant program. The Florida Department of Education (FL DOE) Pathways to Career Opportunities Grant (PCOG) program has benefitted 263 grantees who have invested in standing up and expanding pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs since PCOG program inception in 2019-20.⁸

However, there are still critical apprenticeship and workforce development system gaps, in particular for Floridians being served by local workforce boards through WIOA Title I funded services. For the rolling four quarters ending March 31, 2025, of the 15,807 Floridians served through the Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, or Youth programs, only 838 of those individuals, or 5.30%, were supported into paid training through apprenticeship programs. The state's numbers, as reported through local

workforce boards to the state and DOL are, however, moving in the right direction – from 3.87% in program year (PY) 22 to 4.93% in PY 23 and, most recently, 5.30%.

Policymakers should continue collaborative work with the apprenticeship and workforce systems, as well as key postsecondary apprenticeship program sponsors and related training instructors operating programs who are working with employers such as Miami Dade College, to identify areas for further alignment. Areas such as streamlining program approval processes, increasing financial incentives for small businesses to sponsor or participate in the program, and utilizing WIOA set-aside funds to pilot models for increasing apprenticeship in key sectors for the state economy recognizes and leverages private investment to produce significant, tangible public good.

2. MODULARIZE, STACK AND ARTICULATE CREDENTIALS

While Florida's state college system largely operates on traditional degree pathways, it can accelerate work being done by individual colleges to grow industry partnerships to inform and increase development of modular credentials. These shorter-term programs result in immediately recognized industry certifications and often "stack" toward higher certifications and/or degrees.

For example, Florida State College of Jacksonville offers 17 non-credit Career Certificates (CCs) as well as 66 Technical Certificates (TCs) supporting mobility into in-demand roles such as Radiation Therapy Specialists, Aviation Airframe Mechanics,

and Data Science Technicians. These TCs also result in college credit toward an academic degree. Miami Dade College runs a full stackable system of 72 College Credit Certificates (CCCs) and 35 Career Technical Certificates (CTCs) that integrate 49 industry-valued certifications and are mapped to 65 associate's in science degrees or 17 bachelor's degree pathways.

Colleges should coordinate across regional economies and convene industry consortiums to focus development of complementary stackable certificate programs and avoid unnecessary duplication, particularly for programs that can utilize entirely virtual instructional delivery.

Another approach to accelerating students' time from classroom to career is transparent articulation frameworks for industry certifications. Broward College uses clear credit for prior learning standards to help students convert micro-credentials or industry certifications into college credit which can be applied toward Technical Certificates and Associates degrees. This approach values time invested by students or current workers toward career mobility, reduces duplicative in-classroom time and lowers the cost of pursuing additional training and certificate or degree attainment.

Enabling students to earn credentials in a shorter timeframe supports both individual responsibility and market mobility. Workers can improve their skills without leaving the labor force and employers build a stronger, more sustainable talent pipeline more quickly. The FL DOE's Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP)'s "Workforce Education Reports" provides the data infrastructure

to support this approach, linking program completions with employment and wage outcomes.⁹

3. INCENTIVIZE EMPLOYER AND INDIVIDUAL FLORIDIAN ENGAGEMENT IN TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Florida can expand its use of proven tools to stimulate both employer and individual career seeker participation in the state's workforce development strategies. Tools should include expansion of targeted tax incentives, focused competitive grants, workforce system Incumbent Worker Training, use of Individual Training Accounts and On-the-Job Training contracts, and supportive services. Incentives should be outcome-based and primarily focused on sectors with clear occupational demands to ensure the highest return for the funds and time invested by the state and Floridians. Several industries merit particular focus:

- Advanced Manufacturing and Logistics - Florida has added more than 36,000 manufacturing jobs since 2019, representing roughly ten percent sector growth.¹⁰ The state's location, infrastructure, and tax climate position it as a logistics hub for the Southeast, but automation and advanced manufacturing technologies require a technically skilled workforce. Modern apprenticeships, short-term certificate programs for key occupations, and allocating more funding toward employer-sponsored upskilling programs could close this gap more quickly.

- Healthcare and Life Sciences - Healthcare remains Florida's largest industry sector, projected to grow by nearly 14 percent through 2032 in the Capital Region alone (Gadsden, Leon, and Wakulla counties).¹¹ Yet shortages persist in nursing, allied health, and clinical support roles. Expanding dual-enrollment programs, competency-based credentials, and apprenticeship models in healthcare could alleviate shortages while providing residents with pathways to high-wage, high-demand careers.
- Technology and Professional Services - As remote-enabled firms relocate to Florida, digital skills are emerging as the new baseline. Expanding credential programs in cybersecurity, data analytics, and digital business services—often delivered in partnership with industry—will ensure Florida's workforce can compete in a technology-driven economy without expanding government programs or subsidies.

Florida's Competitive Advantage—and the Risk of Complacency

Florida's economic competitiveness can only be sustained by a shared understanding across industry, education, and workforce that local, regional, state and even global economic strength rises and falls on the ability to adapt quickly to technological

and demographic change. States that fail to understand and invest in agile and well-aligned workforce development system-building will find that businesses and jobs move elsewhere. Florida's business-friendly climate will be insufficient to sustain long-term growth in the face of fragmented educational and workforce systems.

The good news is that the state has all the raw ingredients for success: a diverse economy, strong employer networks, innovative educational institutions, and a culture that prizes entrepreneurship. Key stakeholders have already begun important work toward market-aligned innovation. Continued focus on coordinating and optimizing state investments and approaches under a coherent, industry-engaged framework will support the state's goal of becoming the model for sustainable workforce development.

The state's prosperity is real, but its continuation depends on whether its education and workforce systems can continue evolving to meet the demands of a changing economy. A modern, aligned workforce development system that coordinates all stakeholders, works with industry, grounds itself in data-driven decision-making, emphasizes transparency, and ensures accessibility will not only close the skills gap but also strengthen Florida's economy and growing opportunity for generations to come.

The path forward does not require centralizing control but, using the REACH Act model, intentional coordination across stakeholders. That work will ultimately

empower individuals and employers to act, invest their own resources, reap results, and continually grow both personal economic mobility and business competitive advantage for decades to come.

Katie Adams is the managing director at Safal Partners. Mukta Pandit is the CEO at Safal Partners. Safal Partners is a mission-driven small business partnering with clients to effectively strengthen America's workforce, classrooms, and communities.

ENDNOTES

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