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Class of 2012

*Each spring, our colleges and universities graduate thousands of students with real-world skills. Meet six of this year’s outstanding grads.*

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Our region is home to 12 institutions of higher learning, enrolling more than 29,000 students—from traditional 18-year-olds fresh out of high school to single moms and dads in midlife taking evening and weekend classes so they can start a new career. Students can get a variety of professional degrees, among them nursing, criminal justice, homeland security, computer animation, human resources management and even, at two local institutions, a degree in medicine. We took a look at this year’s graduating class and chose six top students about to unleash their talents on the region and the world.
Kim Vassell, 24, graduates this month from the University of South Florida’s School of Hotel and Restaurant Management—the first USF school established off the main Tampa campus. Founded in 2003, it has produced 120 graduates who’ve gone on to management positions at companies like the Helmsley Sandcastle and Thayer Lodging Group. Vassell is one of 2012’s standout graduates.

The Jamaican native founded the campus chapter of the National Society of Minorities in Hospitality, served as events coordinator for the association of Hospitality, Financial and Technology Professionals, and was a member of the Hospitality Society. She’s attended hospitality conferences in Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Las Vegas, and recently had lunch with the CEO of Marriott International. In her spare time, she volunteers at local high schools speaking to at-risk students.

This summer, after a year-long internship with Tampa-based McKibbon Hotel Management, Vassell plans to join the company full-time in an entry-level accounting position—the next step before she returns to USF-SM to pursue an M.B.A.

Vassell credits USF-SM’s small classes and “private-university feel” with her burgeoning career. But she also recognizes the part she’s played in her own success and tells high school students, “Get involved. Don’t just be a face in the crowd. Make your mark.” — Hannah Wallace
Brian Cogburn’s passion for helping underserved populations started in high school, on a trip to Tanzania with Medical Missions International, where he worked with doctors in a small rural clinic helping to deliver primary care. “After that trip, I knew [medicine] was what I wanted to do,” he says.

After two years at Florida State University College of Medicine in Tallahassee, Cogburn, 27 and a Venice native, headed to FSU’s regional campus in Sarasota for his final two years of clinical training. Established in 2000, FSU’s medical school has created a unique model that sends its third- and fourth-year students to campuses across the state to work in clinical practices and local hospitals instead of having them finish their studies in the academic environment of the medical school. The hope is that the real-life experience will encourage their interest in becoming primary care physicians in Florida and communities of greatest need. The downtown Sarasota campus has approximately 40 students.

During his time at FSU, Cogburn continued to do medical work in Africa. He led 10 fellow students and FSU faculty on a trip to Gulu, Uganda, where the team partnered with local nonprofit Hearts Afire to set up a primary care clinic. Cogburn also worked alongside African doctors and students last November in Kenyan and Tanzanian hospitals, an experience that convinced him to do his residency in internal and
preventive medicine at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in San Francisco, which will pay for him to get a master’s degree in public health at UC Berkeley. “This will be a great platform for me to do an infectious disease fellowship and work for the World Health Organization or the CDC,” he says. “I’m really excited!”—Sarah Gassel

New College of Florida student Naushin Jiwani, 21, who was born in India, initially wanted to be a lawyer. But a freshman class in Chinese language changed her path. Combining fluency in Chinese with her native Hindi, she realized, would enable her to communicate with half the world. For the last four years, she has directed her language studies toward her interest in developing countries, social issues and education.

This interdisciplinary approach to learning is common at New College, Florida’s honors liberal arts college, which is consistently ranked as one of the top in the nation. “The great thing about New College is that it allows you to take a host of different classes in
different disciplines,” Jiwani says. “I didn’t want to narrow myself to economic
development. I took sociology of development, political development.”

Jiwani received a National Science Foundation grant to study in China in 2010 and won
a Critical Language Scholarship to study there this summer. She was also offered a
position on the field research team of the Rural Education Action project in China to
study computer-assisted learning.

In addition to the research position in rural China, Jiwani has her pick of post-grad
programs, including a two-year stint with Teach for India and a Ph.D. program in
England. Though she sees herself as a researcher, she is equally interested in the
practical application of her findings—“influencing policymakers, working with local
governments,” she says. “Academia is great, but it’s really about making actual, real-life
changes.” —Hannah Wallace
When Curtis Anderson’s high school English teacher in Ohio caught him doodling and asked him to stay after class, he assumed he was in trouble. Instead, Anderson’s teacher told him about the Ringling College of Art and Design.

Initially an illustration major, Anderson is graduating from Ringling’s advertising design program after discovering he liked collaboration. “I was emerging as a social butterfly,” he says, “and I realized I couldn’t sit in a studio and draw by myself for the rest of my life.” Ringling’s advertising design major is in its first year and gives students real budgets and clients, such as Tervis Tumbler. Already its students are winning local advertising awards and have their career sights set on Disney and DreamWorks.

Anderson won the Trustee Scholar award, the college’s highest honor for exceptional talent and leadership, and the Avant Garde scholarship for the most outstanding volunteer at Ringling College. One of his favorite projects was with Habitat for Humanity, when he and other students partnered with a school from Michigan to clean, paint and beautify a long wall near Newtown. He also has been selected as the student commencement speaker at this month’s graduation.

The 22-year-old is pursuing job opportunities in advertising, like one with DreamWorks Animation, and he plans to continue volunteering in his free time. “I feel confident about whatever happens,” Anderson says.

Christian McGowan
Everglades University, Aviation Management

Christian McGowan, 29, joined the Army after high school and became an Avionics Systems Technician, inspecting and repairing aircraft and radar equipment. A career in aviation had been a lifelong dream: “I’ve never wanted to do anything else,” he says.

After eight years in the military, he developed an interest in the management side of aviation. He was happy to discover that Everglades University in Sarasota offers a degree in this specialty. The aviation management program was established in 2000 and graduates between 40 and 50 students every year. “The teachers have a lot of
aviation experience,” says McGowan, “and you get one-on-one time so they can really work with you.”

Even though he had to put school on pause for an unexpected deployment to Iraq in 2008, McGowan earned Dean's List honors eight times and is graduating this month with a 3.8 GPA. Before graduation, he landed a local job with the Federal Aviation Administration as a management and program analyst, and he still spends free time helping younger students network to find jobs in aviation.

McGowan hopes to eventually be promoted to an aviation inspector—which would allow him to inspect airports and equipment around the country while staying based in Sarasota, where his wife is an immigration paralegal. “That’s my ultimate goal,” he says. “That could be the rest of my career right there.”—Beau Denton

A few years ago, Andrew Sink, an electronics hobbyist, found himself building audio processors, amplifiers and synthesizers for friends in his spare time. Sink, now 23, had already begun a degree in music composition at State College of Florida, but quickly concluded that, “You can’t eat if you’re a musician.”

He decided instead to pursue electronics through SCF’s Engineering Technology Program, a brand-new program that emphasizes skills in alternative energy and sustainability, which are in high demand in manufacturing and construction.

Sink began working on solar energy projects as part of his studies, and will graduate with an associate’s degree in applied science this month. He was one of only eight students in Florida to be selected to attend the Iberian Partnership for Technical
Excellence in San Sebastián, Spain, this summer, where he will receive training in alternative energy and energy efficiency. When he returns, he has a job as a test lab technician in the research and development department at ETCO Inc., an electrical manufacturer in Bradenton.

“Working in research and development has been something I’ve wanted to explore for a long time, so having an entry-level job in that is pretty solid,” says Sink.

He also plans to enroll in SCF’s energy technology management program to receive a bachelor of applied science degree and does not rule out the possibility of graduate school.

“My dream job would be to be an inventor, a tinkerer,” says Sink. “Instead of working with one specific thing, I’d be working with ideas.”—Sarah Gassel