Mary Jane Saunders, who has a strong background in science and administration, will become the next president of Florida Atlantic University. Saunders, 59, most recently served as provost and senior vice president at Cleveland State University. She received the FAU board of trustees' vote of support after nearly two hours of discussion. She beat out two other finalists, Gary Miller, provost at Wichita State University, and Terry Hickey, provost at the University of Central Florida.

"She has the vision we need," said William Bryant, a trustee on the board.

Saunders, who goes by the nickname "MJ," will become FAU's sixth president and the second woman to hold the job, following Helen Popovich, who served from 1983 to 1989. Her start date hasn't been determined.

She said her goal will be to build on what she already sees as a successful university.

"This institution is just poised for greatness," she said. "We really need to take stock of all the wonderful things going on, get the word out about the activities of our students and faculty and the successes of FAU, and get together to have a plan for the future that the entire community buys into."

Her credentials impressed FAU's trustees, who were looking for someone who could raise money, improve academics, nurture partnerships with The Scripps Research Institute and other biotech giants, and develop a proposed medical school.

She was the founding dean of Cleveland State's College of Science and director of its Biomedical Health Institute. Her background also includes work at the National Science Foundation, the University of South Florida and Louisiana State University. She received her doctorate in botany from the University of Massachusetts in 1982.

"She's the full package. She's had a wide variety of experiences in the academic world," said Nancy Blosser, chairwoman of the FAU board of trustees.

Blosser said Saunders received the most positive responses, based on comment cards from public forums of students, faculty, staff and community members.
About 40 people were in the audience when the board made the decision, while another 400 were watching a webcast of the meeting. Kerrie-Ann Nesbeth, 20, a junior from Boca Raton, applauded after the vote. She had been to several forums featuring the presidential candidates, and Saunders was her favorite.

"She seemed excited about student involvement and student life on campus," Nesbeth said.

Saunders will replace Frank Brogan, who left in September to become chancellor of the State University System.

Her husband, George Newkome, is also an accomplished academic, currently serving as vice president for research and dean of the graduate school at the University of Akron. He said he plans to phase out of his job there before joining his wife full time in Boca Raton.

During her interview, Saunders stressed the need for fundraising and academic improvements.

She said when students leave before graduating, it hurts them and the institution. FAU's graduation rate has been below 40 percent in recent years, one of the lowest in the state.

"When students leave, they are not leaving in a good personal situation. They may have taken on debt and they have no degree," Saunders said. "You have lost ability to collect tuition and subsidies for those students. … If you can make that graduation number 80 or 85 percent, you can increase your revenue considerably, and [the students] will leave with an FAU degree."

Students who graduate are also more likely to become active alumni who donate money, she said.

FAU student government President Tiffany Weimar, who sits on the board of trustees, asked Saunders what a student who graduates from FAU in 2020 will say to a prospective student.

"They're going to say, ‘I started in 2016, finished my degree, and all my courses [are] available, I have the opportunity to work in industry, and I plan to take my first check and give half of it back to the university,’” she said.