

# EDISON

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the one where you work a full-time job, carry on a successful marriage (or lose one and go it alone), and raise secure, stable children, while simultaneously paying the mortgage and staying healthy. That's a hard road.

There are other people welcomed by Edison, too, including a growing number of international students — one of the college's new goals. And some 2,000 each year who apply to the only other game in town, Florida Gulf Coast University, but don't make the cut. (In universities statewide, 50,000 or more hopeful student applicants are rejected annually.)



WALKER

"For them, we want to develop a joint admissions process with FGCU, one that encourages them to come to Edison first. I think what makes us unique is, we are an open door college. This is the people's college, where we give people a chance," explains the unequivocally egalitarian Kenneth Walker, district president of Edison College, which includes the main campus in Lee, and satellite campuses that serve Collier County, Charlotte County, and Hendry and Glades Counties.

To plant the people's flag, so to speak, he and a determined staff, along with the nine-member, governor-appointed board of trustees, have now created a "four-year community college," as Walker describes it. Here, anyone with a high school diploma and ambition can study, and four-year baccalaureate degrees tailored to community needs are now guaranteed options to the traditional associate (two-year) degree.

Perhaps even more extraordinary are two long-term plans now in the works of Walker and company: one, to create on-campus housing, first on the Naples campus, Walker says, and then perhaps in Fort Myers. And two: to gather the proverbial tribes and create a single council of private and public bodies that could ultimately provide scholarships not only for every Edison student in need, but also for others throughout the five-county district.

In other words, if you want to ride, Walker believes it's his duty to help put you in the saddle.

In the soft, East-Texas drawl he still carries from his youth, Walker explains that an open door is not enough — it's just not the full enchilada for a lot of people, something he knows by personal experience. Walker once had to turn down a scholarship to law school because he didn't have the money to live (later he earned a doctorate in education from the University of Texas at Austin).

"Part of my mission is to find a way to make scholarships available to every student who needs and deserves financial help to go to college," he says, with enough modesty not to point out that he may be the only college president in the United States, or one of the few, ever to put a pragmatic mind to the problem of helping every student, not just some.

"I think I may be on the trail of finding that way," he adds. "Imagine if we got together all the civic clubs and various organizations who give scholarships in Collier, Charlotte and Lee, along with the Southwest Florida Community Foundation and others, and we pooled all those resources to tell young people, 'If you want to get a college degree, we will make that happen.' And not just so they could come to Edison."

What if? Walker, as any who know him will attest, is no utopian — he's no nowhere man, in other words. If he's talking about it, they say, he has a plan.

Just like he had a plan to boost teachers' salaries at Edison from the lowest in



COURTESY PHOTO

**Students in Edison College's cardiovascular technology program spend the first year studying on campus, and 1,000 hours of the second year working one-on-one with a cardiologist at a clinic site or hospital.**

the state system of 28 community colleges when he arrived in 1991, to fourth on that list. And just like he found a way to convince the Florida State Board of Education to let Edison and a few other community colleges in the state system offer four-year degrees. (One in public safety, inspired by the events of 9/11, he says, is now graduating students. Two in secondary education — one math and one science — will kick off their programs next year. And three others, in elementary education, nursing, and supervision and management, are aimed for state approval next year, with more proposed baccalaureates to come, most likely.)

## By the numbers

But that transcending effort still leaves a vast pool of potential talent untapped, College officials believe.

"We're increasing our access at an affordable price to our students, but the latest statistics indicate we have a ways to go," explains Roger Bober, district dean of baccalaureate and university programs. "In Lee County alone, 85 percent of the population 25 or older have high school diplomas, but only 22 or 23 percent have bachelor's degrees. That's a big gap, and we have to shore up our residents' abilities to be competitive."

In some programs, that's happening quickly. "In our first baccalaureate program in public safety management, our enrollment this summer is 380 percent higher than last summer," Bober says. "We had 10 seats in the summer of 2006, and 48 filled this summer. We want to go to 260 students in that program, and we will."

Paying for it, however, is always a thorny proposition. In the 2007 spring semester, the College enrolled 2,915 full-time equivalent students, according to its records. What that means in the knotty calculation of the Florida system is that about 10,000 actual humans were enrolled in either full or part-time programs among the college's campuses, but if all the credit hours they pursued collectively were divided by 30 — the standard for a full-time student who enrolls for one year — there would have been 2,915 students. And for each of those calculated heads, Edison College receives \$3,300 from the state of Florida.

Which is a figure that falls short of the money required actually to educate students who will be successful, especially in technical fields where Edison excels,

now.

For example, in the remarkable and state-of-the-art cardiovascular technology program headed by Jeff Davis, the cardiac catheterization lab was only the eighth in the nation to be accredited, and now numbers as one of 22 nationally. "We have Phillips imaging equipment and a WHITT, which is a physiological recorder or monitoring system. It's state of the art, so we can simulate realistic cases," Davis says.



DAVIS

Students spend the first year studying on campus, and 1,000 hours of the second year working one-on-one with a cardiologist at a clinic site or hospital, either in the region or in Sarasota, Tampa Bay or even at the University of North Carolina.

As is the case with many Edison students from programs in public safety or management or drafting or a variety of others, they're likely to live and work in Southwest Florida when they graduate, which is hugely important for employers, and for the local economy. That's why, explains Davis, Lee Memorial Health Systems has offered significant help over the years, providing scholarships and equipment worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and forming a marriage of sorts with the college.

All this can have startling effects on the quality of life in the area. Heart disease, for example, remains the number one killer of both men and women in the U.S. — but not in Collier County, which fit that statistic until recently (now it's cancer in Collier). One of the reasons is Edison's cardiac catheterization lab.

"Even five years ago, if a patient was having a heart attack, he would not go to the catheterization lab," Davis says. "But today the standard of care is to have an intervention done before the attack does a lot of damage, by inserting a little mesh tube in the artery between blockages, to keep that open."

Lives are saved, many by teams of three or four that include, along with the cardiologist and others, an Edison-trained "registered cardiovascular invasive specialist," who is expert at getting that stent in quickly and neatly.

The support Walker has for Edison's chameleon changes appears to be nearly universal, not only among fellow administrators and faculty members, but among

students and trustees alike, all of whom fit a classic American stereotype — they champion the underdog, whether they have ever been underdogs themselves, or not.

"We will never abandon our community college education mission, but it's also true that we aren't content just to remain where we are," says Mary Lee Mann, who chaired the College's board of trustees for 12 years, and who also sits on the Edison College Foundation. The 40 foundation members manage a \$50 million fund, 80 percent of it, or \$40 million, set aside for scholarships and academic support. That's not Harvard University's nearly \$23 billion endowment, or even the University of Florida's \$1.15 billion (the reported endowment in 2005). But it comes a lot closer to FGCU's \$58.3 million in net assets reported last year, and it's still some significant muscle for working-class students.

Each one of whom is not only welcomed, but nigh on embraced when he or she steps through the doors at Edison. "We test every student or returning student, we offer refresher courses, and essentially we've revamped the entire college preparation program so students don't get depressed and discouraged," Mann explains.

"We do a luncheon for students who are receiving scholarships, and all you have to do is sit at a table and hear those stories to be deeply moved. The young girl whose parents are still migrant workers, Cuban émigrés who are outstanding leaders on campus — there's no way their parents who came here after leaving everything behind could have offered them an avenue to succeed."

Students themselves seem ecstatic at the reception they receive from the Edison College community.

Sheona Young, a 25-year-old in her last semester who will transfer to FGCU to study elementary education, is vice president of student government. When she arrived from Canada, she felt fear — not unusual for many students.



YOUNG

"It's so hard to move to a new country and know nobody," she says. "I was scared about meeting people, but class sizes are reasonable, it's easy to get to know students and professors here, and I've been very happy."

Maria Feliciano came to Cape Coral public schools from Long Island, New York, graduating to become a Hope scholar at Edison, a program designed to help those with hardship backgrounds which she can continue at FGCU. Now 20, she's a sophomore completing many of her initial science classes, en route, she hopes, to becoming an optometrist.



FELICIANO

She lives with her grandparents, something she enjoys, and commutes to school. "They're always telling me how Edison has changed me for the better," she says. "It's a family-oriented place."

Vanessa Rodriguez, 23, arrived at Edison last August from Venezuela to study management, and eventually to major in hospitality and resort management. "I was really scared to come here," she says. "But as soon as I started, I realized, people here are so welcoming, so warm. They try to make you feel as comfortable as possible."



RODRIGUEZ

And then they educate you, without leaving you destitute. They give you a big fat chance, if you're willing to work and try, no matter who you are or where you came from — and isn't that the American way? ■