FAU’s new president: University is ‘on the cusp of greatness’

Mary Jane Saunders was hired Wednesday to lead the school

Mary Jane Saunders, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Cleveland State University, speaks with faculty and students Monday afternoon during a question and answer meeting on campus. (Brandon Kruse, The Palm Beach Post SoFlaShare / February 28, 2010)

By Scott Travis, Sun Sentinel
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Florida Atlantic University may have its share of problems, but it also has enormous potential in the eyes of its new leader.

Mary Jane Saunders, hired Wednesday as president, envisions a university that can be a first-choice institution for students and a world leader in science and research. After all, no other university can claim to house sites for The Scripps Research Institute and the Max Planck Society, two of the world’s giants in biotechnology.

"I think this is a university on the cusp of greatness," Saunders said in a phone interview from her home in Ohio. "All the partnerships are going to help transform the work at Florida Atlantic University."

Saunders, who will likely start this spring, said she is eager to tackle all of the challenges FAU faces. The university has struggled in recent years with budget cuts, faculty discontent and poor graduation rates.
She said her first priority will be to meet with people at FAU and the surrounding community to see what issues should be addressed first. Already on her agenda: defining the role of a proposed new medical school, and FAU's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Research Institute in Fort Pierce, which has lost much of its private funding.

She said she wants to ensure that the proposed medical school has a research focus and can generate economic development for the area, rather than concentrating strictly on primary care and training. She also wants to make sure FAU fully develops its relationships with Scripps, Max Planck and other biotech industries that have collaborated with the university in recent years.

"I think it's very important for the president to be right there with those really strong partners to find out how the institution can be an equal partner going forward," she said. "What you do in the early days of the relationships can shape the future, and put you on firm footing."

Saunders' enthusiasm and credentials have won her many fans on campus. She was the top choice among students and faculty who attended forums with the three finalists.

"She's really personable, approachable and open to new ideas," said Collene O'Reilly, 21, student government vice president. "I think she'll be good at motivating and mentoring students."

Saunders said she will work to improve FAU's poor graduation rate, which is about 39 percent, and make students more engaged. She supports efforts to transform the Boca Raton campus into a more traditional campus, with additional residence halls and a campus stadium.

Many faculty had a tense relationship with her predecessor, former Lt. Gov. Frank Brogan, who brought strong political ties in Tallahassee but little higher education experience. Faculty questioned his support of pay raises, tenure and other issues important to them.

Saunders comes from a traditional academic background, and arrives from outside the state.

Although she spent 17 years at the University of South Florida in Tampa, her most recent administrative experience has been at Cleveland State University, where she was the founding dean of the College of Science before being promoted to provost. She resigned in January due to differences with the university's new president and is currently on sabbatical.

"She's coming in with a certain fresh perspective, and as a result she will have ideas and a set of approaches that could be different. I think that's a positive," said James Tracy, president of the FAU chapter of the United Faculty of Florida and a critic of Brogan.

Michael Schwartz, former president at Cleveland State, said many faculty wanted her to be named president after he retired last year.

"She is inclusive and cares so deeply about faculty. She wants to celebrate every achievement they have," Schwartz said. "I think they've found a real friend."

Beth Cagan, president of the faculty union at Cleveland State, gave Saunders a more mixed review. She said she took a strong leadership role that some viewed as micromanaging.

"There were faculty who liked her a great deal and saw her as hardworking and quite dedicated," Cagan said. "And there were some who felt she had too much of a hand in things and wanted to set her own course and didn't really work collaboratively."

Saunders said there will never be unanimity among faculty on any issue.

"I know I will be leaving this a better institution than when I came," she said.

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