



Florida Polytechnic Grew Stronger as Its Freshman Year Progressed

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By KHRISTOPHER J. BROOKS THE LEDGER

LAKELAND | In the weeks leading up to Florida Polytechnic University's opening, the academic building was finished, the bookstore was set and the professors were in place well before students arrived.

The residence hall was a different story.

"The elevator was not in, carpets weren't down, it was a mess," President Randy Avent said about the days leading up to the opening. "I think they got it done really about four or five days before the students moved in."

A photo finish at the residence hall perhaps embodies the type of year it has been at the state's newest public university. It was a year of making adjustments on the fly while trying to plan for the immediate future. It was a year in which the university saw one of its early leaders leave for Palm Beach County and it was a year that featured a heated discussion about how aggressively the university should expand.

While dealing with those issues, university leaders heard criticism from students about the few food options on campus and almost no opportunities for physical activities.

Florida Poly, the state's 12th public university, started as a satellite campus of the University of South Florida in 1988.

In 2012, former state Sen. J.D. Alexander, who was the budget chair, began a push to convert the USF Poly campus to a separate university. Using some of his political muscle, the Polk County native got the Florida Legislature to approve Florida Polytechnic in March that year.

The university focuses on attracting professors and students who want careers in science, technology, math or engineering. The university opened with one residence hall with 215 bedrooms as well as 45 (22 full-time, 23 adjuncts) faculty members, 518 undergraduate students and 22 graduate students.

At this point, students can pursue majors in eight different areas.

The university has operated this year without being accredited by a regional commission. Avent and other leaders say they hope to gain that status by December 2016. Until Florida Poly gains accreditation, it cannot pull federal student aid dollars. Therefore, most students have received hefty scholarships from private dollars to attend the university.

Since Florida Poly opened, state university officials have been impressed with the school's ability to hit projected targets in enrollment, facilities and academic programs. The university's governing board is now paying close attention to Florida Poly being able to gain accreditation next year, one state official said. As Avent reflected on this first year, he said it's not easy to start a university from scratch, but he was proud that "we hit all the big things."

Avent and some of the most vocal students at Poly say things will be different this fall because new students will arrive, classes will be tweaked and there will be new athletic fields.

THE FALL SEMESTER

The first batch of students piled into the residence hall mid-August. There was excitement and nervousness in the air.

Avent said he thought there would be a log jam of people moving their stuff in, but he said everything went smoothly. About 10 professors even helped students move in.

As people moved in their belongings, it was obvious that students were still feeling each other out.

"Especially in those first couple of days, there were a lot of people who were not as social as others, but I saw more of those people kind of getting together," said student Andrei Moss. "So the people who were not as social were all being social

with each other."

On the first day of classes, things went according to plan. Professors jumped into the material and students paid attention and took notes. The university also welcomed its first-ever dual enrollment student - Lee Wall.

While students were in class, university officials were having back-and-forth conversations with the Florida Board of Governors about building a second residence hall.

Florida Poly officials didn't know how many, but they knew a new crop of freshmen would arrive this fall and it was time to find a place to house them. The initial plan was to have the second residence hall approved and built before a second freshman class arrived, but that deal evaporated, Avent said. The university couldn't get state approval because the state was still doing its research on a new funding model for college buildings.

By December, university officials had a problem: new students were coming, but there was no place for them to sleep.

One of the early options, Avent said, was bringing in modular homes that could be quickly furnished, then moved out of the way once the second residence hall was built. Several other options came up, sounded promising, but fizzled.

Weeks went on and there was no clear game plan for where the incoming freshmen would live and where the returning students from this year would go. There was a lot of confusion among returning students about where they were going to live, said student Veronica Perez.

Moss said some of his classmates began looking for cheap apartments within a five-minute radius of campus.

"People didn't like that they couldn't go back to the dorms," he said. "I think they felt betrayed in a sense. But (the students) were waiting for the university and it was taking a while."

Some of the delay centered on officials having to weigh a lot of options, said Florida Poly board member Sandra Featherman.

She said the board weighed how far away another housing option would be from campus, how clean the complex would be, if there were enough rooms for the fall class, how much it would cost and if there was on-site security.

University officials eventually settled on Big Oaks Apartment Homes, where students will pay \$625 per month this fall to live 10 miles away from campus and be placed two to each room within an apartment. Students can start moving in this August.

Incoming freshmen will get priority placement at the residence hall on campus and, if there's leftover space, returning students can fill those spots. Students who live at Big Oaks will have bus transportation to and from campus. From conversations he's had with students, Moss said he doesn't think many students will opt for Big Oaks because they've already found cheaper apartments where they can have their own room.

It was in the fall semester when university officials began hearing students grumble about few activities. There was a hack-a-thon competition, a cyber capture the flag event and a chance to showcase student inventions to industry experts, but the students wanted more outside activities.

Some students began playing soccer and basketball outside, but found the land to be inferior for running and jumping.

Avent said the university is working on building a soccer-lacrosse-football field on campus along with basketball and volleyball courts. Those amenities should be available this fall, he said.

Those fields will improve student life, Moss said.

"I think as you add more amenities, the students will start to feel there's more things to do outside their room," Moss said.

THE SPRING SEMESTER

Students and professors enjoyed the typical Christmas break, but returned in early January for the spring semester and another round of classes.

It took hours of behind-the-scenes work from four or five students, but the university started a chapter of the Student Government Association and elected Moss as its first president. Perez will serve as SGA president this coming year. Perhaps the most noteworthy buzz on campus in the spring was the search for a school mascot. University leaders opened the process to students and even hired an outside design firm to help students massage their ideas.

Dozens of ideas sprouted from that process - from the Pioneer, the Wizard, the Hydra and the Technocrat.

While students were studying and coming up with a mascot, April quickly became a big month for the university.

University leaders selected the final four mascot candidates, added a fifth write-in candidate option then let the students vote.

Students chose the Phoenix.

Also in April, board member Robert Scaringe took major objection to how quickly university officials wanted to expand enrollment. The projections were

spelled out in the university's work plan, which the board eventually approved and sent to the Florida Board of Regents. However, Scaringe disagreed with the numbers because, he said, the university would be growing too fast and eventually it would be a massive regional university like the University of Central Florida.

Featherman took offense to Scaringe's statement and disconnected from the board meeting's conference call.

Fences have since then been mended, Avent said.

In the same month, the university learned that it would soon lose one of its early architects - Ava Parker, the university's chief operating officer.

Parker received a journalism degree and a law degree from the University of Florida and then went on to practice law in Duval County. In 2010, she became chairwoman of the state university system.

In 2012, Florida Poly's board hired her as the university's first executive.

Parker reported directly to the board and carried out most of the president-type responsibilities until Randy Avent left North Carolina State University to become the first president.

The governing board at Palm Beach State College selected Parker as the college's fifth president. Parker starts her new job in July.

Avent said he knew Parker was looking for a college president's job. Avent said soon after he became president, he spoke with Parker privately and said, "I don't want you to leave, but when you do leave, I don't want it to be just because I'm the president here."

Avent said Parker did so much for the university that eventually she learned that she liked doing college-presidency work.

"Let's not mix words here, Ava was the president of this institution for two years," Avent said.

Those who govern Florida Poly say Parker's leaving was a big blow to the university.

"She really helped build the place," board member Featherman said. "She put a lot of energy and effort into the place. In many ways, she was being the president before Randy. It's a big loss for us."

Avent said Parker is irreplaceable. The university will not fill Parker's position, Avent said, and instead her responsibilities will be spread to the university provost, chief financial officer and president.

THE FUTURE

Throughout the fall and spring semesters, state university officials have been impressed with Florida Poly because faculty members have spent countless hours making sure transfer students' credits will be accepted, said Jan Ignash, chief academic officer for Florida's state university system.

Overall, the university has made projections and met them perfectly, Ignash said. "They have made their enrollment targets," Ignash said. "They've actually exceeded them a little bit and their curriculum seems to be solid."

The coming weeks at Florida Poly look to be as busy as the school year that just closed.

Summer classes will come to a close soon. University leaders will conduct an internal study about what new majors should be offered in the future. The university has sent out acceptance letters and is expecting at least 550 new students. Officials are also gearing up for a special visit from the accreditation council.

But if there was one big hope the university has for the upcoming year, it would be getting \$33 million in state funds to build an applied research laboratory, Avent said.

Avent said the university needs this lab because students and professors need space to test and build new inventions.

Featherman said having the laboratory is good for recruiting top-notch researchers as well.

"The best people won't come unless they have the labs to do their research," Featherman said.

Avent said he's hoping for a research building although state officials are focusing on gaining accreditation.

Ignash said state officials are pleased with how often Florida Poly talks to the accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools or SACS.

"We know they've talked to SACS and SACS has been very willing to work with them," she said. "That whole application seems to be proceeding right on time."

If all goes well, the university would gain accreditation in December 2016. After the school gains accreditation, Ignash said, she doesn't see Florida Poly growing exponentially, adding, "We see them as a smaller institution that is very specialized."

The final decision on accreditation is months away, so, for now, the university is

focused on the near future. Next school year will focus on adding to what was already created.

"We got the cake built," Avent said. "Now we can start working on the icing."

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