Pinning our hopes on education

OUR POSITION: Expansion of State College of Florida programs brings new and better opportunities for local residents.

Two years ago, Manatee Community College jumped through hoops to get authorization to offer its first-ever bachelor of science program.

On Saturday, 38 students will pick up diplomas from what is now known as State College of Florida, Sarasota-Manatee, as the college celebrates the first graduates in its baccalaureate in nursing program.

It’s a big day for SCF and a big day for the nurses who have raised their proficiency and level of education while serving the needs and demands of area health care providers. Frankly, it’s nothing but positive for all of us.

The baccalaureate in nursing program got the ball rolling for higher-degree programs at the community college’s three campuses — Venice, Lakewood Ranch and Bradenton — which serve a population from Charlotte and DeSoto to Manatee County.

Two new bachelor degree programs will start fully this fall, in early childhood education and health services administration. Next spring, SCF will offer four-year degrees in homeland security, public safety administration and energy technology. As was the case with the advanced nursing program, all courses grew naturally from local demand. Even more are planned for the future: in athletic training, various teaching disciplines, as well as marine industry management.

But nursing led the way, thanks to the support — financial and otherwise — from area hospitals and the desire of nurses to raise their skill level. The program has been a tremendous success: 47 started in January 2010 and 38 will graduate this week. A total of 89 students are currently enrolled. Twenty-five will be admitted to each of the spring, summer and fall semesters.

Key to the success is flexibility. Most students are working registered nurses with associate’s degrees.

They can weave school into work and home schedules. The program is designed to take a short 15 months. The home campus alternates among the three SCF sites one semester to the next, so nurses from Port Charlotte, North Port, Englewood and Venice can do their classroom work in their own backyard.

That certainly was a plus for Elizabeth Rigney of Englewood, who started working as a technician at Englewood Community Hospital in 2000, then got a nursing degree from SCF in 2006. She wanted to continue on to a bachelor’s degree, but none of the available programs worked. Then came the new SCF program.

“I decided to look into it and it was a perfect fit,” she told us.

“The Venice campus was 10 minutes from my house and all the classes were available either at that campus or online. It was a fantastic value and Englewood Community Hospital was once again willing to pay 100 percent of the tuition.”

Rigney will get her diploma and will be a guest speaker at the SCF commencement ceremony. She told us she will talk about “changes that our hospitals and communities will see related to educating talented..."
and motivated nurses within our own communities.” Thanks to her degree, she is now in training for a new job as clinical documentation specialist at Englewood Community Hospital.

Rigney’s personal story of success extends to the wider community: the college, the hospitals, doctor’s offices and the patients served. The SCF programs bring higher education to our doorsteps. They meet the real-life needs of local residents and local employers and the people they serve. The more the better.

Congratulations to all of those who worked hard for this day.