This year, the Florida Institute of Technology launched a new, numbers-crunching initiative — the Activity-Based Total Accountability Institute housed at the College of Business. This venture comes at a time when many citizens are questioning free spending and government spending.

The private Melbourne school was awarded a grant of $752,000 from the Florida Department of Education to create this unique organization and accountability tool to help lawmakers better understand how government money is being spent.

“The ABTA Institute has been collecting and analyzing large amounts of data in order to produce consistent reports on how each of the 50 states spends tax dollars across a broad spectrum of areas,” said Dr. Deborah Carstens, director of the ABTA Institute and associate professor of management-information systems at the College of Business.

“Our main effort was to create activity-based accountability tables, and we are going to highlight the tables at the National Conference on Innovations in Government Accountability and Performance scheduled May 18 at the Hilton Melbourne Beach Oceanfront Hotel, where Earl Devaney will be the keynote speaker,” she said.

“We ended up with more than 213,000 tables. It was a huge undertaking by a dedicated team. The tables highlight the cost of various government operations. For example, in the field of corrections in Florida, we determined that it costs $98 per inmate meal. The tables clearly put things into perspective so that the information can be easily consumed by the taxpayer. All of this data is online (www.abta.fit.edu).”

John Clarke, technology administrator and data-depository manager for the ABTA Institute, led a team of six undergraduates and one graduate student who collected the information.

“We gathered data from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau, Florida Performance, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the ‘Corrections Compendium,’ which is a paper that is put together by the departments of corrections around the U.S.,” Clarke said.

“There is quite a bit of historical data on the ABTA Institute Web site,” adds Dr. Annie Becker, associate dean of research at the Florida Tech College of Business. “In that regard, we are offering not only a statewide service but really a nationwide service that is timely with the government’s Recovery and Reinvestment Act.”

The ABTA Institute team includes Bemie Cooperthwaite, who is the operations coordinator. Florida Tech College of Business Dean Dr. Robert Niebuhr says the ABTA Institute is creating a new model for governmental data collection. “It’s really data that governments haven’t used in the past. Governments can say they are really efficient, but they need some similar metrics in order to draw a comparison. As a business-school dean, I am excited that we are taking this model to the federal, state, and even the county levels, in terms of accountability in the measurements. This is new territory.”

Attendees of the first National Conference on Innovations in Government Accountability and Performance will learn more about how this system is intended to become a major step toward transparency in government spending.

The conference will be conducted from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. A fee of $40 covers all sessions and panel discussions, a continental breakfast, lunch, and refreshments. To register, visit http://abta.fit.edu/conference/registrationform.php, or call 674-7396. An opening evening reception will be hosted at the hotel on Sunday, May 17. The fee to attend this gathering is $30.

The conference is looking to attract professionals and researchers in local, state, and federal government, industry, nonprofit organizations and academia.

“We’re hoping to draw not only agency heads within Florida and from other states, but also individual citizens who are particularly interested in the accountability issues — locally, at the state level, and nationally,” said Dr. Martha Sale, associate professor of accounting at the Florida Tech College of Business. “We think the conference holds a certain appeal to the population as a whole.”

Certified public accountants who register for the conference can take advantage of the option to attend a continuing professional education morning course. The course has been approved for 4.5 credits, Dr. Carstens said.

“The keynote speaker for the conference will be Earl Devaney, the top U.S. official on government accountability. We have some very high-level people as speakers,” said Dr. Carstens. “I think we got lucky with Mr. Devaney.”

Devaney, a former U.S. Secret Service agent and 1970 graduate of Marshall College with a degree in government, was appointed by President Obama on Feb. 23 to chair the Recovery Act Accountability and Transparency Board.

His job is to ensure that the money spent under the Recovery Act is maximized with transparency and accountability to the taxpayer. Devaney is on leave as the Inspector General for the Department of the Interior. He was nominated by President Clinton in July 1999 to be the seventh Inspector General for that department.

He was widely credited for transforming the Office of Inspector General into an innovative organization dedicated not only to detecting fraud, waste, and mismanagement, but also to assisting the department in identifying and implementing new and better ways of conducting business.

Additionally, Cheryl Whitaker, deputy chief administrative officer for the Government Accountability Office, will be a speaker and panelist. Her panel is titled “Government Accountability on the Federal and Local Level.” Lisa Parker, a project manager with the Governmental Accounting Standards Board, will address the conference attendees, too.

Congressman Bill Posey of the 15th District, the “originator of activity-based total accountability,” will make the opening remarks at the conference. He is the author of the book “Activity-Based Total Accountability.” The American Legislative Exchange Council, the nation’s largest bipartisan organization of state lawmakers, named Posey a “National Legislator of the Year” for his efforts to bring greater accountability to government.