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Necessity, mother of reinvention

Jobless adults take time out from the grim search to seek out new skills

By [Michael Pollick](#)

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For 52-year-old George LaGrange of North Port, it was either spice up his résumé with some late-life education or drift from one odd job to another. There is simply no more work in his original field, running machine tools by hand.

He flipped the switch to electrical technician in less than a year and is now assembling and installing power panels for a Manatee County company that makes industrial-strength tire-shredders.

From State College of Florida, where LaGrange picked up his certification, to Keiser University, where 37-year-old Nicholas Williams is learning to hack up a side of beef rather than blocking hackers from a computer network, today's hardscrabble job environment is sending adults back to school in droves.

"Right now since jobs are pretty much a scarcity, it is a good time to be in training," said Jim Shoemaker, who runs full-time back-to-school programs at the Suncoast Workforce Board, the overseer of Jobs Etc. offices in Sarasota, Bradenton, and Venice.

Unemployment is only rising. On Thursday, the federal government reported that employers cut a larger-than-expected 467,000 jobs in June. The unemployment rate climbed to a 26-year high of 9.5 percent. The data showed just how scarce jobs remain -- five people for every single opening nationally.

In Manatee, Sarasota and Charlotte counties -- clocking in collectively with an 11 percent jobless rate during May -- some schools have seen enrollment rise by



STAFF PHOTO / THOMAS BENDER
Louis Koplau, 30, Sarah Debik, 19, and Cameraron Coleman, 23, are enrolled at the Center for Culinary Arts at the Sarasota campus of Keiser University. Here they work on chocolate mousse bombs during a recent class.

double digits and find themselves with waiting lists in some areas.

The costs for their services can vary widely, but money is available from the huge government stimulus to cover some low-cost options.

Trying to come back into the work force as a high-end interior designer -- after tending to her infant son for his first three years -- was not working for 33-year-old Sita D'Oyen of Sarasota.

"My husband said: 'You have always wanted to go back to school. Why don't you look into that?'" she recalled.

Now, D'Oyen is taking classes at the Lakewood Ranch campus of Keiser University that will allow her to add "R.N." after her name.

"In a year, I will be a nurse," she said.

LaGrange, the electrical technician, began his new career with a trip to Jobs Etc. Importantly, he started off by saying he wanted training, not just a paycheck. That put him in the sights of Shoemaker, who manages the Workforce Investment Act program, now benefiting in a trickle-down way from the huge federal stimulus.

Shoemaker ushered LaGrange through the aptitude tests and the application forms that landed him in a yearlong curriculum at State College of Florida, the former Manatee Community College.

LaGrange -- who got his general equivalency diploma, or GED, years ago in the Army -- took full advantage of the opportunity. He took a year's worth of classwork in nine months and even made the honor society, then landed a job at the CM Tire Recycling division of Columbus McKinnon Corp.

Hooking up with Shoemaker "was a blessing," LaGrange said. "He helped me pick the field. He even helped me with my tools. He bought my safety shoes."

Budding chef Williams, who has lined up a four-month internship starting in December at the prestigious Bern's Steak House in Tampa, came to Sarasota from Boston to take care of a family emergency, putting his computer consultancy on hold. In August, he enrolled at Keiser, where he is a big fan of the course structure: "Instead of four classes at once, I focus on one subject at a time."

Keiser, based in Fort Lauderdale, is a kingpin in the field of career-driven education. With 13 campuses and a fast-growing online division, Keiser has 15,500 students this summer, with every indication that population will push much higher.

Becoming a chef at Keiser will probably cost Williams \$30,000, counting books, uniforms and incidentals. The basic tuition is \$6,356 per semester.

That is at the high end of the spectrum, but for students who can afford it, the schedules and the "yay-team" approach are ideal.

"One hundred percent of our graduates are placed in the field," said Chef Michael Moench, who runs the Center for Culinary Arts at Keiser's Sarasota campus.

He previously worked at the Ritz-Carlton Sarasota for four years, so Moench knows his way around a canape. He has about 120 students. Some are right out of high school, but Keiser has had culinary school graduates as old as 62.

Moench has seen his share of recession-driven job-changers: "Some of them, their business has been downsized. Others want something that is more of a passion for them than just a job."

Overall, Keiser's enrollment this summer is running about 22 percent higher than a year ago, said President Arthur Keiser.

"I think there is a kind of inverse relationship between the unemployment rate and enrollment," Keiser said. "As students become uncertain about their future, they are looking to hedge their bets."

Those who want or need a less expensive career-booster have other choices in Southwest Florida, including State College of Florida, Manatee Technical Institute and Sarasota County Technical Institute.

At SCTI's sprawling campus in southeast Sarasota, students can line up a new education-driven job for less than \$5,000. That is a key number because it represents the cap on how much Shoemaker's people at Jobs Etc. can write a check for each year.

"Our tuition is \$2.25 per hour," said Todd Boden, SCTI's director.

That can add up pretty fast for some areas of study. Automotive service technology, for example, is an 1,800-hour course. Adding books and lab fees, the total cost works out to \$5,650.

"Practical nursing is \$4,670 out the door," Boden said. "Paramedic is \$3,612, including EMT. Fire Science totals up to \$2,607."

But unlike Keiser, which can quickly add teachers to soak up extra demand, government-funded schools find it tougher to keep up.

Prospective students need to plan ahead and get on waiting lists, like one for licensed practical nurse, or LPN. "As opposed to taking the first 25 applicants, we are trying to select the best 25 for anything to do with health, and that is new for us," Bodens aid.

"Construction is boom or bust. There is a general feeling that people still get sick and hurt themselves regardless of the economy," Boden said. "A lot of those people are looking for stability. They want off the roller coaster."

Scott Kennedy, who oversees nursing, EMT and EMS programs for SCTI, said it is not just the nursing classes that are filling up quickly.

"When the economy was good it would take right up until a week before class. They'd do the prerequisites but not make a commitment," Kennedy said. "I am finding now that we are getting commitments months in advance."

Seats in the class for new nursing students that starts in late August were spoken for by the end of May.

Boden also has a waiting list for a class about to start in auto technology.

"That is one that we usually have to make a decision whether to run it with the ones we have. Now we are having to turn them away."

"I am trying to massage my budget."

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