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## **U. Of Trouble? — Florida’s University System Is In Distress: Costs Up, Tuitions Up, Enrollments Way Down**

BY TOM BROWN

The state university system in Florida is facing hard times as The Internet, not the college across town, has proven to be the greatest competitor. Although no one in the university power structure will admit it, the truth is that many state colleges — severely impinged by budget shortfalls and feeling that there are “no more students” to enroll — may soon have to sell part of their campuses just to try to break even. Back in 1998, when “Distance Learning” was first cited as a new educational wave, few could have foreseen that it might mean the end of weekend college classes — and maybe even weekend football. And Florida is by no means a special case.

At its beginning, 20 or more years ago, Distance Learning was merely to be a supplement to long-established university curricula. And, for a

while, it was. The more avant garde colleges quickly saw that providing courses via The Internet was an effective way to bring in more students, especially those who found it hard to be on campus during the precise hours when college classes were being held.

However, Distance Learning has overtaken on-campus instruction. Even weekend and evening classes, once the academic refuge of the fulltime worker, soon became as problematic as attending classes Monday through Friday on a 9-to-5 basis. Too many students now work a flex schedule that is spread over seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

The result is that, since 2004, Distance Learning has escalated dramatically as the percentage of income for most universities in Florida. By 2007, this was actually a lucrative arrangement for many colleges: with a still-substantial base of on-campus students and a complement of distance learners, college coffers swelled.

Then, in 2009, four major trends started to hit Florida colleges hard:

... Given the increase in the average age of the population, there were fewer youth to enroll in college to begin with

... For those of any age who were interested in college, smaller and more imaginative institutions around the world started to offer degree-issuing programs where students needed to be on-campus less than 25% of the time

... Simultaneously, these enterprising colleges lured students away from major Florida colleges by offering brilliant “e-faculties”: top professors from colleges worldwide were contracted to teach, often in team combinations that the Harvards and Oxfords could only drool over

... Lastly, the costs of operating a college campus continued to soar with revenues not rising proportionally: having fewer students on campus for less time has meant that many college classrooms are empty more than

50% of each day — and the ancillary revenue sources (from dorm rentals to food service revenues) have sagged accordingly

With budgets tighter throughout the Florida college system — and costs jumping for everything a college needs to operate (from test tubes for science labs to jerseys for the sports teams) -- college administrators have become apoplectic. All of a sudden, every college in Florida is not only competing with all the others in the state as well as top regional colleges — but they are also competing with class-act Distance Learning institutions in places like Mexico City, Seattle, and Stockholm, Sweden.

In Florida, as a consequence, tuitions have gone up 225% in the last decade; and while some have warmed to the advertising pitches that only a campus-based curriculum offers a “quality educational experience,” many others have decided to measure a college’s attractiveness by the simple indices of “What can I learn? From whom? How easily and efficiently? How soon?”

Enrollments in Florida colleges are now off by an average slide of 40% as students in famed college locales such as Gainesville, Miami, Tampa, and Tallahassee have seen the merits of learning off The Internet under the aegis of a non-Florida college, utilizing ultra-flexible self-scheduling options, and being able to work with gifted professors whose home colleges may be half a world away.

It’s impossible to gauge where all this may lead. Will colleges soon have “going out of business sales”? Not likely. But Florida, which expanded its state college system in the 1960s, may be forced to close some universities so that its most prestigious ones can survive.

To be sure, for Florida’s university chiefs, there will be no easy way out of this downturn. Other than last season’s homecoming game, even the powerhouse University of Florida football team saw more stadium seats empty than filled. Rumors are rife that “low occupancy” college buildings and parking lots may be sold (if the state legislature allows it) in order to

try to close the gaps which now pervade university budgets across Florida. Once skittish about such a prospect, a number of Florida's state legislators now think a "sell-off" is more attractive than further tax increases to support Florida's sagging colleges.

At a recent news conference, Florida's university system chancellor, Katherine McWilliams - Sawyer, was asked if Florida could afford to operate all its colleges. "We in Florida are proud of our university system and consider it one of the best in the world.

"Our universities are academic treasures — absolute treasures. It's inconceivable to me that Floridians could overlook the value of both living and learning in Florida. As more Floridians see that attending college, here in this state, is their best option, our temporary budget problems will evaporate." |<

*digital art by dave pierson*

