The right person to lead us forward

BY NANCY BLOSSER
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An exciting and promising new era got under way at Florida Atlantic University last week as the board of trustees unanimously selected Dr. Mary Jane Saunders to serve as the university's next president. Saunders' background has provided her with ideal preparation for the job of leading an institution that is undergoing rapid maturation as a research university. With a doctorate in botany from the University of Massachusetts, Saunders is committed to the continuation of this growth. Indeed, FAU's emergence as an important player in the biomedical research arena is one of the factors that motivated her to seek the university's top leadership position.

Upon being named FAU's sixth president, Saunders said, "I can think of no more worthy goal for a university to pursue than to become a center of cutting-edge scientific discovery."

FAU's faculty and student researchers are advancing on this front, both independently and in collaboration with some of the world's most eminent scientists. The university's recently established partnerships with The Scripps Research Institute, the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies and the Max Planck Society have opened up a whole new world of opportunity to them. The fact that the Florida headquarters of both Scripps and Max Planck are located on FAU's Jupiter campus greatly facilitates joint research initiatives, and we expect to see more and more of them in the years ahead.

Saunders also brings to FAU a strong background in administration, having served as provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Cleveland State University for four years. She also was the founding dean of CSU's second largest college, the College of Science, and she headed the Institute of Biomolecular Science at the University of South Florida. Additionally, she has been a program officer and deputy division director at the National Science Foundation.

Despite the severity of the budget problems that FAU and all of Florida's public universities are still struggling with, Saunders will take the reins of an institution that is moving forward in many important ways.

Enrollment at FAU's seven campuses and sites reached an all-time high of 28,000 last fall. Support services to undergraduate students have greatly increased, with the purpose of giving every student who enrolls at FAU the tools needed for academic
success. Two years ago, FAU established a Graduate College to provide comprehensive services to students at the master's, doctoral and post-doctoral levels. And while the university continues to accommodate the needs of both full-time and part-time commuter students of all ages, the Boca Raton and Jupiter campuses offer the traditional college living experience to more than 2,500 students in residence.

Saunders succeeds Frank Brogan, who left the university last fall to become the chancellor of Florida’s State University System after serving as FAU's president for six years.

The university grew steadily during that period, adding to its research credentials and establishing important partnerships. Now, as the university approaches its 50th anniversary celebration in 2011, it is poised to take another giant step forward. Saunders is the right leader who has come to FAU at just the right time to lead that charge into the future.

*Nancy Blosser is chair of the FAU Board of Trustees.*