Universities work to tailor programs to fill local jobs

By Jennifer Miller

Business professionals this year will continue to work closely with area school officials to make sure students are getting the expertise and training to fill the jobs Miami-Dade County will have in the future, university officials say.

While the practice is generally lauded by those who take part in it, not everyone agrees it reaps the best results.

Bay Elliott, executive vice president of the Farwell Group, a Coral Gables head-hunting firm, for example, said he sees the end result limiting the ability of students to make critical career decisions.

In a market with big-name banks and industries such as trade, tourism and information technology, most business school representatives seem eager to say the working community is involved in workshops and job fairs at their campuses and often influence curricula.

"Industries," said Sharon Belnavis, senior coordinator for career services at Johnson & Wales University's North Miami campus, "want students who have some knowledge of what they're doing once they get there."

Ms. Belnavis said the community-deficiency works particularly well with Johnson & Wales, a cooking school, to provide job and training opportunities for students.

Armani Exchange, Continental Airlines, Union Planters Bank and Wal-Mart are just a few of the firms that sent representatives to the school's career fair last October, she said.

The fair, she said, has grown from representing 23 companies in a 1994 debut to 102 in 2000. Ms. Belnavis said students at Johnson & Wales are accustomed to recruiters on campus since the school partners with the hotel chain Marriott Properties.

Often, Marriott representatives will speak on campus or conduct interviews there, Ms. Belnavis said.

Linda Rump, director of graduate placement services for the University of Miami's Sanford Ziff Placement Center — which links graduates with area jobs — said the school's alumni have been very helpful in training students.

Through a mentoring program, she said, alumni from industries such as computer science, consulting and accounting conduct informal discussions at which students can ask executives how to go about getting into their companies.

"That's a hit," Ms. Rump said about the program. "It's very popular because there is no threat. The whole purpose is to find out more about the industry you're looking to get into."

Aside from having speakers, she said, the school is exploring other options for linking graduate students with community representatives.

Florida International University's business school, said Sally Callion, assistant dean for marketing, communication and publications, has similarities with area companies that allow for internships and part-time job training.

But, she said, the school goes a step further to make sure students take classes that will be useful when they graduate.

"We want to make sure that what we're giving our students is the latest and most current information in the field," she said. "A majority of our graduates are employed in this area. We want to make sure we meet the business community's needs."

University officials, Ms. Gallion said, make sure faculty and businesses are on the same page by inviting members of the business community to review core requirements of the curriculum. She said instead of having executives go through high-level administrators, the program lets them sit down with teachers to talk about courses.

Ms. Magvenn said the university also sponsors faculty internships, usually during the summer.

"Through those internships, faculty can see the application of what they're teaching and make changes based on what they see," she said. "It's a two-way street because business benefits by getting research assistance."

Ms. Gallion said a group of constituents fill out annual surveys to assess how well-prepared FIU graduates are to work.

Alumni, she said, also receive surveys each year and five years after graduation that ask about the strengths and weaknesses of their education.

At Farwell Group, Mr. Elliott said it may be good that universities about the importance of envisioning themselves as a product that needs to be managed and positioned in the market.

Mr. Elliott said 97% of people still expect to be taken care of. The 3% who don't literally rocket ahead of the others. That's basically what I try to convey to the graduating classes.

The fault, he said, lies in educating children for 18 years in an environment where they are coddled and carried from one place to the next.

Ultimately, Mr. Elliott said, everybody has to manage his or her own career.

"We could always work on improving relationships with businesses," he said. "What we haven't done is prepare students to help themselves."