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Pandemic leads to bigger enrollment at DeSoto's South Florida State College

By TED CARTER Sun Correspondent
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South Florida State College DeSoto Campus Director Asena Mott
photo provided

Health risks of the coronavirus have led students from DeSoto and other nearby counties to opt for online courses from South Florida State College campuses this fall instead of attending universities.



The result: Student numbers at the Arcadia school and the college's three other campuses exceed last year's COVID-free fall term, DeSoto campus director Asena Mott said.

"The increase we have noticed has been more of students choosing to stay around rather than going to universities while the pandemic is around," she said.

The main job for Mott and Dr. Thomas Leitzel, president of the four-campus college, is achieving a balance of safety and learning. The report card for the first month shows a passing grade, said Mott, in a late September interview.

"They are going well," she said of the Aug. 21 start of a mix of classroom instruction, combinations of classroom and virtual learning, and full virtual instruction.

Student credit enrollments at the Arcadia, Wachula, Avon Park and Lake Placid campuses are up 3% over the fall term of 2019. The Arcadia campus signed up 322 students in advanced and professional instruction; 32 in vocational instruction and seven in supplemental instruction.

The advanced and professional instruction is delivered both from the classroom and online, while vocational instruction in power line work and construction trades is done face to face, including an evening corporate-sponsored welding class, Mott said.

The online enrollment trend for South Florida State College is similar to increases showing up at community colleges nationally, according to surveys that indicate concerns over COVID-19 are leading university students to opt for online classes from community colleges. They also are attracted by costs typically well below that of their universities and confidence the classes will count toward university degrees.

"Those credits are transferable without" difficulty, Mott said, and added SFSC's \$80 per credit hour are a strong enticement.

"There are some pretty good benefits for getting prerequisites here," she said. "The classes are small, and they know you by name."

A student from, say, Florida Gulf Coast University, who does not want to be on the Fort Myers campus this term and next can apply as a "transient" student. "The university would OK it before they take the course," Mott said. "So, the student would be 100% guaranteed."

In contrast to South Florida State's 3% rise in enrollment, Florida university enrollments have dropped about 12%, according to Mott.

Like universities, South Florida State College has bachelor degree and post-graduate offerings. For instance, students can get a bachelor's in business and supervisory management "either online or in person," Mott said.

Gaining students in a pandemic is a feat to be cheered, noted Mott, an Arcadia native and holder of bachelor and advanced degrees from South Florida State College.

"I am so happy," she said. "We are providing what the students need."

Mott estimates that up to three-quarters of the instruction from the DeSoto County is online at the moment. At all four campuses, 80 percent of students are taking online or hybrid courses, the college says. The rest are enrolled in face-to-face classes.

On campus, classrooms are arranged to provide seating that meets CDC social distancing guidelines. Seat numbers are capped depending on a room's square footage, according to Mott.

Students must wear masks inside the classrooms, she said. Instructors have the option to remove masks while delivering lectures, Mott added.

South Florida State College is one of 28 colleges in the Florida College system. Most were previously designated as community colleges and some, such as Tampa's Hillsborough Community College, still are. Scholastic achievement numbers show the void the colleges are filling, especially in small town and rural communities.

In DeSoto County, only 16% of residents have an associate degree, a milestone that comes with completing two years of required instruction, Mott said.

Much of the curriculum — especially in business, the trades and nursing — is geared toward enhancing local employment opportunities for students and helping employers maintain a skilled and educated workforce, according to Mott. "The point of a community college is that we give them what is needed in our region," she said.

BUSINESS/CLASSIFIEDS/ REAL ESTATE

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AVON PARK • LAKE PLACID • SEBRING

SECTION D

Hotel Jacaranda reopens buffet dining

By **BILL ROGERS**
CORRESPONDENT

AVON PARK — Every kind of restaurant has been hit hard by the pandemic and that includes buffets. The coronavirus has forced them to change and do things differently.

The Hotel Jacaranda has done that with new safety measures. But what hasn't changed is that it is still going to serve what people travel to the historic hotel in Avon Park for ... Southern cooking including that tasty fried chicken.

The Jacaranda will bring back its lunch buffet this week. Beginning Monday, operating hours will be from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. daily except Saturday when the restaurant is closed.

Glenn Little, vice president of administrative services at South Florida State College, said there

were discussions among those involved while the restaurant was closed during the pandemic about the plan to reopen. Little said they didn't want to lose the buffet concept.

"That's what we are known for," he said.

Guidelines have been put in place for diners and employees.

All diners will be required to wear face coverings prior to entering the building. Guests must wear face coverings unless seated in the dining room. Gloves will be available for use by guests and employees. Hand sanitizer will also be provided.

All employees must have their temperature checked prior to starting a shift. All employees are required to wear a face covering prior to entering the building and throughout their shift.

All serving utensils will be changed every 30 minutes on all serving areas including ice scoops.

All chairs are to be sanitized after each guest leaves, along with any high-touch areas. Table cloths will be replaced after each use. Salt and pepper shakers and sugar caddies will be sanitized after each guest use. They will be stored on the back counter. Servers will ask guests if they need these items when taking the drink orders.

The annual Oktoberfest event will be held Oct. 29 from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. It will showcase the talents of the students in the culinary program.

For those who are new to the area, the South Florida State College Foundation Inc. purchased the hotel in 1988. As a result of a partnership with the college, students hone their skills by training in the hotel's kitchen.

Little said the restaurant will begin offering dinner

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in November or early December.

Another buffet that is back in business is the Hibachi in Sebring. Located at 2870 US 27 N., it is open seven days a week.

SFSC Partners With Florida DOE For 'Get There' Workforce Education Initiative

By **MELISSA KUEKNLE**
Special To The Herald-Advocate

South Florida State College (SFSC) has joined forces with the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) for a new workforce education initiative aimed at raising awareness of short-term career and technical education programs.

"Get There" is a campaign to position career and technical education as a solution to workforce needs. The Get There campaign highlights the key benefits of the programs available locally in Highlands, DeSoto, and Hardee counties, and to all Floridians statewide.

"SFSC is proud to join 75 institutions throughout Florida and the Department of Education to help our residents get jobs or advance in their careers with new skills," said Dr. Thomas Leitzel, president of SFSC. "We want to ensure Floridians know the College is here to offer them a quality education that will serve them for years to come."

Career and technical educa-

tion, often referred to as "CTE," serves as a critical component in preparing individuals for occupations important to Florida's economic development. Program offerings are organized into 17 career paths and are geared toward middle school, high school, district technical school, and Florida College System students throughout the state.

"Get There accelerates student success, preparing them for their future and ensuring a talented workforce," said Kathy Hebda, Chancellor of the Florida College System. "With 28 state colleges and 48 technical colleges and centers spanning the state, there is a program for everyone. Whether you've recently experienced job loss, graduated high school or are simply looking for a career change or opportunity to stack your credentials into a degree - we want to help you Get There."

Students can enroll in an in-demand, high-quality work-

force program, move quickly, and gain critical skills needed in the Heartland's essential and emerging industries. At SFSC, 17 rapid credential programs are available: automation; automotive service technology; carpentry/roofing; CNC machinist/fabricator; commercial driver's license (CDL); correctional officer; electrical; emergency medical technician (EMT); engineering technology support specialist; firefighter I; firefighter II; landscape and horticulture professional; lean manufacturing; nursing assistant; phlebotomy; real estate; and welding.

"Career and technical education matters more than ever," said Henry Mack, chancellor for Career, Technical and Adult Education. "Get There raises awareness about CTE and helps everyone envision the power of a workforce training opportunity for professional and personal wellbeing. By connecting students to high value credentials at our state colleges, we will be sure to reach our goal of becoming No. 1 in workforce education by 2030."

At *GetThereFL.com*, Floridians can learn more about CTE and workforce training programs available at state and technical colleges, align their interests with a career path, and connect with their local institution to enroll.

For information about the 17 programs that can be completed in a short amount of time at SFSC, visit *southflorida.edu/rapid-credentialing* or contact Tom Bohan, college recruiter, at 863-784-7447.

Melissa Kuehnle is Director of Institutional Communications at SFSC and can be reached at kuehnlem@southflorida.edu.