

Miami Dade College and the public schools system team to train students for jobs in transportation in the wake of the Panama Canal's 2015 expansion

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CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Construction is on schedule as workers continue work on the 7ft wharf expansion at PortMiami. PortMiami is already preparing for expansion of the Panama Canal with work on its wharves in preparation for deepening the channel to accompany post-Panamax ships.

Multi-billion-dollar expansion projects at Miami International Airport and the Port of Miami, a major expansion of the Panama Canal, along with a \$900 million project to expand the Cuban port of Mariel into a strategic shipping zone in the Atlantic, could foretell a boon for jobs in the transportation industry through 2020, experts predict.

Projected job openings for logistics engineers, which can start at about \$39 per hour, could top 48,000 positions, while logistics managers could fill about 34,000 jobs.

Miami hopes to secure a piece of that action through a program to be presented by the Miami-Dade County Public School System, Miami Dade College and the Miami Dade Beacon

Council. The Transportation Academy, at three Miami-Dade schools that are yet to be determined, aims to prepare the local workforce for the expected demand at the Miami International Airport and Port of Miami. The initiative, aimed initially at the high school level, is geared to drive interest in transportation opportunities, such as logistics and supply chain management, especially among minorities and women.

Miami-Dade's School Board expects to name the participating high schools in August, says Cristian Carranza, administrative director in the school system's Division of Academics, Accountability and School Improvement. "We're planning to offer logistics in the Transportation Academy to approximately 500 kids to prepare these students for the emerging areas in transportation."

The rollout would feature two schools in the county offering the curriculum in the 2013-2014 school year — one geared toward the Port of Miami, the other MIA. The third school, envisioned as a stand-alone global logistics track, would come onboard in 2014-15.

"The state of Florida has identified major opportunities to increase its role as a major trade hub

and we want to align ourselves,” Carranza said.

Indeed, the airport’s \$6.5 billion capital program includes new terminals, an upgraded baggage-handling system and people mover. A \$50 million rail project to rehab tracks and improve links from the port to the Florida East Coast Railway yard near MIA is also underway, along with the addition of 15 acres at the port for three parallel rail tracks to accommodate half-mile-long trains.

There also is the \$915 million port tunnel, which is under construction in downtown Miami, designed to whisk trucks that use the interstate highway to the port and alleviate traffic congestion. At the same time, a \$150 million dredging project to deepen the channel by 50 feet will help accommodate larger cargo ships expected in the wake of the Panama Canal expansion in 2015, which is expected to transform the shipping industry. The 48-mile canal connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and is a key passageway for international maritime trade.

“The idea for the program creates a pipeline of talent to address the workforce demand we are seeing in international trade,” Carranza said.

The high school students who engage in the Transportation Academy will funnel into an educational pathway at MDC, which will have new degree programs in transportation logistics and supply chain management.

“It is business-focused,” said Thania Rios, associate dean for MDC’s School of Business. “Those [magnet high school] students would come to college with some kind of certification. When we did the proposal for degrees, someone graduating can make about \$50,000 to \$60,000 to start. We’ve worked extensively with the industry to form these programs.”

There are many certifications within the industry, Rios said. Gaining early knowledge through the Transportation Academy can give locals a leg up.

“This will allow them to zip through a lot of those exams,” she said.

The county is scrambling to shore up its transportation capabilities, with deeper port waters and rail, for instance, so it can be competitive once the Panama Canal expansion is completed and ascend to prime position as a gateway port. Ports from Miami to Columbia are all anticipating the transformation of the Panama Canal, which will unleash considerably larger cargo ships.

“We’re really hoping those super vessels will come to our port because we are able to support them,” Rios said.

Broward College in Fort Lauderdale also recently received state approval for a new transportation baccalaureate degree, bringing a total of four institutions readying the workforce. The others are the University of North Florida in Jacksonville and the University of West Florida in Pensacola.

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