

Universities' presence on Treasure Coast based on opportunities

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Three major Florida universities have branch campuses or partnerships with industry on the Treasure Coast and elsewhere in Florida there are more such academic satellites.

But remote site expansion of higher education on the Treasure Coast and across the state has been without guidance, said Frank Brogan, chancellor of the State University System of Florida. Brogan spent last week appearing before House and Senate education committees in Tallahassee. The former lieutenant governor and Florida Atlantic University president said he told lawmakers a plan is needed to grow higher education in the state.

"I am concerned that there appears to be little rhyme or reason with this at the end of the day," Brogan said. "Sit down and discuss a vision of how many baccalaureate, how many masters, and how many doctoral degrees are going to be needed in Florida and who will provide them."

The Treasure Coast has grown satellite programs, facilities and classes by state universities, most notably FAU, the University of Florida and Florida State University. The latter announced Sept. 30 it would partner its film school with Wyndcrest Holdings LLC. The private company has a state economic development grant to build a digital production studio in Tradition.

Brogan said the proliferation of satellite programs in higher education started in the absence of an overarching delivery plan.

"The beauty of all that is the opportunities it brings to individuals," Brogan said. "The challenge is making certain that it makes sense, that we aren't stepping on each other's toes and wasting state money in duplicative areas."

Satellite universities are not a Florida trend, nor an intentional model for expansion, several education officials said. Rather, they're usually driven by a good fit.

"(A facility remote from campus) is usually related to very specific things," said Bob Bradley, vice president for planning and programs at FSU. The Tallahassee-based university's College of Medicine opened a branch campus at Indian River State College in Fort Pierce in 2007. It is one of six such sites following the college's community-based model for training doctors.

FSU's Film School Dean Frank Patterson recently toured IRSC's Fort Pierce campus with college President Edwin Massey, visiting IRSC's new Digital Media Institute and predicting a future partnership with his school.

"There will be a demand or some unique training opportunity that comes up in a place," Bradley said. "You have to make sure that at each site you can offer a full array of services that we offer students elsewhere."

Brogan said he also met last week with Will Holcombe, chancellor of the Florida College System, to discuss degrees offered at two- and four-year colleges.

Despite the seeming increase in universities with a presence on the Treasure Coast, IRSC's Massey did not think it represented a trend.

"More than a conscious trend, it's being driven by the needs of individual companies and the educational needs of the community," Massey said.

He said if anything, the near future will probably not see a lot of new satellite college campuses.

"With money short as it is, I don't think you're going to see a lot of this kind of expansion right now," Massey said. "Now every institution is interested in its core mission."

University of Florida was first to set up shop on the Treasure Coast. It opened its Indian River Research and Education Center in 1947 with a single scientist in a small lab. Today, students commute to the center from a five-county region to earn bachelor degrees in agribusiness and environmental management. The Fort Pierce center also offers master's degree programs in several disciplines.

Another UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Science extension grew in Vero Beach from a public health lab that opened in 1956 to study mosquito-borne diseases. The Florida Medical Entomological Laboratory on East Oslo Road became part of UF in 1979. Today, between 10 and 15 graduate level students work there at any given time, said Walter Tabachnick, its director.

Florida Atlantic University and IRSC have been partners since the 1970s. In the early 1990s, FAU bought 50-acres in St. Lucie West from the St. Lucie West Development Corp., predecessor of CORE Communities, now developing Tradition.

Shawn Reilly, CORE's vice president of sales and marketing, said he recalls company executives Pete Hegner and Danny Miller with pins stuck in a map of Florida to show the location of colleges and universities and, more to the point, where they were absent.

"They showed there was a big hole on the map (at Port St. Lucie) and a growing market for higher education," Reilly said.

Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute north of Fort Pierce began doing scientific research as a private non-profit in the 1970s. It was struggling financially by 2007, when former State Sen. Ken Pruitt and Brogan put together a plan that resulted in FAU

buying the facility.

Pete Patro, executive director of Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute at Florida Atlantic University — the new name for the campus at Link Port — said FAU graduate students now work with Harbor Branch scientists, who became FAU employees in December 2007.

“It’s still primarily a research institute, which is how you drive graduate education programs,” Patro said.



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