

Florida Atlantic University Planning Interview Report

For The Learning Alliance
Ann J. Duffield
April 20, 2011

Over the course of four days—from Tuesday, February 15 through Friday, February 18, 2011—I interviewed twenty-three individuals from Florida Atlantic University. Most of the faculty and senior administrators I met were members of the campus in Boca Raton, although I did have discussions with senior administrators and faculty members from each of the other campuses. In addition, I met with individuals who had roles on all of the campuses, including one member of the University's Board of Trustees. On the whole, I believe I spoke with a good representation of the University in terms of age, gender and discipline (the group was not, however, representative of the enormous diversity of the student population in terms of race and ethnicity).

Each interview entailed two parts:

1. At the beginning of the session, I asked each individual to write down five words or phrases to describe FAU today, and toward the end of the session, I asked each person to write down five words or phrases that they thought would describe FAU in 10 years. A standard element of the Learning Alliance's planning process, this analytic tool helps the Alliance to identify the type of current language the community uses to define its culture, and the aspirational language it hopes to use in the future.
2. During the interview process, I typically asked each individual the following questions:
 - What differentiates Florida Atlantic University from the other universities in the Florida System?
 - What are the opportunities out there that FAU could take advantage of to distinguish itself?
 - What would FAU have to do to take advantage of these opportunities?
 - How does having a more research-intensive environment change a community?
 - What three priorities would you identify for the University to commit itself to as part of its 50th Anniversary year?

The following report summarizes the discussions that ensued from the questions explored during the course of each interview. There was some natural overlap between the questions, which resulted in each session having a relaxed and conversational flow rather than a rigid and less dynamic interrogation. This enabled me to capture some interesting stories, examples and phrases that further strengthen the foundation laid by the language analytic tool.

What Makes FAU Different from Other Universities in the System?

According to most of the individuals interviewed, FAU has recently lacked an identity that would differentiate it from other institutions in the Florida System. When it was the first university in the country to offer just the last two years of the undergraduate education and graduate education, it had one, but this was lost in 1984, when the University simultaneously added the freshman and sophomore years and continued to maintain its 2+2 relationships with community colleges in its service area. With Florida's community colleges shifting to state colleges offering baccalaureate degrees and the onslaught of the economic recession, FAU lost what had been its strong and defining signature. The result today is that it now competes for students with the state colleges, with the University of Florida and Florida State University, and more recently with Florida International University.

Some believe that the University continues to be characterized by a "youthful exuberance," but this does not provide it with the institutional memory and traditions that older institutions have. As it has struggled to figure out whether it should focus on students, teaching and access, or faculty, selectivity and research/scholarship, it has failed to take advantage of its youth to be innovative, take risks and create a unique identity. This has left some of the older and founding faculty members in the community discouraged.

FAU's response to its increasing competition was to become a "distributed campus" with seven campuses: Boca Raton, Sea Tech, Davie, Fort Lauderdale, Jupiter, Treasure Coast, and Harbor Branch. According to many of the people interviewed, this compounded what had already become a significant problem for the institution: a silo-based mentality with its ten colleges and seven campuses operating mainly independently of one another. FAU's multiple personalities have made it difficult—if not impossible—to define the whole institution as more than the sum of its parts.

On the Cusp with Abundant Opportunities

Most interviewees believe that FAU stands at the intersection of great change. Opportunities abound for the institution, not the least of which is the appointment of a new president who they view as being a strong academic with outstanding leadership abilities. While some of them fear change, they also know that FAU can no longer afford to drift along as a group of stand-alone campuses and programs. In fact, most would welcome a focused sense of direction rather than the "idée de jour" they experienced in the past.

The Surge of a Scientific Powerhouse at FAU's Front Door

In spite of some of their fears, most interviewees understand that the institution must capitalize on the recent feathers it has added to its cap or it will squander an historic opportunity that may never recur.

- Its unique partnerships with the Scripps Florida Research Institute, the Max Planck Florida Institute, the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies, the H. Lee Moffitt

Cancer Research Institute, and the Smithsonian Marine Station: These are unbelievable assets that every major public and private research university in the world would like to have as part of its research portfolio. And they all have chosen to be affiliated with FAU.

- Its acquisition of one of the foremost ocean research centers, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute: Taking advantage of this major institution, FAU has the potential of adding its name to a short list of outstanding ocean research establishments—MIT’s Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego.
- Its newly accredited Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine: This is an enormous opportunity for FAU to take advantage of its position in a community that has a richness of wealth and diversity. Given the fact that FAU and the City have become closer in aspirations, “now is the time to do what Florida International University has done in a much poorer area in Miami.”

Location: What Other Place Sits between the Ocean and the Everglades?

Adding to FAU’s chance to distinguish itself as a major research university are two other significant characteristics that it has so far failed to exploit: its extraordinarily diverse student body and its location in Southeastern Florida between the ocean and the Everglades. The institution has the opportunity to do something now that it failed to do in the past—to take advantage of the strength it has in ocean engineering. Both the ocean and the Everglades are at the center of climate research, and FAU is in the “cat bird seat” with regard to both. As one person said, “We should be giving incoming freshmen a choice between an orientation that takes place on a boat in the ocean or one that is held in a camp in the Everglades.”

Because of its location in Southern Florida, FAU has a core of international business faculty members who have connections with Latin American businesses. One person points out that this could be the beginning of a bridge between businesses in South Florida and Latin America.

FAU already has established itself as a magnet for an enormously diverse student body, with a large percentage of students from Latin American countries and the Caribbean. “FAU is one of the most diverse universities in the United States.”

A Period of Student Influx

Applications to FAU have more than doubled so far this year, and many see this as the result of several events. One is that more prospective students and their families are hearing about the significant changes at the University: the construction of the stadium, the relationship with Scripps and Max Planck, the acquisition of Harbor Branch, and most recently, the accreditation of the Medical School. These are all signals that the University is on an upswing, one they want to be part of from the outset.

The economic downturn has also brought a lot of people back to FAU. “People who were hit hard by the economy are coming back to retool their skills.” Similarly, returning GIs from Iraq and Afghanistan are enrolling for the first time. And the population of full-time and visiting retirees increases the demand for continuing education. All of these additional students—part-

time and full-time—suggest that FAU really needs to embrace e-learning before it gets completely left behind.

Different Learners

While interviewees grumbled about student preparation and their different habits of mind and values, many also realized that FAU has the opportunity to break its institutional pattern of totally separating undergraduates and graduates, i.e. having undergraduates take classes and graduates do research. “We need to change this by moving research into the classroom for our undergraduates. Our culture is young and innovative enough to make undergraduate education more hands-on and to make what we’re doing in the classroom connected to what’s happening in their lives. The liberal arts need to be put in the context of today, with a connection to the world these young people live in.”

A Summary of FAU’s Current Language

The Learning Alliance’s word analysis, unsurprisingly, reflects the mixed—one could say almost conflicted—messages that characterize the interviews. Nearly every individual’s words and phrases contain a mixture of the positive and the negative: the opportunity of greatness amid a totally disconnected present. Resorted, this language looks like the following chart with blue indicating positive, green indicating descriptive, and red indicating negative:

5	becoming
5	hopeful
4	energetic
4	dynamic
3	opportunity
3	change
2	leadership potential
4	diverse
4	scholarly
4	research
4	transition
2	local connection
2	science
2	student centered
2	regional
2	comprehensive
2	unrecognized
2	spread too thin
3	underfunded
9	fractured

Taking the Bull by the Horns

With all of the opportunities FAU currently has, many worry that both rapid growth and an historic tendency to be silo-driven will pose barriers to FAU's ability to focus and seize the moment to become not just a major player in Florida but in the nation and the world.

They believe the following changes will need to be made in order for FAU to take advantage of its current opportunities:

Stop Being Balkanized

FAU must be able to overcome the silo mentality that dominates its departments, colleges, and campuses. If it does not, it will not be able to build an identity that is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, it will continue to lack distinction in the State and certainly outside of Florida.

Nearly every individual interviewed noted the need to modify existing structures, policies, and procedures in order to enable cross- and multi-disciplinary research, teaching, service, and projects. They believe this will be exceedingly difficult to do, but that it is essential in order for the University to take advantage of its strengths and to improve its weaknesses.

Resist Temptations

As one person puts it, "FAU needs to stop picking up every shiny object." The lack of focus, or put differently, too many new projects with no follow-through has weakened FAU and made many people chary of working too hard on any new idea suggested by the University's administration. The University needs to identify a limited number of areas where it will play a major state and regional and ultimately a national and international leadership role.

Exercise Discipline

FAU must stay on top of, indeed ahead of, the disciplines it identifies to define itself. Once again, this means that the administration and the responsible units will need to follow through on projects and look for new opportunities only in those areas that will strengthen the University's steely focus on its strengths.

Growth with a Purpose

While most individuals agree that FAU needs to grow, they also worry that this might turn into a philosophy of "growth for growth's sake" if the administration does not have a strategic plan that defines growth and how best to achieve it. There is a strong commitment to access and the continued support of a richly diverse population of students and faculty; there is also an equally strong commitment to holding the community to high standards. A number of people identified a move toward more selective admissions as a positive future direction, and many people discussed the need to hire and support talented new faculty.

As part of a growth plan, FAU should emphasize the need for more support structures: student support structures to ensure that less prepared students have the academic preparation they

need to be successful at FAU, and faculty support structures to ensure that new faculty are properly introduced to academic life at the University. In terms of students, one person suggested that the student leaders “should be taught how to engage all of the student body—to capitalize on diversity—so that the same few students aren’t always in the room or in charge.” Likewise, another person talked about providing “access to funding and networking, particularly for young faculty who are on tenure tracks.”

Be FAU

When all is said and done, FAU must be its own institution. Most interviewees agree that the strategic plan should not turn their academic community into the classic university like Harvard. As one person said, “Be something as FAU, as the gold standard in new universities!”

Make the Tough Decisions

At all levels of the University, people at FAU have tended to shy away from making decisions that will ultimately result in a better community.

A Summary of FAU’s Future Language

The words and phrases people identified to describe their future University are consistent and direct. They want to be proud of FAU. They want the University to be socially responsible. They want it to have an academic signature. And they want it to be focused. The Learning Alliance sorts the phrases and words in the following way, with turquoise indicating branding, green indicating socially responsible, orange indicating academic significance, and yellow indicating focus.

11	talk of the town
6	research grants
5	selective
3	energetic
3	football champs
7	community impact
4	diverse
2	accessible
2	engaged
2	sustainable
2	collaborative
5	sciences
4	high technology
3	global
3	graduate education
2	health care
2	interdisciplinary
5	focused
2	simpler administration
2	bigger

Committing to the 60th Anniversary: 50th Anniversary Initiatives

In order to achieve “bragging rights” in its 60th year, the participants in the interviews identify a number of initiatives that they believe could be committed to during FAU’s 50th Anniversary this year. Because many of them are unique, they are listed below in bulleted format rather than in prose. This will also hopefully make it easier for people to consider during future planning sessions after the initial roundtable.

- Make a commitment to bring in ten top people who will increase FAU’s external reputation, provide role models for other faculty and act as institutional leaders.
- Create an “Innovation Village” that develops a synergistic relationship between biotechnology and medical training: America’s Newest Medical School. (“When you grow these fields, other applied fields, such as management, forensics, engineering, the arts, will benefit as well.”) And think about locating the College of Science and the Medical School on the Jupiter campus so that all the sciences are together. (Others warn: what will this do to the Boca campus?)
- Come from behind to jump ahead in e-learning and use the expertise of the University’s School of Communication and Multimedia Studies to make this leap.
- Focus on the quality of the undergraduate programs to ensure retention and selectivity and develop a world-class model for undergraduate research, mentoring and experiential learning (understanding and capitalizing on the characteristics of today’s younger generation).
- Provide support to faculty who are “doing the right things after identifying what the right things are.”
- Establish an identity that is institutionalized and permanent (“not something that has wasted everyone’s time”).
- Select a focus—“a theme”—that will unite FAU’s campuses.
- Use multidisciplinary projects to connect the liberal arts to FAU’s professional colleges.
- Focus on just three major research areas, such as climate change, brain repair, healthy aging, and connect these with teaching and learning throughout the institution.
- Use FAU’s focal points as connections with and solutions for the problems of the communities surrounding all of its campuses.
- Create “an administration that we don’t deserve, just as we have a faculty we don’t deserve.”

- Double the research portfolio by staying focused, collaborating and providing incentives.
- Develop a global presence (with our Max Planck connection) and capitalize on our proximity to Latin America by building bridges between these countries and our local communities (“get out of just this Florida thing”)
- Become a leader in social media and technological journalism so that FAU jumps ahead of other institutions in terms of our understanding and use of 21st Century communications.
- Improve the diversity of the faculty so that it better reflects the enormous diversity of the student population.
- Become known world-wide for our relationship with Scripps, Max Planck, Harbor Branch, and FAU’s other scientific partners, e.g. “hang banners across the streets of small towns in the Caribbean and in Latin America that say, ‘Florida Atlantic University: Etc.,’ like Florida International University has done.”
- Capitalize on the stadium as a way to connect further with the community and to gain more widespread media attention.

Summary

Both the word analysis and the interviews reveal a community at FAU that is cautiously optimistic about the University’s opportunities and its new leadership. It is the contrast between the caution and the optimism that produces a sense of “mixed messages” from the word list. There is no doubt that everyone wants the institution to be recognized for the strength of its programs and the quality of its students and faculty. There is, however, some question about whether this can be achieved due to the times the faculty at FAU worked hard to make something happen, only to discover that interest had moved onto another new idea or political necessity. People also fear that the institution’s seemingly unending “spread” into more campuses and a larger student population will give FAU even less focus and identity and that the “parts” will make it even more difficult to find the “whole.” Both this balkanization and past changes in direction loom large enough in the interviews that strategies will be required to assure the community that two significant goals will be to simplify FAU’s structures and policies and to focus on a limited number of strengths that will be used to unify the campus community.

Clearly the largest finding from both the analysis and the interviews is that people believe strongly that FAU has an enormous opportunity in the field of biomedicine. There is a sense of pride about the fact that this University has been chosen to be a partner by some of the world’s most renowned research institutes. There is also the sense that FAU can be unique because of

its newness and because of its location between the Atlantic Ocean and the Everglades. And most of the interviewees want FAU to find its own voice and not adopt one from the older, traditional research universities. As one person put it, “[FAU] needs to be a university that is more like Socrates in the streets rather than Plato’s institute.”

This is an exciting time for Florida Atlantic University and I appreciate the opportunity I have had to interview a distinguished group of people with affiliation to FAU. I thank everyone involved for the time they took to prepare for my visit and to meet with me.