College pursuing four-year program

MCC: School wants to offer degrees in nursing, education and sciences

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MANATEE COUNTY — Manatee Community College has long been a home for students seeking two-year associate degrees as a step toward careers in nursing or teaching. But about 80 percent of the school's graduates end up leaving the area to complete their degrees, MCC officials say.

Many do not return, leaving local companies struggling to find qualified entry-level workers. MCC officials hope to reverse that trend by starting to offer four-year bachelor's degree programs in those and other fields.

MCC's Board of Trustees voted Wednesday to seek approval from the state to offer bachelor's degrees in nursing, education and some science fields. If successful, upper-level classes needed to get a bachelor's degree could begin as soon as January 2010.

The college, which serves Sarasota and Manatee counties, would join a growing number of Florida community colleges that are increasingly offering the same degrees as four-year universities.

Ten of Florida's 28 community colleges already offer four-year degrees, including St. Petersburg College and Edison College in Fort Myers. Some have changed their names, dropping the word "community" to reflect their new status.

MCC President Lars Hafner said the degree programs would help the college meet the region's need for skilled workers, particularly qualified nurses.

"If you take the pulse of the campus and the community, you can see there is a true need out there," Hafner said.

MCC's bid to expand its programs has received strong support from local employers including Manatee Memorial Hospital, which would be able to send nurses with one year of training to MCC to qualify as registered nurses.

"It will save time and expense on travel to Tampa and other locations," said Vernon DeSears, vice president of marketing for the hospital.

"This will be wonderful opportunity for students, nurses and hospitals."

MCC's move comes at a time when enrollment at MCC is at an all-time high of almost 11,000 students.

The college has benefited from universities like the University of Florida and University of South Florida raising admission standards and limiting enrollment because of cuts in state funding.

Lower tuition fees and the chance to save money by living at home also make community colleges more attractive at a time when many families are struggling financially.

Hafner said MCC is not looking to compete or duplicate degree programs offered at the University of South Florida's Sarasota-Manatee campus.

MCC FROM 1B

POSSIBLE PROGRAMS

Manatee Community College is seeking state approval to begin offering 4-year degree programs in the following fields:

- Nursing
- Math and science education to teach at middle and high school
- Applied science degree in the following tracks: environmental studies, exercise science and nutrition, health care management, nonprofit leadership and management, radiologic sciences and technology management.

The school is planning to conduct a study to confirm the demand for qualified students in the fields in which it may offer bachelor's degrees.

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