Florida Keys Community College (FKCC), located at the western end of the 130 mile long frost free Florida Keys, is the smallest of Florida's Community Colleges, yet it offers an awesome array of dive related courses. Situated on the island of Key West, the most western of the 822 named keys (islands) of the Florida Keys, FKCC offers dive focused courses running from basic open water through instructor to a two year program to win either an Associate in Science (AS) or Associate in Applied Science (AAS) in Diving Business and Technology or an AS or AAS in Marine Environmental Technology.

Programs also include courses such as Work Diving Technology, Surface Air Supplied Diving, Recompression Chamber Operations, and a number of specialized courses for work diving technicians, researchers, and law enforcement divers. The dive department works closely with Key West and Monroe County law enforcement divers and the United States Army Underwater Operations School, also located in Key West.

FKCC has an Olympic size pool and an adjacent Underwater Training Area (UTA), which has a 15 and 30 foot training platform, a sunken car, school bus, boat, and timbers from the treasure ship_Atocha_, which sank 41 miles off Key West in 1622 with its $130 million in treasure. These facilities are used extensively for work diving safety training, Underwater Police Science Technology, recreational, and scientific diver courses, as well as the full array of conventional dive related courses offered by FKCC.

The Beginning

In its 1963 session, the Legislature of
the State of Florida authorized the establishment of the junior college, initially called Monroe (county) Junior College (MJC). Classes began in August 1965 in a downtown Key West school building, and offered “co-ed scuba diving,” carried under physical education. The course covered, according to the MJC Bulletin, “physical principles of diving, a study of diving diseases, search and navigation, a study of marine animals, collection techniques, decompression techniques, and repetitive diving.’’

In October 1965, Monroe Junior College changed its name to the Florida Keys Junior College (FKJC) in anticipation of expanding its offerings throughout the county. The following year, on September 4, 1966, a groundbreaking ceremony took place for FKJC’s new and permanent 19-acre campus; the remaining 97 acres are the Underwater Training Area (UTA)/lagoon or bay bottom. Scuba diving continued to be offered, as was Introductory Oceanography and a new course titled “Pre-Marine Science.”

In 1969 the construction of a new Lower Keys hospital was begun next to the FKJC campus, which in keeping with its growing role began Nursing and Marine Propulsion Technology programs. By this time the physical education program included not only scuba diving but also skin diving and beginning and intermediate swimming. Within two years NAUI and YMCA approved Advanced Scuba Diving was also offered and covered photography, equipment maintenance, and search and rescue.

In 1970 Florida Keys Junior College became the Florida Keys Community College (FKCC).

By 1973 underwater photography was offered as a separate course, and the entire back cover of the 1973-1974 catalogue was covered by a color photograph of scuba divers. The following years more expansion took place, as Marine Biology and Environmental Science were added to the FKCC curriculum. By 1978 scuba instructors were being trained at the college. Then in 1982 FKCC hosted the in-water portion of the YMCA’s three week International Diver Training Program.

**The Little Giant’s Growth Begins**

In September 1984, Robert (Smitty) Smith, joined the staff of the FKCC as Coordinator of Business, Industry, and Community Service as well as Chairman of the FKCC Committee on Coordination and Safety of Underwater Activities. Subsequently he also became an adjunct instructor with the Institute of Criminal Justice (police academy), which was co-located on the FKCC campus.

Bob had relocated to Key West in 1976 to accept the position as Director of the National YMCA Center for Underwater Activities. Prior to his move to Key West, Bob had been Senior Research Scientist with the American Institute of Research (AIR) and had been involved in a wide variety of underwater activities, including saturation/habitat diving, search and recovery, light salvage work, and diver safety. Bob, a diver since 1958, was also the founder and Director of the Human Factors Research Diving Team for the AIR, which conducted psychological studies on diving and other performance environments.

By 1986, Bob Smith had brought the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer’s Diving Safety Courses to FKCC, a program that he and Dick Geyer had originally developed and taught since 1976. Dick Geyer, a former Navy diver who began his diving career in 1960, has over 6,000 working dives to...
his credit and operates his own commercial diving business.

The Corps of Engineers’ courses included Work Diving Safety and Supervisor’s Programs as well as Work Diving refresher training. These courses are now open to other organizations and individuals interested in Work Diving Technology, including Surface-Air-Supplied Diving.

In his capacity as Coordinator of Business, Industry, and Community Services, Bob Smith drew together the local emergency medical system, U.S. Army Special Forces divers, Monroe County Sheriff’s Department divers, the Navy Search and Rescue Helicopter Squadron, and the Florida Marine Patrol to support the various diver education programs.

This effort was strengthened by the 1986 arrival of Dick Smith, a Master Instructor and Course Director, who began scuba diving in 1956 with the elite Force Recon of the U.S. Marine Corps. Subsequently he completed the Combat Swimmer and UDT course at the Navy’s Underwater Training Facility at Coronado Island, California. Dick immediately became involved in the Corps of Engineers’ program. Two years later Dick’s unique expertise was applied to the underwater law enforcement courses, where he used his military skills to teach not only scuba but also infiltration, reconnaissance, and camouflage to police tactical dive students.

**Diving Comes of Academic Age**

In 1986, FKCC began offering a new two-year degree program in Recreational Dive Management, with Bob Smith as Program Director. One third of the required courses were dive related, one third were business courses and the final third were general education. Concurrent with this dive program expansion was the acquisition by FKCC of 45 timbers from the *Atocha* treasure ship. These mahogany timbers, weighing 300-1600 pounds apiece, were transported from their discovery site to the FKCC UTA by Navy LCU and laid out in the UTA/lagoon. This became the basis for a new Marine Archaeology course first taught by Duncan Mathewson, Archeological Director of Mel Fisher’s Treasure Salvage Project, which had discovered the *Atocha* in 1985.

By 1988, FKCC had moved into the underwater law enforcement arena with courses that included Underwater Search and Recovery, Public Safety Diving, and Underwater Police Science and Technology, which includes certification through the Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.
Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE). Recreational diving had expanded as well, to include dive stress (an area in which Bob Smith had done pathfinding research), Divermaster, Rescue and Emergency Medicine, and Scuba Equipment Maintenance and Repair. A new course, Research Diving, combined biology, geology, and archeology; training divers to the standards of the American Academy of Underwater Sciences (AAUS).

The 1990-1992 FKCC Catalog, reflecting the coming of age of diving at FKCC, showed a woman scuba diver on the front cover, while the back cover was an underwater photograph of a Gray Angelfish. Both photos were taken by Underwater Photography Instructor Lynn Smith, an FKCC faculty member and wife of previously mentioned Dick Smith.

The offering of the college had also expanded and in 1992, in addition to the two-year degree in Recreational Dive Management, FKCC offered a two-year Marine Biology Technology degree which included a number of required diving courses.

**New Diving Expertise**

In 1992, Bill Chalfant, a former U.S. Army Ranger who began diving in 1969, joined the FKCC team. Bill, who was also a factory representative for a number of major dive equipment manufacturers and a businessman, introduced a new level of equipment and dive business related expertise. Bill was also a long time advocate of adding nitrox to the field of recreational diving.

In January 1993, Bob Jason, a highly experienced underwater specialist, joined the staff of FKCC. Bob had been initiated into scuba diving in 1962 and subsequently joined the navy, where he worked as a hard-hat diver, doing general salvage work with “the fleet” and underwater construction during his stint with the “Seabees” (Navy Construction Battalions: C.Bs). He is also a NAUI Course Director.

With this added expertise, FKCC substantially increased its offerings to include a nitrox/computer course, more hands-on training in the Scuba Maintenance and Equipment Repair course, upgrading of academic requirements for Advanced Divers to college level and a “how-to business course,” titled The Business of Recreational Diving. In addition, a more occupational leaning array of courses was introduced, including Work Dive Technology, Introduction to Surface Air Supply, Advanced Equipment Repair, and Advanced Underwater Photography.

The U.S. Customs and Florida Marine Patrol (now the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission) had also started training in the Underwater Police Science Technology Courses.

By 1994 the two-year program in Recreational Dive Management had expanded to become The Diving
Business and Technology Program.
The FKCC diving staff is also crowned with some of its own graduates, such as Kenny Lingle, Marshall Harris, and Hazel Hans, who have now compiled their own notable records as both divers and instructors.

Ties with Emergency Medical Service training and more technical courses had been drawn into the regular FKCC curriculum from the Corps of Engineers and Underwater Police Science Technology courses.

By 1996 FKCC had built the Mario F. Mitchell Aquatic Safety Center, with its Olympic size pool, dive equipment locker and an air/nitrox tank refill facilities.

The Work Dive Safety Program had also been expanded to allow State Department of Transportation (DOT) dive teams to take part. To date DOT teams from Virginia, Texas, and Nebraska have taken advantage of that opportunity. Training has also been provided to diving teams from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, The South Florida Water Management District, and the Dade Bureau of Reclamation. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has been using the diving resources at FKCC for its work dive teams since 1998.

With the 1997 acquisition by the Monroe County Sheriff's Office of a UH 1 helicopter, from the Mississippi National Guard, more realistic air-sea rescue and medical emergency activities by FKCC came into play. Then, in 1999 the U.S. Army Special Forces Underwater Operations School donated two hyperbaric chambers to FKCC, which laid the basis for training and education on this system for both divers and emergency medical personnel.

**AND THE GROWTH CONTINUES**

FKCC’s course offerings continue to grow. In 2001, Diving Medical Technology, Dive Medical Technicians, and Nitrox For Working Divers courses were added to the course selection. Future courses will involve medical and dive training related to the hyperbaric chambers; an Advanced Underwater Research Course to further prepare FKCC divers for the role of monitoring the evolution of life on the Artificial Reef Vandenburg (www.bigshipwrecks.com) to be sunk off Key West in the fall of 2002; and offerings on the Dräger rebreather, already of proven civilian use for research, underwater photography, and law enforcement.

The FKCC also has a highly active scuba club, which numbers some 90 divers and has one or two club sponsored dives a month. These dives run the gamut from fun dives and reef cleanups to fish surveys to support FKCC's Artificial Reef Vandenburg project. More recent, in keeping with Halloween, was the underwater pumpkin carving contest. The club provides a mixing ground for FKCC diving faculty, instructors, and students to share their enjoyment of the underseas.

**Conclusion**

Today FKCC offers four two-year associate degrees—an Associate in Science (AS) or an Associate in Applied Science (AAS) in Diving Business and Technology or an AS or AAS in Marine Environmental Technology. Soon there will be an addition to the Mario F. Mitchell Aquatic Safety Center with the building of a marine/public safety hyperbaric chamber annex, made possible by a $250,000 donation by the Monroe County Sheriff's Office and matching state funds. This facility will house both hyperbaric chambers donated to FKCC by the U.S. Special Forces Underwater Operations School in 1999.

In its early years, the growth of dive related activities at Florida Keys Community College reflected the development and growing interest of recreational diving. What made FKCC the “Little Giant in Diving” was partially the location, climate, and dedication of part time instructors, divemasters, and advanced divers who supported the programs. But mostly its growth has been the result of the perseverance of uniquely qualified,
highly motivated, and visionary underwater specialists, who marshaled like minded professionals in local, state, and federal government into mutually beneficial cooperation.

As a result of these human and environmental resources, as the science and technology of underwater activities continued to expand, FKCC met the challenge of development by expanding its underwater curriculum and facilities accordingly.

Visit Florida Keys Community College at www.fkcc.edu/fkcc/

Dr. Denny Howley, a frequent contributor to Resources, is a NAUI instructor with the Florida Keys Community College. Denny operates his Scuba Dive Management System (SDMS) organization, which monitors customer service on THE DIVE in the Lower Florida Keys. He also has his own private investigative agency, CADCORP, Inc., as well as coordinating the Process Servers Cooperative of the Florida Keys (PSCFK), which covers all 822 named keys of the 130-mile long Florida Keys. Denny is a former Airborne Ranger, Special Forces, combat experienced Infantry career Army Officer who served many years with the National Intelligence Community in Washington, D.C. He began diving in 1961 in Monterey, California.