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FAU gets $4.5 million boost for biotech

Zhongmin Lu, a postdoctoral researcher at FAU works in the lab of Greg McCloud, a professor of Integrative Biology and Neuroscience at FAU, on FAU’s Jupiter campus. (Handout / Florida Atlantic University)
Florida Atlantic University has been trying to transform its northern campus into a hub of biotech research for years, and it's finally received some state money to do that.

The Jupiter campus shares space with biotech giants Scripps Florida and Max Planck Florida but has struggled to fully benefit from those relationships as far as research dollars and prestige. But this year, FAU has received $4.5 million from the state to help transform the campus, which has faced plummeting enrollment in the past decade.

Officials hope the money will bring more scientists to the campus who can work with Max Planck and Scripps to develop new treatments and cures for illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's.

"When you're doing great research and solving serious health problems like Alzheimer's and dementia, it can make a huge difference in the quality of life and health care costs," FAU President John Kelly said.

The state Legislature this year allocated $3 million in planning money to help the university construct a state-of-the-art, 72,000-square foot science building with research and teaching labs, classrooms and offices. The university received another $1.5 million in recurring dollars to hire more science faculty.

The science building is expected to cost about $30 million, and FAU hopes to receive additional state funding next year as well as gifts from donors to help pay for it. Construction is expected to start during the 2017-18 year, pending full funding, spokeswoman Cara Perry said.

Scripps took advantage of millions in state incentives to locate at FAU in 2004 and Max Planck followed suit in 2007. Kelly said the partnerships should have put FAU on the map years ago, but the former Clemson University administrator said he’d never heard about them until he interviewed for the president's job in early 2014.
"I think there were people who clearly saw the potential, but they were not in a leadership role to make it happen," Kelly said.

Since arriving at FAU, he's been looking for ways to better leverage the partnerships. That includes meeting with leadership at Scripps and Max Planck and hiring several respected scientists to work alongside the researchers from the other two agencies.

"That campus is a unique jewel for the university," Kelly said. "No other university has anything like this in the country, so it would be foolish not to push it to its maximum potential."

Kelly's goal in the next few years is to hire 30 to 45 more researchers on Jupiter campus, as well as increase student enrollment, which has dropped from about 1,600 in 2003 to 750 this year. Kelly's said he hopes to increase that to about 3,000 within the next 10 years, all honors students, most of whom will focus on science.

The Jupiter campus has long been the home of the liberal arts-focused Honors College, and that will remain, Kelly said. But the university is also adding a second science-focused Honors College.

The campus hasn't attracted many science-focused undergraduate students, largely because its science classes were mostly based on the Boca Raton campus. Officials said the distance between FAU researchers and those at Max Planck and Scripps also proved a detriment at conducting joint research.

Budget cuts and a lack of space on the Jupiter campus also hurt FAU's abilities to collaborate with the biotech researchers, officials said.

Officials at The Scripps Research Institute and Max Planck welcomed FAU's expansion.

"This is a positive development, further strengthening the region's growing biomedical research hub and recognizing Jupiter as a focal point for world-class science in the state of Florida," said Steve Kay, president of The Scripps Research Institute.

David Fitzpatrick, CEO of Max Planck Florida, said he's also excited about the possibilities.

"We're delighted that the state recognizes the value of this campus's dedication to research and education and are optimistic about the future of the Jupiter Life Science Initiative," he said.
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