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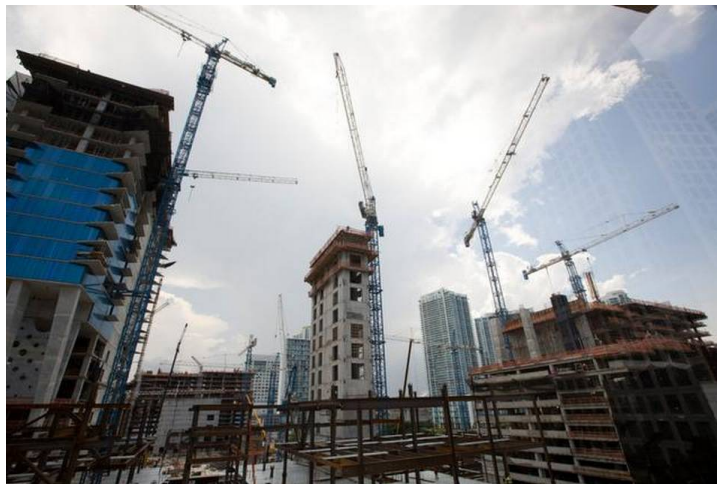
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Miami Dade College receives \$10 million grant to train construction workers

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Construction underway at Brickell City Centre.
(Pictured from L-R) The hotel at Brickell City Centre,
called EAST, Miami, Wellness at Brickell City Centre
and Condo North. EMILY MICHOT/MIAMI HERALD
STAFF

As many recent college graduates are finding out,
simply poring over textbooks, studying theories and
acing exams offers no guarantee of a job.

Employers are looking for more than a degree. They

want a worker who can get to work immediately without the learning curve.

Thanks to a nearly \$10 million government grant, Miami Dade College's School of Architecture could soon become ground zero for such "skilled workers," a term used by businesses suffering from a shortage of trained employees.

The school's new program aims to provide training and education designed for the construction industry in Florida and will be run with three other state colleges.

"This is a great opportunity for the industry, the community and really the whole state," said Lourdes Oroza, president of Miami Dade College's Kendall Campus.

The driving force behind the idea was simple supply and demand, Oroza said.

"We write these grants based on the needs in the community," Oroza said. "Usually it starts with a conversation: 'What does the industry need?'"

The real world will blend with the academic world in this program, with industry experts acting as professors who hold class on a construction site.

The first step, Oroza said, is to develop industry standards and create certifications for the new program.

"What do people who work in the construction industry need to know?" Oroza said.

The length of each training cycle will depend on the

type of certification, the skills needed to perform the task and each student's experience in the field, Oroza said. She added that they can be "as short as a few weeks or as long as a year or two."

Miami Dade College is talking to potential partners in the construction industry.

She expects the program to launch between fall 2015 and spring 2016, and estimates that between 500 and 600 students will participate each year.

Miami Dade College will head a consortium composed of Polk State College, Santa Fe College and Seminole State College. Valenica College in Orlando will receive a \$2.5 million grant.

The five Florida schools are part of a contingent of nearly 270 community colleges that will receive \$450 million in job-driven training grants, the White House announced Monday. The funding is part of the Department of Labor and Department of Education's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training competitive grant program, which is designed to partner schools with employers.

Over the past three years, the government initiative has awarded nearly \$1.5 billion to institutions and communities across the country. Massasoit Community College in Massachusetts and Chippewa Valley Technical College received the largest grants at about \$20 million each.

The experience will be different than for the typical college student.

"These are not professions," Oroza said. "These are

skill-based jobs.”

And the need for those workers is real.

“Unfortunately, I think it’s late coming,” said Mike Neal, CEO of KAST Construction in West Palm Beach. “There’s been a dramatic shortage of skilled workers.”

Think carpenters, drywall framers, block masons.

Why the shortage?

After the housing market collapsed more than five years ago, many workers moved out of Florida looking for jobs.

The demand is so high, Neal added, that some firms get into a bidding war, with construction workers “getting picked off one project for 50 more cents an hour.”

“Florida’s economy is very much construction driven,” Neal said, adding that he doesn’t expect the demand to slow anytime soon. “There’s just so much work that’s been injected into the market so quickly.”

Because of the worker shortage, projects are often delayed.

“It becomes a huge problem if the project can’t open on a set date,” Neal said.

But will high school students want to pass up a four-year degree for a job on a construction site?

According to a USA Today report on the new, emerging job market nestled between low- and high-paying jobs, society’s push to get students into four-year colleges contributes to a shortage of skilled

workers.

"People degrade or demean jobs that don't require a four-year degree. ... That's not what they want their kids to do," William Symonds, who is launching the Global Pathways Institute at Arizona State University, told USA Today. The initiative aims to study the issue and urge policymakers to help students find the best "pathway" to success.

Miami Dade College's new program could be such a pathway, even amid reports that the construction industry is taking hits on a national level.

Construction spending in the U.S. fell in August, marking the second decline in the past three months. Spending dropped a seasonally adjusted 0.8 percent after a 1.2 percent increase in July, according to a Commerce Department report released Wednesday.

Nonetheless, the construction industry in all Florida metro areas is trending upward, said Sean Snaith, an economics professor at the University of Central Florida. Snaith's forecast for the average employment growth for that sector is at 9.3 percent for the state and at 11 percent for the Miami metro area.

"It's the fastest growing sector when it comes to employment growth," Snaith said. "We're forecasting that to continue through 2017."

Snaith agrees that programs like the one at Miami Dade College could become increasingly important because of technological advances in the industry.

"It's going to require an adaptive set of skills for the American workforce," Snaith said. "This kind of

program ... is a win on both sides. It's a win for Florida's economy but also for the students."