Florida Atlantic University wants to convert its Jupiter campus into one focused on science. In this file photo, Neurobiology graduate students Melissa Borgen and Brian Orr study images of a neurons as part of their research. (Mark Randall, Sun Sentinel)

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A lot of scientific research has happened on Florida Atlantic University's Jupiter campus in recent years, but not from FAU.

The university has been mostly left out of the millions in federal research dollars that have gone to the Florida locations of Scripps Florida and The Max Planck Society, two biotech giants housed on the Jupiter campus.

But FAU President John Kelly has a plan to change that. He has proposed converting FAU’s Jupiter location from a regional campus to a science-focused campus that could attract students from all over the world.

The plan includes moving or hiring 30 to 45 researchers and staff to Jupiter as well as building a 72,000-square-foot facility would include research labs, teaching labs and classrooms. It’s an expansion of an idea started last year when the FAU started moving about a half-dozen science faculty from Boca Raton to Jupiter.

While the plan would greatly expand the presence of science, the liberal arts-focused Honors College would remain, as would faculty in other disciplines.
The result of the change could be more collaborations with Scripps and Max Planck on potential drugs for cancer, heart disease, addiction or Ebola.

"We want to get to a place where we're aggressively pursuing big strategies, big ideas that work on the strengths of all the entities," Kelly said. "If we get some large grants, we can build a science program that has a chance for more drug discoveries or breakthroughs in areas such as healthy aging."

The plan is dependent on state funding. The State University System’s Board of Governors is expected to decide Nov. 5 whether to include FAU’s $29 million request in its capital needs priorities for the next year. The final decision would be up to the state Legislature and governor.

Kelly has made it a priority since he arrived in January to better leverage FAU’s relationship with Max Planck and Scripps, which have received about $1 billion in state incentives. FAU spent $25 million for two buildings that served as their temporary homes.

"I don't know anywhere else in the world where you have a university and two such branded enterprises on one location," Kelly said. "But to be a true partner, you have to be an equal partner. You can't be the weakest partner in a triad."

FAU had hoped to be a stronger partner years ago, but budget cuts and a lack of space on the Jupiter campus hindered its abilities to collaborate with the biotech researchers, officials said.

The new plans call for FAU to boost enrollment on the Jupiter campus, which has dropped by nearly half in the last decade to about 1,100 students. The proposal would expand that to 3,000 over the next decade.

The Honors College would be expanded to include students pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering and math, collectively known as the STEM fields.

The long-term future of the biotech efforts on Jupiter's campus was in doubt earlier this year when The University of Southern California proposed merging with Scripps, raising questions about how a Florida campus would fit into that strategy. But Scripps later called off talks after its faculty voiced opposition.

Kelly said he has met with Scripps officials and feels comfortable with its commitment to Florida.

Scripps officials say they support FAU's proposed expansion.

"We strongly favor anything that will improve the environment for biomedical research and development in our area," said Dawn Johnson, senior director of scientific operations for the Scripps Florida campus.

Dr. David Fitzpatrick, scientific director for the Max Planck Florida Institute, agreed.

"President Kelly's vision and commitment to make FAU a school of scientific excellence has strengthened and energized the Jupiter Neuroscience community, increasing opportunities for students to work with cutting-edge technology and research," he said.

He called the three-way partnership "a unique and valuable asset to Palm Beach County and the entire state of Florida."

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