

Florida Atlantic University Roundtable March 14-15, 2011

A roundtable of some two dozen faculty members and administrators of Florida Atlantic University (FAU) took place March 14 and 15, 2011 at Baldwin House on the University's Boca Raton campus. The Roundtable was convened by FAU President, Mary Jane Saunders, and Vice President of Strategic Planning, Gitanjali Kaul. The participants in the roundtable reflected a cross section of the University in terms of college, department, and campus affiliation as well as length of service to the institution. Prior to the roundtable each participant had been interviewed by an affiliate of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education; these individual interviews had offered preliminary insights into the University's strengths and potential opportunities while also suggesting some ways in which FAU has yet to realize its full potential.

The Roundtable was facilitated by Robert Zemsky, Professor and Chair of The Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania, along with his Learning Alliance colleagues, Joan Girgus and Gregory Wegner. This document provides an account of recurrent themes and considerations that emerged in the course of the two-day roundtable discussion. The purpose of the Roundtable in the broadest sense was to take stock of where FAU is today in the course of its development, and what directions the University might seek to pursue through the next decade.

A Changing Environment

The self-introductions of roundtable participants revealed that many had come to the University during times of significant growth or change, and that FAU is a different institution today from what it had been in the past. FAU was founded 1961 as an institution offering only upper-division undergraduate programs; a key purpose in its founding was to provide students who had begun their studies at one of the state's community colleges with an opportunity to continue their progress toward a four-year degree. The University later added graduate programs in several fields of study, and in the late 1980s FAU added freshman- and sophomore-level courses to its curriculum, opening the University to students interested in pursuing a four-year undergraduate education at a single institution while also continuing its attractiveness to upper-division baccalaureate students. In its 50-year history the University has grown physically to include seven campuses and sites located along 150 miles of the South Florida coast. The collective portrait that emerged was of a young university that has virtually never experienced a steady state. It is an institution that continues to evolve in dynamic transition to meet the changing needs of the region, the state, and the nation. Throughout the discussion roundtable participants expressed excitement about the University's future prospects. The sense of energy and initiative from these exchanges conveyed a general sense of an academic community in common resolve to build a robust future for FAU.

A summary of one-word characterizations of the University from the interviews revealed that roundtable participants have a range of impressions about FAU's strengths and its prospects.

The impressions that were voiced most frequently described a university that is multi-faceted, energetic, and dynamic.

Part of the discussion indicated that the South Florida region itself is multifarious in terms of its aspirations and demographics, and this characterization of the broader community was to some extent reflected in the University as well. As the region grows in population, FAU has made important recent strides through such achievements as the creation of a medical school, a dramatic increase in admissions, and the construction of contemporary residence halls, to name a few. Participants also recalled times in which FAU's growth seemed to have pursued fortuitous and diverging directions, sometimes without sustaining momentum in a given priority.

It was also observed that some aspects of the University's growth have been due less to internal decision making than to external factors, including state legislative actions that create an additional campus or add an academic program in a constituency district. Moreover, as an institution that depends heavily on state subsidy, FAU has less ability to make sustaining investments from its own resources in new opportunities that are not accompanied by external funding.

Others described the sense of variance that results from the fact that FAU's several campuses have somewhat different missions and a range of administrative structures. One result of this circumstance is what some have perceived as a differing emphasis on teaching and research. When a major research center such as the Max Planck Institute is placed at FAU, it would seem natural that its presence should result in an increased emphasis on scientific research. It was observed, though, that highlighting research of one kind can create a sense of separation between research in the scientific and non-experimental fields, or more generally between research and teaching. At several intervals the discussion stressed the need to build more intentional linkages between work in the scientific fields and other disciplines, not just in students' educational experience but also in the broader academic life of the University. One articulation of this principle suggested the need to infuse the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – the STEM disciplines – with a greater understanding of achievement in the arts and other humanities disciplines, in effect transforming STEM to STEAM.

The fact that the University community is spread across multiple campuses can also contribute to a sense of separateness, to the extent that a faculty member may find it difficult to know what other FAU colleagues share the same interests in research or teaching. Until recently, each campus had its own budget and operated for the most part independently of the others. Campuses have tended to evolve with individual identities, at times giving rise to differing academic program elements. Now, however, budgets are allocated primarily by colleges, with each college having responsibility for its programs across the campuses.

A Search for Opportunities

While acknowledging the complex factors that have contributed to the University's growth, the roundtable began to consider what opportunities FAU might pursue that would allow it to fulfill its educational and research missions more effectively while creating a more coherent

sense of identity among the University's parts. What are some defining themes that can link the multiple strengths into a more unified and effective whole?

In the course of this discussion roundtable participants identified several areas of promise and initiative that could become key elements of the FAU's continued evolution. The several ideas that emerged could be conceived in the framework of two encompassing themes, which came to be described as "Florida First" and "The University as an Academic Village."

- *Florida First*: Planning from the knowledge that several of the most significant challenges confronting society – including environmental, demographic, educational, and economic concerns – will become matters of intense focus and engagement in Florida sooner than in other parts of the U.S. Creating linkages across the University that help coordinate and strengthen FAU's stewardship of place, helping it to focus on such issues as sustaining the well-being of the region's environmental treasures, or finding constructive approaches to issues of aging, literacy, and economic development.
- *The University as Academic Village*: Creating an environment that conceives FAU as an interconnected set of academic and geographic locales – an environment in which each campus comes to have its own sense of place as a village in which students and faculty members interact effectively among themselves, at the same time they engage with the extended range of people and resources across the University.

A more detailed accounting of the discussions under these two themes follows.

Florida First

One defining element of the roundtable discussion was the sense of vitality and opportunity that invests the South Florida region itself. Many participants observed that some of the most significant challenges facing the nation as a whole will culminate in Florida sooner than other settings of the U.S. Unlike some other settings, this is not a region that regards its most productive and important era as having occurred largely in the past. Rather, South Florida is a bellwether of issues that confront the nation as a whole. Florida First describes the integral contributions that FAU can make as a public university – both in the steps it takes to cultivate heightened awareness of the region's distinctive qualities, and in the leadership it displays in addressing the societal and environmental challenges that Florida shares with other regions of the U.S. The University is positioned to be a strong and consistent steward of place in South Florida, and in so doing, to provide both regional and national leadership in implementing constructive approaches to address urgent societal and environmental issues.

Societal issues. South Florida leads much of the nation in the proportion of its population who are ethnic and racial minorities, as well as in the proportion of both younger and older people. It is a setting of continued population growth and economic development, and as such it constitutes a laboratory to study and develop solutions to an array of societal challenges – including issues of aging; issues of environmental vulnerability and preservation; and the challenge of building cohesiveness in a diverse, multi-cultural society. South Florida is poised to demonstrate leadership in forging sustainable and effective approaches to societal well-being in the twenty-first century, and FAU possesses the academic and research capacity to be a central

driver in helping ensure the continued vitality and development of the region through its leadership in such issues as adult literacy, diversity and human rights, immigration, memory and learning, and global climate change.

Gateway to the Atlantic. Another important component of the Florida First theme is the University's integral connection to the Atlantic Ocean. The phenomenon of global climate change and its impact on rising sea levels will likely affect Florida's coastline in dramatic ways. FAU's leadership in understanding and addressing the impact of this and related considerations would benefit the region and the nation, as well as other nations bordering the Ocean. Observers in other settings will note carefully the steps this region takes to address the vulnerability of Florida's Atlantic coastline as well as its approach to broader issues of environmental stewardship, including the sustainability of environmental treasures such as the Everglades ecosystem. At the same time, the very image of the Atlantic invokes international and global dimensions extending beyond Florida. One of the opportunities FAU could pursue is to develop formal partnerships with the Brazilian Ministry of Science and Technology on joint research concerning the Atlantic. Research partnerships of this kind would make it possible for FAU faculty and students to study issues concerning such matters as reef ecosystems or the impact oil exploration from an international perspective. Research partnerships with Brazil would also allow students to learn from the experience of working in intercultural settings. The prospect of an international partnership could entail decisions about the recruitment of faculty with requisite expertise. As with any of the ideas identified in the roundtable discussion, a research project of this kind would require a combination of administrative leadership and faculty interest working in strong conjunction at FAU to make certain such an initiative succeeds.

Entrepreneurship as a defining element. The roundtable exchanges indicated that a key component of the Florida First theme would be a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship across the University. Strengthening the entrepreneurial character of FAU would mean investing in people with promising new ideas – in effect rewarding self-starters who are exemplary teachers as well those with research potential. Entrepreneurial initiatives would involve different areas of the University working in partnership – for example, projects that draw different faculty and students together in learning communities, projects that involve different campuses and different disciplines working together, and projects that involve units from the Division of Student Affairs working in active partnership with members of the faculty. Members of the roundtable emphasized that creating a more dynamic environment of entrepreneurship would require building an infrastructure within the University that supports creativity and promotes the development of new ideas with potential to enhance the well-being of the region and the nation. Enhancing the capacity for entrepreneurship does not imply the creation of a top-down system; rather it means making purposeful and sustained investments in infrastructure that supports new initiative.

Extended benefits of Florida First initiatives. Taking a strong public leadership role in actions that support the Florida First theme would help FAU to gain attention from other parts of the U.S. and beyond – including higher education institutions in areas that are dealing with similar challenges of societal well being and sustainability. FAU's leadership in addressing issues integral to the region's continued vitality could be an important force in attracting students – including those from out of state – who are interested in hands-on engagement in a

multifaceted community, helping address issues of transportation, literacy, health care, and aging, as well as a range of environmental concerns. Such an emphasis could lead to the design of different kinds of educational experiences for students as well as explorations of community-based participatory research involving faculty members and students working to define problems and test solutions. A more direct involvement in concerns of the region and community would not fundamentally recast the nature of the research process; for faculty members an increased community engagement is not an end in itself but rather a means to create new knowledge through scholarship and research.

The University as Academic Village

The concept of an academic village describes an ability to draw members of the University community together who share a common interest or commitment to a shared purpose. The village theme applies at the campus level in the first instance by conceiving each campus as having a distinctive sense of place – a close-knit academic community whose members engage with one another, both giving and receiving support in building a collective sense of identity and progress. The village concept reinforces the integral connection between academic and student affairs in contributing to the successful progress of students in completing their studies and earning a degree. While noting that the image of a village can carry a suggestion of a confining and parochial setting, an equally important concept from this discussion was to reinforce the ability of students, faculty, and staff members to reach beyond the campus setting as well – to convene and work together across demarcations of geography, fields of study, or job descriptions. While a single campus may provide a social and academic context in the first instance, ultimately the campus village extends outward to engage the full research and teaching strengths of the University.

The theme of FAU as an academic village provides a fitting image of the kinds of issues that need to be resolved to draw the multiplicity of missions within the University into a dynamic whole. One of the key challenges the University faces is to find the right mix of centralization and decentralization in its organizational structure – one that will allow FAU to grow in meaningful ways and fulfill its missions most effectively. In some instances, individual campuses of FAU offer exemplars of people serving in multiple roles, pooling their expertise and initiative to achieve goals extending beyond the functions outlined in the formal organizational structure. These examples could serve as models for both the smaller and larger campuses of the University.

A University connected through social media: a key element of FAU as academic village. The proliferation of digital technology through the past two decades has caused many higher education institutions to employ a broader array of tools for purposes of teaching and research as well as basic communication. Virtually every university and college faculty member uses e-mail today; many institutions offer courses online, and the use of such platforms as Blackboard is widespread. In the time since these now-familiar tools have been introduced, however, new methods of interaction through social networking media have gained strong and growing popularity – among young people in the first instance, and increasingly among those of all ages, cultures, and occupations. To date no higher education institution has shown leadership

in tapping the potential of social networking as an integral means of educating students and conducting research. The prospect of adopting social networking technology could allow FAU to extend the concept of academic village across all of its geographical settings. With seven campuses and sites spread across 150 miles of Florida coast, employing social media in the digital realm offers ways of building richer and more sustaining exchanges among the members of the University's extended academic community. FAU could be a pioneer in applying the power of social media to connect faculty members and students in ways that broaden the possibilities for thought and engagement beyond the context of a particular time and place. To advance this theme would be to adopt a conception of the University's most important academic resource – its faculty – as inhabiting a learning platform that is not confined to a particular campus, building, or department of the University. Taking this step would mean rethinking some elements of course design to ensure that the addition of technology contributes most effectively to an enrichment of learning – among faculty members engaged in shared research projects, and between faculty and students. The planning question is to define what things the University and its faculty would like to accomplish that social media will help it to do more effectively.

Collaboration, Coherence, Alignment

Several times in the discussion of possible planning themes there were exchanges centering on the potential for developing partnerships, and on whether FAU should seek to develop more extensive partnerships with other stakeholders in the region. One discussion focused on whether FAU should seek to enhance partnerships with K-12 school systems in the region. Some of the largest school systems in the U.S. are located in the region, and a University initiative undertaken on a broad scale involving all its campuses in conjunction with seven regional school districts could attract major visibility and grant support. If a set of interventions from FAU research projects could demonstrate success in narrowing the literacy gap between the most and least advantaged students, for example, the results would draw wide attention to the University and its partnership with K-12 schools. It was observed that some of the largest grants the College of Science has gained from NSF have involved students and faculty working in the region's schools.

It was also suggested that FAU needs to consider the areas in which developing a partnership with the Florida state colleges offers greatest advantage – to the region, to the state colleges, and to FAU itself. Among other things, this process could help FAU to identify and communicate broadly the ways in which its programs differ from the state colleges on the one hand, and with Florida's other public universities, on the other.

Another consideration of increased collaboration with local partners centered on the possibilities for more concerted engagement with the Scripps Research Institute and the Max Planck Institute in shared research projects. While its location is contiguous to the FAU Jupiter campus, the Scripps Institute's contract is with the state of Florida, which requires that Scripps engage with all state universities; Scripps seeks research partnerships in particular that will help it to attract external funds. While honors students on FAU's Jupiter campus participate in some research projects at Scripps, there is as yet no major initiative with Scripps at the graduate level. The Max Planck Institute has a more explicit purpose to work collaboratively and help

strengthen FAU as a young research university; at present there exists a joint program with Max Planck Florida Institute in Integrative Biology and Neuroscience (IBAN) whose students are in FAU's PhD program in Integrative Biology. This represents a foundation on which to build. Here too, the prospect of expanded collaboration between Max Planck and FAU faculty would be greatly enhanced to the extent that the involvement FAU's faculty creates a stronger position for gaining external research funding. Partnerships with Max Planck and Scripps will also be facilitated through joint appointments and shared research facilities.

Another strand of discussion centered on the fact that the addition of a freshman and sophomore curriculum had occurred some 25 years after the University's founding, and by some accounts these entry-level programs were added without a great deal of thought or sufficient financial resources to address the different academic needs of students in their first two years of college. It was suggested that FAU may be at a point in which it could benefit from a broad set of conversations about the coherence and design of its undergraduate degree programs, possibly in light of some themes the roundtable has identified. What elements of the undergraduate programs should FAU consider recasting to yield stronger and more distinctive courses of learning? One suggestion was to stress the strong component of undergraduate research in FAU's baccalaureate programs, helping students make a more seamless transition from a baccalaureate degree to graduate programs leading to a master's or Ph.D. A decision to offer more undergraduate programs of this sort could mean a redesign of some existing undergraduate programs to facilitate transition to graduate study (including the prospect of earning a professional master's degree in five years beginning in the freshman year).

In the course of these discussions it was noted that whatever thematic elements might come to be emphasized as areas of focus for FAU, it is unlikely that all faculty members would seek to align their work as scholars and educators explicitly with these elements. Faculty in the probationary stage of their career in particular must focus their work on the requirements of tenure within their academic discipline, and in some cases those requirements may not coincide with areas of strategic focus the University may seek to pursue. At the same time, there could be instances in which the University's strategic goals become a powerful means of recruiting talented young faculty members whose interests do align with the University's strategic priorities. Beyond the probationary stage, moreover, faculty members in virtually any field might explore ways of connecting their own work more closely with others to advance the University's progress in fulfilling broad strategic goals.

On Academic Signatures

Toward the close of the discussion it was noted that one of the goals of the roundtable was to identify promising areas of strength that have the potential to become an academic signature for the University. Some questions were raised about the concept of an academic signature and how it might be applied by FAU. In seeking to emphasize activities that constitute distinctive strengths, should the University identify themes that are broad and encompassing, such as the Atlantic environment, or more narrowly focused on topics such as K-12 literacy? Should it invest in eight to ten themes with potential to become academic signatures or concentrate instead on a smaller number? In what ways might the identification of academic signatures inform the search for new faculty members in the future? What actions could the

University take to engage greater faculty interest in collaborative projects centered on areas of academic promise?

The questions led to a consideration of several areas of existing or potential strength that could become points of increasing distinction for FAU. The University could become increasingly distinguished for its medical health strengths through its continuing care facilities; it could make increasingly important contributions to a goal of healthy aging across cultures through approaches that involve the Colleges of Medicine, Social Work, and Nursing. An emphasis on lifelong learning could become a point of increasing distinction in light of the number of older adults who enroll in FAU programs. Other areas that could come to represent academic signatures for the University include human rights and social justice, earth sciences and environmental studies, brain science, marine science and engineering, climate change and ecosystems. An emphasis of a different kind could draw together scholars in several arts and sciences disciplines to explore the basis for meaning in a culture that has abandoned traditional values and beliefs that once provided foundations for personal meaning and societal order. In any of these potential areas of distinction, the development of an academic signature would inform the future hiring of faculty.

It was noted that many of the potential signatures noted above reflect areas of existing or growing strength within the University, though each has tended to develop in comparative isolation. In thinking about academic signatures for FAU, it was then observed that ideally, a commitment to work together on shared University priorities would confer a strategic advantage to the University.

Gauges of Progress

In the final stage of the roundtable all participants were asked what tangible signs would indicate that FAU had made progress in becoming the kind of university it has the potential to be. The responses clustered into seven broad categories:

Academic Success

- A community of high-achieving faculty and students;
- Assistant professors maintain enthusiasm for the University as they advance in their research and teaching;

Collegial, Supportive Environment

- A policy statement in place that declares that at FAU, education is a human right;
- Increased incidence of the University's leadership asking members of the academic community how they are doing and what might be done to help;

Community/Regional Engagement

- A growing number of businesses and organizations turn to FAU for help in meeting their challenges;
- FAU conducts collaborative research in partnership with regional school districts;
- FAU becomes a leader in the economic development of the region;

Consistency of Vision

- Consistency of mission, such that areas of strategic emphasis continue to be sustained for several years;
- Groups convening in five years that express more enthusiasm about the prospects for the future than regret about the University's past;

Growing Research Strength

- An increase in external research funding from federal agencies;
- The creation of a health sciences campus;
- Receipt of training grants that allow more students to be involved in the Max Planck Institute;
- An increase in all levels of funding as well as partnerships with industry;
- Establishment of a Ph.D. program in biological science;

Recognition and Appeal

- A marked increase in applications for FAU's Ph.D. programs;
- Active recruitment of more FAU graduates by top graduate programs in the nation;
- Increase in the number of people who consult FAU's web site to find answers to questions;
- More students apply to FAU as freshmen and regard it as a destination institution;
- FAU comes to be regarded as first class and world class, and as the best university in Florida;
- FAU increases its ability to recruit and retain high-quality faculty and academic leadership;
- Peer institutions and colleagues will ask FAU how it does what it has achieved;

Successful Collaboration

- An increased number of grants for projects in which several faculty members of several disciplines collaborate;
- Increased collaboration between academic affairs and student life.

Linking FAU's Assets

In the closing exchanges of the roundtable, it was observed that a recurrent theme of several visions was of a University that conducts more research of a collaborative nature, as well as a University in which greater acknowledgement is given to the contributions people make to the strength of both research and teaching at FAU. It was noted that there had been strains of concern throughout the roundtable that FAU could be embarking on a set of priorities that could change in the future as funding streams alter course and different circumstances come about. At the same time, it was observed that in contemplating its future, FAU cannot allow the experience of the past to become a rationale for inaction in the face of new prospects for increasing its coherence and strength in the future.

It was also noted that the roundtable's conversations described a situation in which there are considerable opportunities before the University. FAU is an institution that will grow and change in the years ahead. While some of its growth in the past may have been the result of happenstance more than deliberate University planning, a key to realizing future opportunity is for FAU to embrace what it has become to date – to recognize the array of strengths it has developed, however independently of one another. The opportunity of the future will consist to a considerable degree in FAU's ability to draw existing pockets of strength together in more dynamic ways to address broad issues concerning the region, the state, and the world.

It was suggested also that the themes and considerations that the roundtable has identified provide fitting points of focus for gathering the strengths of the University and directing them in ways that are more collaborative. Realizing the University's potential will be a matter of placing well-informed bets on FAU's capacity to meet societal needs of the future. Some initiatives – in areas such as health care, increasing collaboration with the Scripps Institute and the Max Planck Institute – clearly involve more deliberate actions to build partnerships and alignments. Many of the prospects would involve overcoming a “we-they” state of mind – with respect to other programs or campuses of the University, with respect to K-12 schools or other potential partners in the region, or with respect to the faculty and administration. In addition, some of the thinking advanced in the roundtable – such as the adoption of social networking technology to link members of the University community more directly for research and teaching – offer the potential for FAU to display national leadership in creating a collaborative academic community.

Finally, it was suggested that a promising sign of success would be for an FAU roundtable to be convened in five years in which participants described the remarkable progress the University had made on several fronts in linking its distinctive strengths more closely together in collaborative initiatives.