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Students Kim Favero, Meghann Carter and Candice Lentz, work on a lab exercise, with a dummy patient, in Valencia College's Cardiovascular Technology program, Tuesday, February 3, 2014
(Joe Burbank, Orlando Sentinel)

2-year college program can bring bigger paycheck than bachelor's degree

By Denise-Marie Ordway, Orlando Sentinel
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After Meghann Carter graduates from college this summer, she could make \$46,000 a year or more at her first job.

Good money for someone right out of school, it's even more impressive considering that Carter will have completed only a two-year degree at a community college.

She is among a growing number of Floridians who are grabbing the chance to earn a good wage faster by completing an associate in science degree. Such students enter the work force in half the time it takes to finish a four-year bachelor's degree. And, generally speaking, they earn larger paychecks — at least initially.

Carter and the other 22 students in the cardiovascular technology program at Valencia College are learning how to help doctors diagnose and treat heart disease. They will make an average annual starting salary of \$46,064 when they finish, according to the school.

"It's going to be more than I've ever made," said Carter, 23, a former waitress, bartender and ice-cream-shop manager who grew up in Merritt Island.

Most community-college students want an associate in arts degree, which focuses largely on general-education studies, the basis for two more years of school and a bachelor's degree.

A.S. programs are different in that they require students to immediately specialize in a limited number of high-demand

fields. They train in areas such as nursing, law-enforcement administration, media design and fire-science technology.

Starting pay varies by field. But as a whole, the median first-year wages of A.S. degree holders is \$45,060, according to earnings data collected by the state from students who graduated between 2006-07 and 2010-11 and stayed in Florida to work.

A.A. holders who don't go on to get bachelor degrees received much less: \$26,504.

Meanwhile, median first-year pay was \$33,816 for graduates with bachelor's degrees from one of Florida's 11 public universities.

Some college officials call the A.S. degree one of higher education's best-kept secrets. Such programs have gained more attention recently, as legislators and higher-education leaders debate ways to help more Floridians earn college credentials.

A key concern of Gov. Rick Scott's administration is that graduates are able to find high-paying jobs.

That emphasis prompted a new state website that offers employment data on graduates of Florida's public colleges and universities. A report that accompanied the recent launch of the website — beyondeducation.org — highlights the benefits of the A.S. degree.

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"For the many students who lack the time, money or inclination to pursue a bachelor's degree, technical two-year degrees may represent a smart route into a career with middle-class wages," said Mark Schneider, president of College Measures, a group that helped Florida create the website.

Community-college administrators said the challenge is helping students see the benefit of such a credential. Many students and parents are unfamiliar with the A.S. degree. Recent high-school graduates generally prefer to pursue an A.A. because they are not sure what they want to study.

Parents, especially well-educated ones, want their children to get bachelor's degrees.

"It's been a battle we've dealt with at the community-college level for years," said Lake-Sumter State President Chuck Mojock. "There's still a sense that A.S. degrees are not as good as a bachelor's."

Some A.S. programs are quite popular, however. For example, Seminole State College received 564 applications for its nursing programs in 2013-14. Only 190 people were accepted, an official there said.

Statewide, A.S. program enrollment has risen sharply in recent years. More than 98,000 students were pursuing A.S. degrees at one of Florida's community colleges in 2012-13, up from 62,420 in 2008-09, according to the state Department of Education.

Nationally, 28 percent of associate-degree holders earn as much or more than the average bachelor's degree recipient, according to the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University.

But Jeff Strohl, the center's director of research, said the financial advantage some associate-degree holders enjoy in the beginning does not hold up over time. Associate-degree holders make \$541,000 less during their lifetimes compared with people with bachelor's degrees, the center estimated in a report it released two years ago.

Stephanie Black of Winter Springs already had a bachelor's degree when she enrolled in an A.S. program at Seminole State College in 2011.

Although Black had earned a degree in journalism two decades earlier, she was working as an independent insurance agent. Wanting a career change — as well as more money and job security — she completed an A.S. degree in legal studies.

As a paralegal, the single mother of two did not want to disclose how much she earns. But she said she now makes about \$15,000 more a year than she did during her best year selling insurance.

"Now that I'm not an 18-year-old naïve kid anymore, I'm really wondering 'Why aren't more people doing these kinds of programs?'" she said.

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Median wages for two-year graduates

Here are median first-year wages of Florida graduates with the most popular A.S. degrees*
Statewide median for A.S. degree - \$45,060

<u>Degree</u>	<u>Wage</u>
Child Care Provider/Assistant	\$25,424
Business Administration	\$30,898
Paralegal/Legal Assistant	\$31,174
Dental Hygiene	\$37,452
Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement Administration	\$38,854
Radiologic (Medical) Technology	\$41,872
Respiratory Therapy	\$44,116
Physical Therapy Assistant	\$45,080
Nursing, General	\$49,844
Emergency Medicine Technology-Paramedic	\$59,928

*For those who graduated between 2006-07 and 2010-11 and remained in Florida to work.
SOURCE: College Measures