FAU scores coup with highly regarded hire to lead Brain Institute

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By Jeff Ostrowski - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

JUPITER —

In a coup for Florida Atlantic University’s biotech ambitions, the new FAU Brain Institute has hired a prominent researcher from Vanderbilt University.

Randy D. Blakely is scheduled to become the first executive director of the FAU Brain Institute in May. He will bring $3.8 million in National Institutes of Health grants to Palm Beach County, a sum that nearly matches the $4.6 million in NIH grants brought in by all FAU scientists in 2015.
"He has a tremendous international reputation," Daniel Flynn, FAU’s vice president for research, said of Blakely. “Certainly in terms of the NIH funding, this makes a big splash.”

The hiring is part of FAU’s plan to build a research hub and science honors college in Jupiter. The program, announced in March by FAU President John Kelly, would collaborate with Scripps Florida and Max Planck Florida.

Blakely said he was recruited by other brain research centers, but he liked the potential of FAU’s center.
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“It caught my attention that FAU was poised to make great strides in brain research,” Blakely said. “I think the opportunity is greater here.”

Blakely, 56, attended high school and college in Georgia and earned his doctorate from Johns Hopkins.
University. He joined Vanderbilt’s School of Medicine in 1996 and heads the private university’s Center for Neuroscience Research.

Blakely’s research focuses on the roles of serotonin and dopamine, two neurotransmitters, in disorders such as autism and attention deficit disorder. According to his resume, Blakely holds 11 patents and has applied for two more.

While Blakely will focus mainly on research, Flynn said he’ll also be in charge of hiring scientists for the brain institute, which aims to help unlock some of the mysteries of the human brain.

FAU this year asked the state Legislature for $29 million to build a 72,000-square-foot building on its Jupiter campus. Lawmakers rejected that request, but Flynn said the FAU Brain Institute has a budget totaling $12 million over six years.

Scripps and Max Planck were lured to Jupiter a decade ago as part of a plan to transform Florida’s notoriously low-wage economy. Scripps got $579 million in state and local subsidies. Max Planck received $188 million.

Kelly, FAU’s president, said he hopes to use the two brand-name institutes to attract top students.

“The intention is of putting a STEM honors college on this campus to go after the best and brightest kids in the world,” Kelly said in March.

Science education is just one way Kelly aims to raise FAU’s national profile. He has boosted entrance requirements for incoming freshmen, and he also is focusing on sports.

Last year, Kelly said he hoped to raise $70 million for an indoor practice facility for the football team, which last month finished another season marked by a losing record and spotty attendance.

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