

Policy Brief

## A Call For Leadership:

# It's Time For All University Leaders To Contribute Their Ideas To Florida's Higher Education Reform Debate

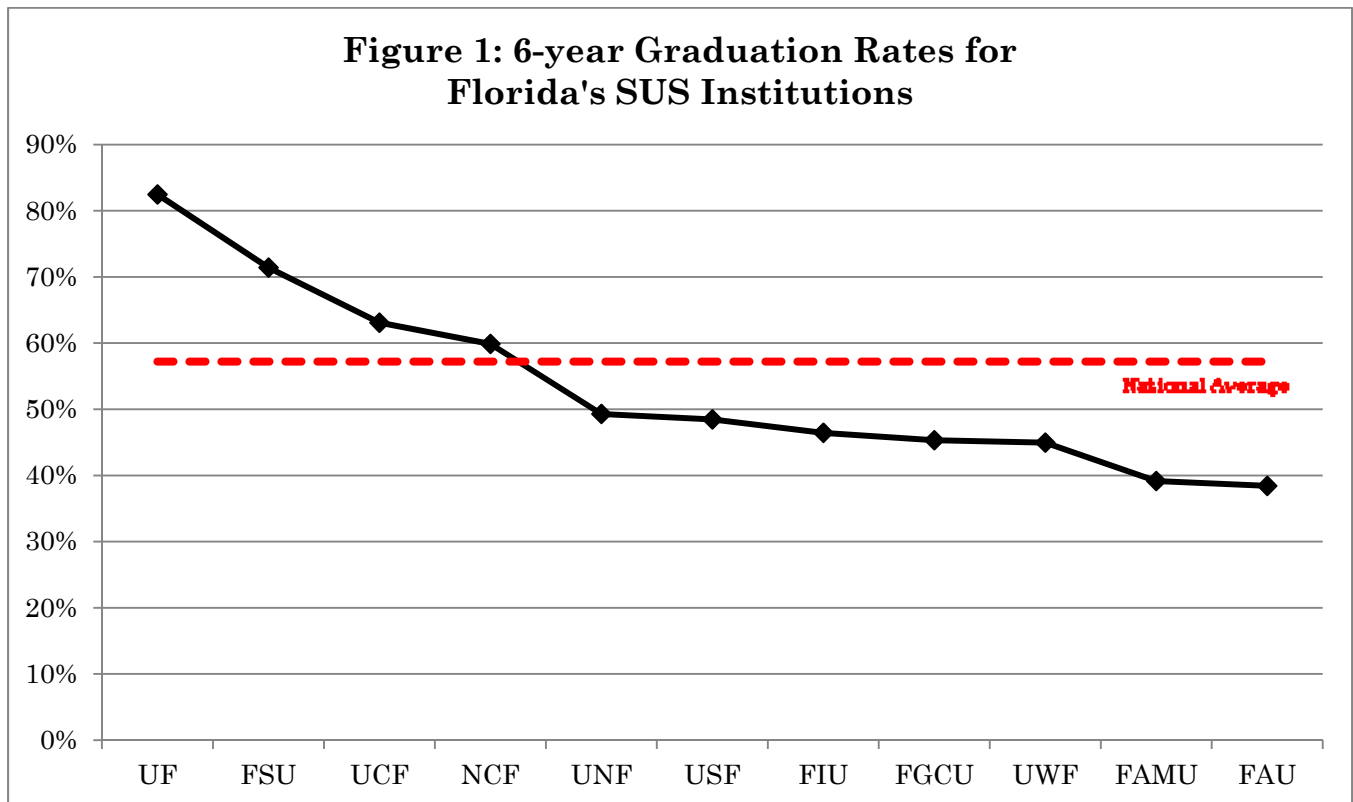
### FLORIDA

The table has been set for the higher education reform debate in Florida. With a new administration come new voices and perspectives that are sure to impact the direction in which we will see our public institutions move. The stale and uncertain economy has presented our higher education leaders with steep challenges, but with changes in state higher education policy certain and forthcoming, space and opportunity exist for university leaders to contribute to the debate and to make significant progress in key policy areas. The general call is simple – increase the number of Florida students who earn high-quality college degrees. What is not so clear is how our leaders will ultimately respond to the call to increase degree productivity under fiscal constraints that are not likely to improve any time soon.

The Florida Board of Governors, along with each president of our state's eleven public universities, should take very seriously the charge of improving student success and higher education productivity as voters from all over the state – *and nation* – pay close attention to reform discussions. Gov. Rick Scott has been vocal about his intention to weigh in with his ideas as he closely examines the higher education reform efforts promoted by Texas Gov. Rick Perry. [The Texas proposal](#) has commanded attention from college officials across the U.S., due in part to the plan's direct measures challenging the faculty tenure process and creating a new accountability system designed to improve instruction.<sup>1</sup> Is exclusively targeting faculty tenure Florida's answer to increasing student success and higher education productivity? Perhaps a broader and more comprehensive approach to reform is necessary. Florida State University president Eric J. Barron proposed a more balanced approach to increase efficiency and develop a more educated workforce in his report, [Breakthrough Solutions for Higher Education: Florida Can Do Better than Texas](#) released early last month.<sup>2</sup> The FSU proposal was followed recently by University of Florida president Bernie Machen, who provided Gov. Scott and other leaders with his [set of recommendations](#) for 'fine-tuning' the higher education system.<sup>3</sup> Gov. Scott has since tapered his talks until recently coming public with his [2012 Job Creation and Economic Growth Agenda](#), presenting a framework for economic development, which includes prioritizing state support for the production of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees.<sup>4</sup>

## Measuring Performance

As the debate kicks off there is broad agreement that significant progress in degree completion rates needs to be made in Florida. In fact, seven of our state's eleven public universities fall below the nation's six-year graduation rate of 57.2-percent. As shown in Figure 1, disparities exist within the State University System (SUS), as the University of Florida and Florida State University outperform all other schools by a healthy margin. As a whole system, Florida has substantial room for improvement, which should be acknowledged by university officials and policy makers alike.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Graduation rates of first-time postsecondary students who started as full-time degree-seeking students, by sex, race/ethnicity, time between starting and graduating, and level and control of institution where student started: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2005, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_341.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_341.asp). SUS figures are from most recent Common Data Sets

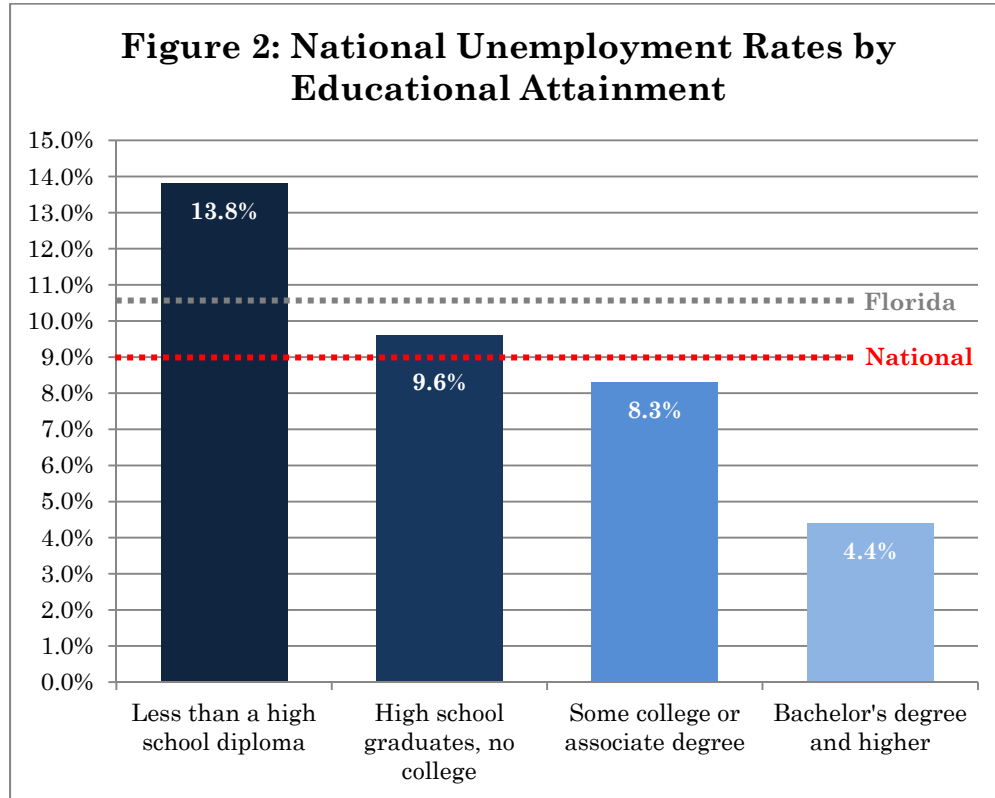
Yet graduation rates are just one way to measure success in higher education. Florida's reform debate around accountability should include how best to use other outcome metrics such as the annual number and percentage of degrees awarded and the average length of years a student takes to earn a degree. In addition to outcome metrics, metrics that measure student progression semester-to-semester and year-to-year should be seriously considered as part of the mix of how we should track Florida's performance. The frequency at which college students actually leave with a high-quality degree stands to remain a key focus of the debate, as recent Florida graduates enter an evolving and highly competitive job market.

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## An Ever-Changing Economy

Florida has the 7<sup>th</sup> highest unemployment rate (10.6%) in the country according to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. The national unemployment rate sits at 9-percent.<sup>5</sup> Yet for those with a bachelor's degree or higher, the unemployment rate has remained significantly lower at 4.4-percent, as shown in Figure 2.



Source: United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics: Seasonally adjusted unemployment rates of civilians ages 25 and over, [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov). High school graduates, no college includes those with high school diploma or equivalent, Bachelor's degree of higher includes persons with bachelor's, master's, professional, and doctoral degrees.

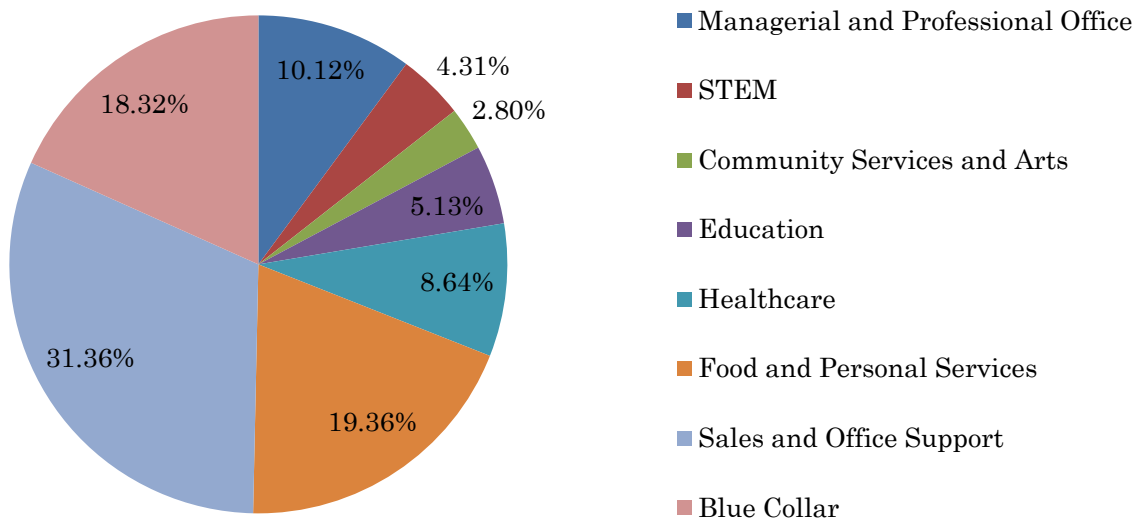
While the role of public universities goes *well* beyond meeting the short-term vocational needs of an economy, the state and its public universities should do more to ensure Florida's labor force needs are met in the future. Projections from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce estimate that between 2008 and 2018, new jobs in Florida requiring postsecondary education and training will grow by 679,000, while jobs for high school graduates and dropouts will grow by 357,000<sup>6</sup>. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of jobs that will exist by occupation in 2018. Matching Florida's labor force demands with its capacity to provide postsecondary degrees will provide the important bridge necessary for college graduates to find or create good paying jobs within the state.

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These projections have serious implications for future first-generation and low-income college students. The increased financial burdens placed on them and their families during their college years, will, as graduates, make the availability of jobs in the marketplace (or their ability to create jobs) extremely vital for paying back student loans and avoiding default. According to the Institute for College Access and Success, the national graduating Class of 2010 saw its debt load increase by 5-percent from last year to \$25,250.<sup>7</sup> College graduates in Florida saw their average debt rise 2.5-percent to \$21,284 during the same time. The upward trend in student loan debt will likely continue. If higher education is to remain a good investment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, college students must choose their academic career paths wisely.

**Figure 3: Projection of Florida Labor Force, by Occupation in 2018**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce

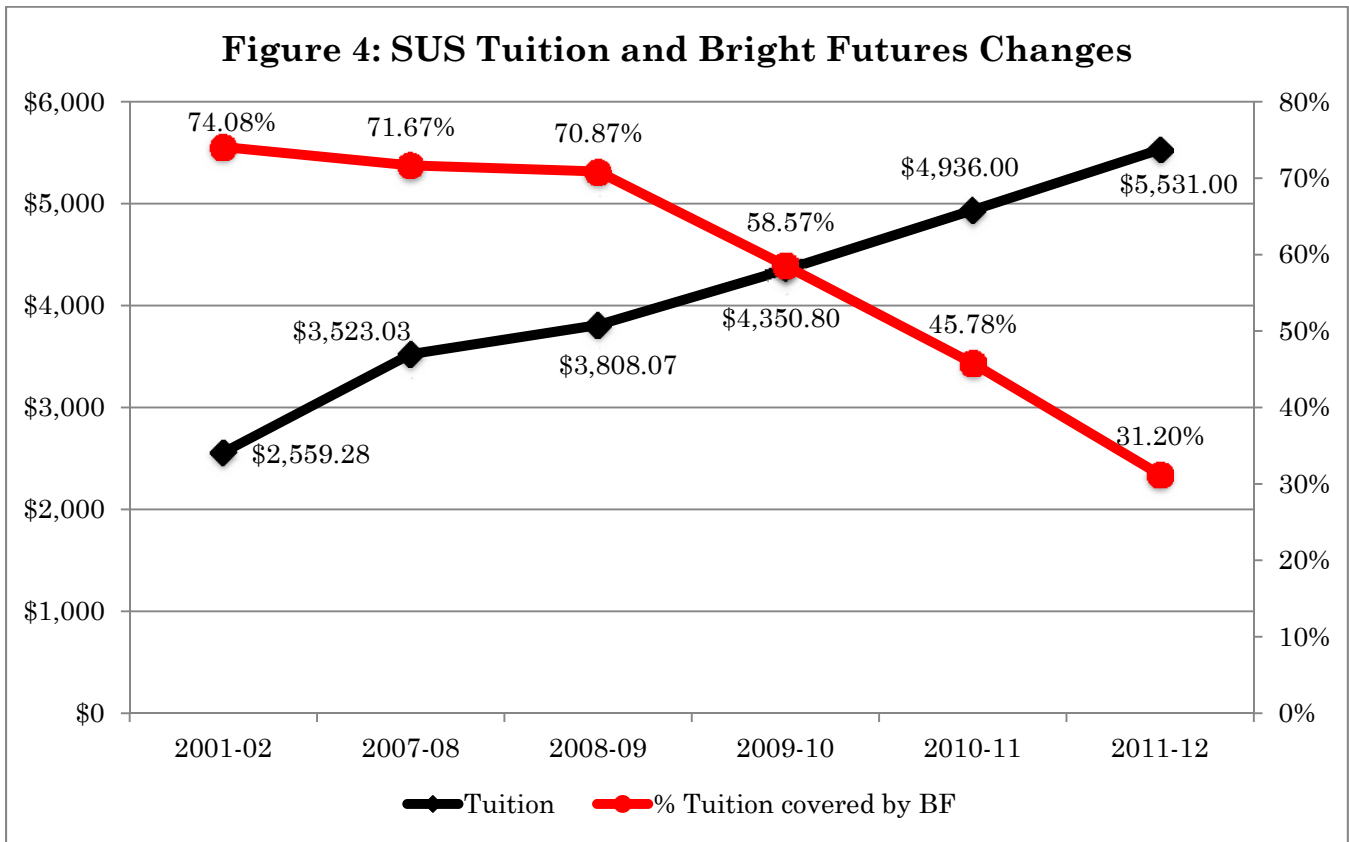
**The Cost-Burden Shift To Students & Families**

The higher education reform debate will not likely remain a two-way conversation between university officials and state policy-makers. Parents and students in Florida are also keeping a keen eye on the impending higher education reform debate. As the cost to attend Florida’s universities has risen and will likely continue to do so, expectations and public demand for accountability will meet all proposals put forth by decision-makers. The number one issue for students and parents will likely be tuition rates, followed closely by financial assistance as another important topic. As seen in Figure 4, tuition prices for SUS institutions have more than doubled in the last ten years while the value of the Bright Futures Scholarship, our state’s most popular financial aid program, has decreased sharply during the last four years. Students and their families have felt the consequences of the decreasing value in financial support from the federal and state government. As a result, institutions must be sensitive to the cumulative effect these financial burdens have on student access to Florida’s universities and should address student and family concerns through better communication strategies and more effective institutional financial aid

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policy. In addition, lawmakers must be delicate in their approach to balance the budget and work with our schools in order to be responsive to the needs of those who are most vulnerable to cuts.



Source: State University System of Florida, Board of Governors, Tuition & Fees: <http://www.flbog.org/about/budget/current.php>  
 Florida Department of Education, Office of Student Financial Assistance, End of Year Reports: <http://www.floridastudentfinancialaid.org/ssfad/home/StateProgramLinks.htm>

### So Where Do We Start?

As discussions continue to develop across sectors, questions about how to shape our higher education system to best serve our students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are paramount. Reform efforts must maintain transparency, be communicated clearly with the public and provide sensible means for accountability and measurement toward goals. The kind of fingerprint the governor would like to leave on higher education has yet to be fully determined, but history is not so kind to short-term, top-down measures to make improvements in education. For this reason, state leaders should begin the debate by setting an ambitious degree attainment goal for Florida and demand from the presidents of our state universities and colleges their list of ideas for reform designed to meet the goal.

The Florida College Access Network (Florida CAN) is calling for leadership at the state and institutional level during this important debate. Fundamental to leadership is setting a clear and transparent goal that can be used to mobilize resources and talents from all sectors. Florida CAN partners and communities across Florida are embracing GOAL 2025, which is to increase the percentage of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60-percent by the year 2025. In Florida, we are currently at 37-percent in this measure. For Florida to meet 60-percent degree attainment by the year 2025, steady

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increases in annual degree production of between 5.7- and 7-percent must be met. Florida's historical degree production growth rate is 4.4-percent. Meeting Goal 2025 calls for at least a 1.3-percent increase above our traditional annual degree production growth rate. Our research suggests this can be done and it can be done in a way that maintains quality using the right mix of student-centered policy changes at the state and local level.

Adopting and promoting a state degree attainment goal is an ideal first step for beginning a constructive dialogue. Such a goal will also support stakeholders of higher education representing the philanthropic, business, municipal, faith-based, and non-profit community to leverage their resources and talents to contribute to a shared vision for Florida. Yet, to achieve such far-reaching aspirations, it is also necessary to create scenarios to make progress in the short-term. Florida CAN recommends the following strategic, short-term pathways towards immediate improvements in postsecondary degree productivity and student success:

- **Incentivize postsecondary training for Floridians who are unemployed or who are returning veterans.**
- **Provide low-cost and flexible mechanisms for working adults who have previously earned some college credits, but have no degree to return to college to earn credentials and/or degrees.** The most current Census data shows over 2-million Florida residents fit into this category, making up 22% of the working-age population in the state.
- **Create incentives for businesses to develop tuition reimbursement programs to encourage their employees to earn degrees.** By improving the skills and abilities of those who are currently employed, employers can support their workers in becoming more dynamic and thereby position their businesses to respond to the talent demands of the future economy.
- **Request that all college and university presidents submit their ideas for improving higher education.** Recommendations should include ideas for incorporating incentives for colleges and universities to graduate more students with quality degrees and credentials, student incentives for course and program completion, new delivery models for increasing capacity for serving students, and ideas around business practices that can produce savings to graduate more students.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Texas Public Policy Foundation, "7 Solutions", <http://texashighered.com/7-solutions>

<sup>2</sup>Eric J. Barron, President, Florida State University, "Breakthrough Solutions For Higher Education: Florida Can Do Better Than Texas," <http://www.uff-fsu.org/art/FSU.BreakthroughSolutions.BOT.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>University of Florida, "Note to Governor Scott from the University of Florida," [http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/the-buzz-florida-politics/sites/tampabay.com.blogs.the-buzz-florida-politics/files/governor\\_rick\\_scott\\_note\\_9-22-11.pdf](http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/the-buzz-florida-politics/sites/tampabay.com.blogs.the-buzz-florida-politics/files/governor_rick_scott_note_9-22-11.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Governor Rick Scott, "2012 Job Creation and Economic Growth Agenda," <http://www.flgov.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Jobs2012FINAL.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>United States Department of Labor, Unemployment Rates, <http://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>

<sup>6</sup>Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce: [Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018](#)

<sup>7</sup>The Institute for College Access & Success: [Student Debt and the Class of 2010](#)

*The views expressed in this policy brief were developed independently and do not reflect the opinions of the universities with which the leadership team and staff are affiliated.*

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