

Exclusive: Universities add cruise industry courses to feed business demand

Cortney Danielle Moore

Veronica Riverol enrolled in Florida International University's new cruise program to push her career forward.

The 28-year-old Miami resident earned her bachelor's degree in psychology in 2016. But after landing a few jobs in the cruise industry after college, she decided to switch her focus.

Riverol is glad she did because FIU's cruise line leadership course exposed her to management opportunities – on and off ships.

"I've been in this industry since 2017. It's not where I expected to be, but there's just something about it that's so inviting," said Riverol, who's a shoreside support specialist at Carnival Cruise Line.



Veronica Riverol enrolled in FIU's cruise line operations master's program in August 2022.

Michael Almaguer; Julissa Valdesuso / Tiny Rex Productions

South Florida colleges and universities are stepping up to educate prospective students about the multibillion-dollar cruise industry as the sector continues to attract travelers from around the world.

With its major seaports and a rich maritime heritage, the region serves as an ideal hub for cultivating future leaders and professionals in the cruise industry. From finance to operations management, these educational initiatives are empowering students to embark on fulfilling job paths in one of the world's most dynamic and fast-paced industries.

Florida International University's cruise-focused master's program

FIU created a cruise line operations track for its [hospitality management master's program](#) and welcomed its first set of students in the fall 2023 semester.

Joseph Cilli, assistant dean and director of distance learning at [FIU's Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management](#), told the *Business Journal* the online program started with 16 students, and FIU plans to grow the program by 10% every term.



Image: Florida International University

Josephi Cilli, Assistant Dean and Director of Fully Online Programs at Florida International University's Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management.

Florida International University

"Prior to this program, the cruise industry would hire 10 business students to every two hospitality students," he said. "Once we announced the creation of this track, executives from the cruise companies quickly realized this could be a pipeline."

[Cruise industry partners helped FIU build its curriculum](#), which includes courses focused on logistics, shoreside operations, revenue management, industry-specific maritime laws, sustainability, provisioning and leadership.

Cilli said the program educates future managers who are analytical and business savvy, and some may have a larger goal to pursue a corporate executive career.



Image: Florida International University

Students join FIU on a Hospitality at Sea Trip in December 2022 on a Holland America Line voyage to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Ivonne Yee-Amor / Florida International University

“Students don’t necessarily need to go work for the big companies here in South Florida. They could go work for a smaller luxury line or riverboat cruise company,” he said. “There’s a perception that those smaller yachts are lower tier, but what people don’t realize is that some of those companies charge up to \$25,000 per [passenger].”

The Covid-19 pandemic hampered growth for the cruise industry, but cruise lines are now moving “full-speed ahead,” according to Cilli.

“We’re seeing recovery in the cruise industry,” he said. “People were on lockdown for how long, so once they were able to go out, they wanted to go out.”

As for Riverol, she hasn’t narrowed down which job she’d like to pursue after graduation. But her experience in the workforce and online classroom have helped her realize there are “more pieces to the puzzle.”

“Being able to see how shipboard and shoreside teams interact has been helpful as I continue on this track,” she said. “Cruise lines are such a big operation, and every piece is so important.”

Miami Dade College launches new program for cruise line operations

Miami Dade College launched a cruise line operations certificate program that’s currently recruiting its first cohort of students.

Pamela Fuertes, dean of the Miguel B. Fernandez Family School of Global Business, Trade & Transportation, said the business-focused program was developed with guidance from advisory committee members hailing from PortMiami and the cruise industry.



Pamela Fuertes, dean of Global Business, Trade & Transportation at Miami Dade College's Miguel B. Fernandez Family School.

Miami Dade College

The program comprises six courses: intro to hospitality, leadership and quality assurance management, intro to cruise line industry, cruise line sales and marketing, shipboard operations, and shoreside operations.

More Miami Dade College news:

“There’s a lot of career growth opportunities in the cruise line sector,” Fuertes said. “Some roles are managerial, some are business positions, some range from hotel management to food and beverage directors and marketing executives.”

Fuertes noted that cruise insiders have said they look to recruit staff who are “adaptable” and “innovative” because the industry is constantly changing. Speaking a foreign language could be helpful since the cruise industry is a global business, but it’s not a

requirement, she added.

Positions that are likely to grow as the industry expands include finance, accounting, strategic planning, business development, technology, safety and compliance, and government or external affairs.

“Managers and corporate executives have to be well-versed in maritime regulations and industry standards,” Fuertes said. “All these things are important to ensure the well-being of guests and staff.”

Florida Atlantic University focuses on hospitality and tourism management

Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton offers a hospitality and tourism management program rather than a cruise-specific one.

Program director Peter Ricci said that about 5% of FAU’s hospitality students go on to work in the cruise industry. He expects that number to rise as cruise lines step up recruitment efforts to address their growing businesses and post-Covid labor shortages.

“Cruise lines really need office staff when it comes to South Florida,” he said. “There’s purchasing, logistics, marketing, human resources and port operations — all of that occurs in the regional or corporate offices that are here.”



Peter Ricci, Clinical Professor and Director of Florida Atlantic University’s College of Business Hospitality & Tourism Management Program.

Florida Atlantic University

More Florida Atlantic University news:

Ricci said cruise lines are recruiting more on campuses, and they’re looking for students who understand hospitality and business. Some roles may require a B.B.A., MBA or CPA.

“Cruise lines want soft skills like good communication, etiquette, business acumen and spreadsheet familiarity,” Ricci said.

He noted other cruise-related and shoreside career fields such as retail, architecture, shipbuilding, IT and telecommunications.



FAU Director Peter Ricci (center) with students at a Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International event.

Florida Atlantic University

For captain and officer jobs, a marine or military background could be helpful, Ricci added.

Onboard managerial roles haven't attracted many American college students because the positions usually require long hours, but he has had some students pursue that route, Ricci said.

The student's path to cruise ship management

Coral Borer, 28, of Deerfield Beach, didn't originally plan to go into the cruise industry when she pursued her bachelor's and MBA degrees at FAU. She thought she would work in hotel management.

"I worked in food and beverage throughout high school and college," Borer said. "I just loved being in the service industry."



Coral Borer earned her MBA from FAU in 2016.

Lazaro Llanes

She joined Virgin Voyages as an account executive in June 2018, and she's worked her way up to senior manager of revenue operations and programs. Currently, she works across departments on promotional strategy, marketing and inventory.

Her responsibilities include building data-backed reports and insights on onboard spending, loyalty programs, itinerary pricing and tactical rates to drive revenue.

Borer said she thinks the entrepreneurship classes and case study curriculum at FAU helped her adapt to the cruise industry's fast-paced environment and see the bigger picture.

"The cruise industry is a 24/7 business, and revenue touches on all aspects of the company," she said. "One decision in a silo can affect multiple areas of a business. It's super-exciting, even though it's stressful at times."

[Sign up here](#) for the Business Journal's free morning and afternoon daily newsletters to receive the latest business news impacting South Florida. For more business intelligence, follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), [X \(formerly known as Twitter\)](#) and [Instagram](#).

THE LIST

Rank Prior Rank School / Prior rank (*Not ranked in year prior) / URL

| | | |
|---|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 | 1 | Miami Dade College |
| 2 | 2 | Florida International University |
| 3 | 3 | Florida Atlantic University |

[View this list](#)