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## Early to rise, early to learn: Colleges offer 6 a.m. classes

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Walter Michot / Miami Herald Staff

Karen Mesa does a little stretching in the middle of her 6 a.m. Human Growth & Development class at Miami Dade College.

Under a still-darkened sky, the students in this Human Growth and Development class are getting ready to discuss Sigmund Freud. The theoretical debate is going to get heated — Freud’s outlook “sucks,” one young woman will soon complain — but before any teaching occurs, there’s five minutes for coffee or tea.

After all, it is six in the morning.

“Don’t ask me how I do it,” student Nataliz Bonnet says when class finally lets out. “I just do it.”

For about a year, Miami Dade College has offered pre-dawn classes — a scheduling feature born of necessity that nevertheless suits some students just fine. One school administrator calls it “the early bird special.”

Across town, Florida International University also has classes starting at 6 a.m., while Broward College offers early classes starting at 6:30 a.m. At least a dozen schools nationally, most of them community colleges, also open for business at 6 a.m.

The pattern has been generally the same at all these schools: student demand surged during the recession, straining the capacity of already-taxed campus buildings. Adopting unconventional hours was one of the only ways to fit additional classes in.

MDC’s Hialeah location is the most crowded of the college’s eight campuses — serving roughly 17,000 students a year through only 26 classrooms. Only the Hialeah campus and MDC’s InterAmerican campus offer 6 a.m. classes.

At MDC, “the main cause of having that kind of schedule is lack of space,” said Provost Rolando Montoya. Still, Montoya acknowledges there are some people who are in fact “attracted” to very-early learning.

Take Hialeah’s Anais Herrera, 22, who usually spends most of her day caring for her grandmother.

“This is the only class I can take,” the English major said. In Human Growth and Development, Herrera has learned — while her grandmother sleeps — about Freud’s deterministic attitude toward personality formation, as well as a competing point of view floated by psychologist Erik Erikson. The students generally favored Erikson.

Being the first on campus has its perks, Herrera said.

“You get the primo parking spot,” Herrera said. “It’s nice and calm. Everything is still clean from when they cleaned it last night.”

Bonnet, her classmate, balances school with work and raising a 1-year-old daughter. Although Bonnet would recommend 6 a.m. classes to a friend, she acknowledged it can be challenging.

Bonnet started to explain: “You’ve got to have motivation, and ambition, and...”

“Three alarms!,” chimed in Herrera.

A few months ago, the state released figures that confirmed what any on-campus visit would have told you: South Florida’s public colleges and universities are busy, busy, busy. Using the state’s “classroom space utilization rate” formula, FIU was calculated at 175 percent, or essentially serving 75 percent more students than could be expected given its size. FIU’s rate was easily the highest among all state universities, with the University of South Florida second at nearly 134 percent, while the flagship University of Florida came in at just under 99 percent.

For community colleges, Gainesville’s Santa Fe Community College led all schools at just over 200 percent, followed by Miami Dade College (185 percent) and Broward College (183 percent).

Asked about the numbers, Randall Hanna, chancellor of Florida’s community college system, stressed that overutilization isn’t the same as overcrowding — as a campus becomes more used, class sizes might stay the same, but the number of classes held increases.

“They’re offering classes all day, into the night, and all weekend, and those are good things to make sure that the classes are available,” Hanna said. “But it also puts wear and tear and stress on the buildings.”

Local colleges’ evening classes can start as late as 11 p.m., although so far no local school has pushed the envelope as far as Boston’s Bunker Hill Community College, which offers six different midnight classes.

At private universities, where enrollment is stable and students tend to hail from the more “traditional” 18-to-22 age group, there has been no significant push to expand into 6 a.m. territory (or midnight territory, for that matter). The University of Miami, for example, starts its classes at 8 a.m.

But it is nontraditional adult students that now make up the majority at U.S. colleges and universities, according to Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. And making it easier for those historically-overlooked students to get to class is a good thing, Nassirian said.

“People go to the gym at 6 a.m. all the time,” Nassirian said. “There’s no reason why you wouldn’t go to an intellectual gymnasium at that same hour.”

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