SCF’s workforce education reaches milestone

BRADENTON HERALD EDITORIAL | Graduation ceremony with bachelor degrees a first

State College of Florida will achieve a milestone Saturday with the graduation of its first students to walk off stage holding bachelor’s degrees. This commencement also marks a significant development for the entire Manatee-Sarasota region as the college continues to evolve into a stronger partner with the business community by developing additional baccalaureate programs to serve workforce education needs.

Our congratulations to the college and the 38 graduates of its Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. For practicing nurses in the area, the program is a boon to the pursuit of a higher degree and career advancement. Previously, nurses interested in a bachelor’s had to commute to Tampa, a severe strain on jobs and families and a roadblock to moving up in their profession.

Three years ago when still known as Manatee Community College, the school began an aggressive campaign to move beyond two-year associate degrees into baccalaureates — first in nursing. The school’s application to the Florida Department of Education hit a snag in 2009 when the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee brought up possible program duplication with its nursing baccalaureate offerings at USF’s flagship campus in Tampa. The state discourages duplication as a waste of precious resources.

The region’s medical community — hospital executives and head nurses from Venice to Bradenton — stepped up to lobby in support of SCF’s application for the much needed local baccalaureate program, a vital component to easing the local nursing shortage. The Board of Education unanimously approved SCF’s application in March 2009, praising the impressive showing by all the hospital executives and nursing educators who attended the meeting.

The college secured accreditation a few months later and began accepting student applications, Classes got under way in January 2010.

Beyond nursing, SCF has won state approval for five additional baccalaureate programs — again with stout community backing. Classes, either upper division or prerequisites, will begin this fall in early childhood education, energy technology management, health services administration, homeland security and public safety administration.

Now the college seeks a dozen more four-year degree programs, mostly in education specialties but also in international business and trade, marine industry management and technology management.

State College of Florida performed due diligence in targeting all these programs, conducting community surveys, analyzing workforce trends and studying projections of future job growth before developing outlines for four-year offerings.

Florida statutes support the development of baccalaureate programs at community colleges as more cost-effective to both students and the state than a traditional university degree. Board of Education policy supports the expansion of the community college mission to include four-year degrees “for specific populations to access further education in a cost-effective manner to meet the needs of today’s workforce and to move readily to compete in an increasingly globalized market.”

Under President Lars Hafner, SCF is pursuing this agenda with determination. The benefits are many — to the students whose careers are propelled forward and to the businesses, schools and government agencies that hire these better educated and qualified graduates.

Indeed, Saturday’s commencement is a watershed moment for the entire community.