

FAU making changes and help comes to Boca's permitting process

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FAU hopes for payday

Florida Atlantic University believes that it will get \$3.5 million worth of good news this month.

The Board of Governors, which oversees the State University System, meets in Tampa starting on June 16. At the meeting, President John Kelly and others will make their case that FAU has improved enough since a terrible assessment report last year that the board should release the rest of the money withheld for poor performance.

At the direction of the Legislature, the Board of Governors now rates state universities based on 10 metrics, with five points being the top score in each metric. According to Kelly, they are many of the same metrics *US News* uses in its college rankings. Universities that score low or show inadequate improvement can get shut out of new money or even lose money. Those that do well get a larger share of any new money. The state calls it “performance-based funding.” The change stemmed in part from the Legislature’s wish to shift the story from its continual shorting of the universities and in part from a need to bring more accountability to higher education.

For FAU, the initial Board of Governors report—covering the first half of the 2013-14 academic year—was disastrous. FAU scored just 24 of a possible 50 points. Of the 11 universities, only the University of West Florida did worse. Unless FAU could develop a plan for timely improvement and show that the plan was working, the university would lose nearly \$7 million.

In an interview last week, Kelly said he had heard something about the report during his interview with

the FAU Board of Trustees in January 2014, but that he “got the news after I was hired.” He started work on March 1. So much for easing into the job.

FAU didn't just do badly overall. The university got zeroes in two vital metrics: the rate of graduating first-time-in-college students within six years and the rate of retaining students for their second year if their grade point average is at least 2.0. In its first report to the Board of Governors last June, FAU reported that 30 percent of freshmen began their second year with a grade point average of less than 2.0

Some students come to college knowing what they want to do and wishing to get there quickly. Others, though, come without direction and tend to drift. FAU's improvement plan especially focused on the drifters.

The university hired 26 more advisers and improved training for all advisers. The national standard is one adviser for every 300 students. Previously, FAU had had one adviser for every 400 students. FAU wants the advisers to encourage, prod and in some cases discourage.

In its second report to the Board of Governors, last December, FAU said it loses 75 percent of students who don't declare a major by the end of their second year. “ I saw that when I applied (to be president),” Kelly said, “and I thought, ‘That can't be right.’ But it is.”

“This is a national phenomenon; it's not just FAU,” said Provost Gary Perry, who basically is the chief academic officer. If a student drifts that long, Perry said, “The chances are that the student will never graduate from college.” Perry hopes to have all students declare a major when they start. “They don't have to stay there,” he said, “but if they have a plan when they come in the door, at least they're moving.”

Advisers now work with students not just to decide on a major but to give up on a major if the student's grades in that subject are poor. Once students choose a major, the university now more aggressively herds them toward a diploma. Kelly calls it “intrusive advising.”

Commuter students especially can be isolated from these support services. Not only has FAU placed advisers in parking garages, they are there at night, trying to turn talk of excuse into talk of a solution. “A student might say, ‘Well, I would graduate, but I can't get this course,’ “ Kelly said. “The adviser can say, ‘Let's just check on that. Here, you can do this. We can move this, and you can graduate on time.’ And the kids love it.”

FAU quickly raised its graduation rate from 40 percent to 45 percent, Kelly said, simply by identifying students who had enough credits to graduate but were still taking classes. “This is not a place to hang out,” Kelly said. Students who overstay their time or aren't taking college seriously, he added, “deprive someone else of a place.” New software allows advisers to check on freshmen for early signs of trouble, such as low grades and poor attendance. Entering freshmen with grade point averages of between 3.0 and 3.29 must go into a program called Jump Start that is designed to better prepare them.

Perry said the changes are so new that FAU doesn't know the effect on the school's retention rate. In the final 2013-14 report, FAU still got a zero in that metric. For the graduation rate metric, however, FAU got a 5. Overall, FAU went from 24 points to 37, which put the university in a cluster behind the University of Florida (44) and the University of South Florida (42).

Accordingly, FAU says in its update to the Board of Governors that the university "can confirm that it has met every single final target as established by the university's board of trustees and as approved by the Board of Governors. This monitoring report provides up-to-date data on the May 2015 expectations, as well as supplemental information, often showing progress beyond the established targets." If the Board of Governors agrees, FAU will get the second \$3.5 million and, as Perry said, "We will be out of the penalty box."

To make even greater progress, however, FAU wants to attract better students. "We can control the type of student," Kelly said. "We can't make them finish." The overall grade point average of entering students has increased, but FAU's report to the Board of Governor says the university will do more to direct those who, in Kelly's words, are "ready for college but not for a university" to Palm Beach State College or Broward College. Roughly 70 percent of FAU's student body is from Palm Beach and Broward counties, but the university expects that percentage to decrease as recruiting efforts target more students from outside the region and the state.

One key change has been the combining of the admissions office, the registrar and the financial aid office into what FAU calls the Enrollment Management Oversight Committee. Incredibly, before the combination FAU was taking between 12 weeks and 16 weeks just to acknowledge an application. FAU now responds, the new report says, in 24 hours to 48 hours. The office contacts students who are nearing their final term but haven't registered for the 15 credit hours to graduate. Previously, recruiters spent 80 percent of their time in the office and 20 percent visiting high schools. That has been reversed.

Metrics alone don't make for an education. Whatever the motivation behind Florida's new approach to financing the universities, however, the metrics revealed an FAU badly in need of a management overhaul. Change is coming rapidly to FAU, which began in 1964 as a place for juniors and seniors and only began taking freshmen in 1985. As FAU seeks to give students more direction, FAU itself is going through a dramatic change in direction.

And a little more help from its friends

In our interview, Kelly told me that FAU remains far from raising all the money to complete the Schmidt athletic-complex that he announced last December with a \$16 million gift from the Schmidt Family Foundation.

According to Kelly, FAU still needs a gift of between \$11 million and \$14 million, a gift of \$7 million and two gifts of \$5 million. So does Kelly still expect that the project will be finished by his goal of December

2016?

“Yes.”

How the health care dispute affects FAU

FAU's main budget requests to the Legislature remain in doubt because of the dispute over health care.

The university wants money for a building to house the new program at the Jupiter campus with Scripps Florida and the Max Planck Florida Institute. FAU also would like some additional money for program expenses. The rules for higher education money that I discussed in the first part of this post don't apply to specialty programs that the Legislature believes could bring value to a university and a return for the state.

If the Legislature doesn't expand Medicaid in some form, and if the state has less money to compensate providers who treat the uninsured, the Legislature will have to make up some of that difference with general revenue. The amount will depend on how much the Legislature wants to spend on cell phone tax cuts.

With the state's fiscal year ending June 30, the Legislature faces a tight deadline. Getting a budget passed could mean a small group of legislators moving lots of money around. With luck, FAU's requests will survive.

Finally! Help comes to the permitting process

Last year, the Boca Raton City Council made improvement of the permitting process a priority. From the chamber of commerce to neighborhood cookouts, the delay in obtaining permits is a common gripe.

Yet there still had been no permanent director of the Development Services Department, which handles permitting, among other things. Former Director John Hixenbaugh resigned in April 2014 after just two years.

This week, however, the city announced the hiring of

Ty Harris for the position. He will start June 29. Since January 2014, Harris has been director of community development for Charlotte County, on Florida's west coast north of Fort Myers. The department handles all the same work as Boca's development services department.

Harris has an interesting background. He's a lawyer who also served as an assistant county attorney. A decade-plus ago, he was a land-use lawyer in private practice on this side of the state.

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