FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY’S
RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS COMMUNITIES

A Report Based on Interviews, Focus Groups and Surveys
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INTRODUCTION

On April 20, 2011, I submitted a report, based on individual interviews I conducted with 23 internal or close members of the campus community (mainly at Boca Raton), to Florida Atlantic University’s leadership for the purposes of informing the University’s strategic planning process. Each interview asked the interviewee to write down five words or phrases to describe FAU at that time and five words to describe FAU ten years from then. I also asked them to discuss with me the following questions:

- How FAU is different from other universities in the Florida System;
- What opportunities FAU might take to differentiate itself;
- What the University would have to do to take advantage of these opportunities;
- How would FAU change by being a more research-intensive environment; and
- What three priorities they would identify for FAU to commit itself to as part of its 50th Anniversary year.

The report—a copy of which is available at the University—summarized the findings from these interviews in the following way:

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...

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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 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 report, based on interviews with 96 individuals (primarily community members from Fort Lauderdale, Jupiter and Boca Raton), serves a different purpose than the April 2011 report for strategic planning. (See Appendix 1 for a list of the individuals and their background information.) The intent of the findings here is to identify ways that FAU may better serve and engage its communities in real, productive and mutually beneficial relationships. While the purpose is different, some of the findings are very similar to those of the first report, but there is very clear evidence through both the focus groups and interviews and particularly the word analysis that FAU has moved the needle forward in terms of its brand identification and reputation beyond its campuses. There is a long way to go, but there is also much more reason for optimism and very much more reason to be bullish.

For this report, discussions were generated around the following questions:

- What are the differences between FAU and other institutions in the region and state?
- How are you currently participating in and engaging with FAU in terms of its programs, activities, events, or community outreach efforts?
What do you wish FAU would provide in terms of outreach to its communities and the region?
What information from FAU would be most likely to gain your attention?
How should this information be communicated in a timely and convenient fashion?

The report is organized into five sections. This introduction is followed by the first section, which provides bulleted feedback with anonymous quotations from each of the visited communities. The second section shares an overview of six of the most dominant themes from all of the focus groups and individual interviews. Accompanying each of these themes are one or two recommendations of strategies to address an issue or opportunity. The third provides the word analysis for this report and compares it to the words from the April 2011 report, and this section is followed by a brief conclusion.

The report is also accompanied by two appendices. The first is a list of all the participants with some information about each one of them that hopefully will be useful for follow-up to this report. The second is a list of the future words focus group members hope might describe FAU in the future. This may be a useful document for members of the University’s Office of Communications and Marketing as they explore language, messages and ways to present FAU to its multiple constituencies.

CONVERSATIONS

Fort Lauderdale: So Close and Yet So Far Away

The majority of the community members who congregated for focus groups in Fort Lauderdale and Broward County know little about FAU, its distinctions, programs and activities. In fact, most of them feel that Florida Atlantic University is very Boca-centric and does very little to engage their community. Alumni and members of several organizations have positive experiences with and understanding of the University, typically through fellowships and scholarships they partner with FAU, alumni committees and activities and the new stadium and sports events. Several people express dismay about the closing of the campus in Broward and the loss of SeaTech.

The Differences between FAU and Other Regional and State Institutions

Florida Atlantic University is:

- Affordable
- Diverse programmatically and in terms of the degrees it offers
- Available in multiple locations
- Known for its focus on marine studies and environmental issues
• Collaborative with the Broward school district through its College of Education through which it provides professional development for students
• Known for having the first LEED Gold-certified building in South Florida
• In transition

I really don’t know enough about FAU to say.

Participation in FAU Activities, Events and Community Outreach Efforts

Involvement with FAU is predominantly through:

• The YWCA in Boca Raton
• Invitations to or attendance at sports events, e.g. football games
• Participation in the President’s Community Advisory Councils
• Courses at FAU (“very impressed”), particularly those for professional certification or advancement
• Involvement as an alumna or alumnus or as a member of the Alumni Board or its committees
• Teaching as an Adjunct Faculty member
• The Broward Education Foundation’s sponsorship of an FAU alumni fundraising event
• Scholarships given to students in this county
• Connection to FAU faculty speakers for the Broward Women’s Alliance and other organizations
• Participation in a redistricting meeting that was held at FAU this summer
• Meetings held on campus, e.g. biotechnology meeting
• Economic development
• Giving a commencement address and attending some award ceremonies
• The FAU Gala and Shindig
• Children currently attending or graduating from FAU and spouses with degrees from FAU
• The African American Success Foundation
• Tony Abbatti (spelling?-his name came up frequently)
• Research partnerships with FAU
• SeaTech’s consolidation
• Business partnership
• Attendance at the Academy of International Businesses Conference, which FAU hosted
• Student interns
• The Public Art and Design Committee
- Fellowships
- FAU faculty as media sources and teachers to journalists and graphic artists
- Children’s on-campus summer camps

I’m surprised that FAU isn’t more ‘impactive.’ I’m surprised that students aren’t more involved and engaged in the community. We couldn’t get either faculty or students involved in planning and visioning for Fort Lauderdale. In fact, we couldn’t get any of the higher education institutions involved.

I’m not fond of Broward College going to a 4-year college.

I got involved when FAU started its football team and built the stadium.

The loss of SeaTech is huge, because it’s been some place the community really did appreciate and visit.

FAU is very Boca-centric.

Recommendations for FAU Outreach to the Community and the Region

Individuals and groups believe that FAU is missing opportunities to be much more active in their communities in the following ways:

- Providing faculty speakers through something like an “FAU Faculty Speakers Forum
- Providing student internships through a central source
- Involving students in community businesses, projects and other activities in their communities
- Having FAU graduates stay to work and contribute to this region and their local communities
- Being more engaged with guidance counselors in the high schools
- Having FAU deans engaging with the campus communities
- Having more strategic matchmaking
- Providing entertainment for the community

I don’t know who to connect to at FAU to get interns and students for projects.

FAU’s deans need to reach out to and be proactive with the multiple campuses’ communities.

The inherent problem is that in spite of some phenomenal programs, [FAU is] not known. Accountants know that FAU’s graduates in accounting are outstanding, but most professionals don’t know about this or about any of the other outstanding programs.
Deans have the internal power to provide the leadership for faculty to be more involved in the community.

This is the Atlantic coast. It’s the whole expanse, and we haven’t taken advantage of our geography. We’re segregated and participate in no regional sharing.

What do we really need in the next decade for this economy in South Florida? What is the strategic plan for FAU to tie the areas along the coast together? What activities should FAU hold at other campuses and not just in Boca Raton?

FAU’s strategic plan should have benchmarks and ways to generate dollars.

Information from FAU That Would Be Most Likely to Gain Attention

FAU would both gain attention from and positive response to information about:

- Cultural events
- Speakers in the area
- Information about employee placement opportunities for new companies
- Internship and faculty available for work and projects for all employers
- Brief e-mails to individuals and employers asking them what they want from FAU
- Informal “salon”-type events with a small group (15), including some students and faculty
- Invitations to local entertainment and events supplied by faculty and students
- Communications about opportunities to engage in research and development with community businesses and government

FAU has come a long way and has grown a lot, but it needs to be more involved in communities other than just Boca Raton.

Preferred Methods of Receiving Information from FAU

Not surprisingly, the most preferred method for receiving information from FAU is e-mail. Other preferred communications channels include:

- Newsletters (preferably e-newsletters, although paper is nice (but expensive)
- Beacon TV (where school board meetings are broadcast)
- Brief e-mails with very specific subject lines and few attachments
- Calls to secretaries

Jupiter: All about Lifelong Learning, Honors College, Scripps, and Max Planck

It is not surprising that most of the focus group participants who met in Jupiter talked mostly about the one piece of FAU that is visible to them, because most of them are
members of the Boards of either the Lifelong Learning Society or the Honors College. They want the University to pay attention to the parts of FAU they believe are the real jewels in the crown. And when they pause long enough to say anything about the whole University, it tends to be something about the other parts they see: Scripps and Max Planck.

Like the groups in Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, these people also perceive FAU as being very Boca-centric, and they do not like this at all. In many ways, they believe the best parts of FAU are right there in their own backyard and not in Boca. They are not short of ideas about how the University could serve them better, and they are particularly vocal, like those in Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, about their inability to find faculty speakers and other potential FAU assets due to both the complexity of the organization and the inward-looking nature of people on FAU’s campuses. In fact, it was in Jupiter that the metaphor with Walmart popped up. Like Walmart, FAU has everything its students and faculty members need under its own roof, so they do not on the whole feed the economy of the community that surrounds them.

The Differences between FAU and Other Regional and State Institutions

The members of these focus groups tend to focus on FAU as it relates to Jupiter and describe its differences in the following ways:

- In transition
- Growing
- Scripps
- Max Planck
- Biotechnology
- Commuter school
- Neurosciences
- Bioscience cluster

I can’t say what’s different about FAU.

FAU needs to demonstrate to the Legislature that Scripps and Max Planck were worth the investment.

We should be known for doing research that helps the communities we serve, for example, land planning and healthy aging.

FAU should make sure it finds opportunities to talk about its vision and where it is different from other [universities] in Florida.

Six campuses make it difficult to understand the whole of FAU.
Some of FAU’s problem is its youth. One, it needs to raise its status in South Florida. Two, it has to raise its global status. And three, it needs to build up spirit and traditions.

I have no real awareness of FAU as a whole.

Students used to leave the area because there was no work, but Max Planck and Scripps have made a big difference.

There’s a substantial cultural difference between the Jupiter campus and the Boca campus.

Abacoa residents know zero about FAU and even Lifelong Learning.

FAU needs to find a place in the larger world and not just in the communities.

Participation in FAU Activities, Events and Community Outreach Efforts

Ways that people in Jupiter currently interact with FAU are the following:

- FAU’s lifelong learning courses
- Hearing the dissertations of students in the Honors College
- Involvement in the advisory boards of the Lifelong Learning Society and the Honors College
- Engagement in fundraising and building enrollment for FAU
- Sitting on the advisory committee for the development of the Jupiter campus

I took some courses at FAU and was impressed with the Lifelong Learning program. The students were treated well and gained a lot.

I’ve had and arranged for mentoring relationships with Honors College students and professionals in the community, e.g. with lawyers.

Outreach by faculty and students of the Honors College serves a ‘double ambassador’ purpose: from the Honors College to the community and from the community to FAU.

Lifelong Learning is fiscally independent from FAU, and we want to stay that way.

Where do the 9000 Lifelong Learning students come from? Answer: The North County.

There’s another Lifelong Learning Society in Boca, and it’s quite different from the Lifelong Learning Society here [in Jupiter].

It’s really good for Jupiter to have FAU, Scripps and Max Planck.

Recommendations for FAU Outreach to the Community and the Region
Some ways FAU could be a vital part of the Jupiter community include:

- Determining how to bring in the Northern parts of South Florida: Torrey Pines and St. Lucie
- Bringing businesses into work with FAU students and faculty members: faculty consultants
- Using videoconferencing to bring more members of FAU communities and beyond into meetings and events
- Linking up with health care organizations
- Having smoother transfer transitions
- Engaging alumni more in outreach efforts
- Finding ways to overcome Gator loyalty
- Providing more feedback channels to FAU so that it is less insular
- Having various boards periodically meet together, e.g. Advisory Boards to the Honors College and the Lifelong Learning Society
- Holding “speed mentoring” events between students and employers and professionals in the community
- Having faculty host special discussion dinners and breakfasts in Jupiter: at least once a month
- Providing more research and academic outreach to and partnerships with businesses and other organizations in the community, e.g. between the biosciences cluster and business, school children, etc.
- Grow a population of future neuroscientists who will comprise a talent pool of bio-scientists and entrepreneurs who will fuel the economy in Jupiter and South Florida
- Holding events at Scripps and Max Planck
- Holding a joint discussion between the Abacoa Town Center, the City of Jupiter and FAU about the community’s needs and issues and how Jupiter and FAU can help one another

There isn’t any program on the campus that has more outreach than Lifelong Learning.

I’d like to know what FAU would like to get out of community outreach.

FAU was the midwife for the North Fort Lauderdale Cultural Society. The University needs to be involved in setting up more organizations like this one.

Scripps wasn’t known in Jupiter but the citizens here have come to know it. People still need to find out about Max Planck.

People live in Jupiter, because they choose to live here, and they have a lot of pride.
FAU is perceived as being very separate from the community.

Students in Jupiter aren’t taking advantage of the restaurants and resources in Jupiter and the Abacoa Town Center, because they have their own cafeteria, student center and other student resources.

Information from FAU That Would Be Most Likely to Gain Attention

These participants are quite forthcoming about the types of FAU information that would be most likely to be of interest to them. These include:

- Providing some type of communications device that provides the definitions of the roles of the various higher education institutions in Florida
- Having more interactions with the President of FAU
- Helping to “sell” jobs in Jupiter to its students and graduates and the rest of South Florida
- Having more regular communications of interest from the University
- Providing more information about the joint PhD-MD program between Max Planck and Scripps and its relationship with the Honors College
- Holding a lecture series

I would give MJ the highest marks possible in terms of communication.

We are very good at selling education to the employers that move here, but I don’t think FAU is very good at selling jobs in Jupiter and the surrounding area to students who graduate from the University.

Other than the logo and the occasional visit, there’s very little information from FAU.

The communications are too Boca-centric, and people here aren’t interested in Boca Raton.

Preferred Methods of Receiving Information from FAU

- E-mail with a “read receipt,” crisp subject line, succinct message, and someone who is known sending it

Boca Raton: A Great University for Boca

While it may sound too glib, it is not an exaggeration to say that the majority of the participants in Boca Raton would like to see FAU be highly competitive with the University of Florida and Florida State University, but they do not want the students to behave like the students at those two universities. There is clearly no desire on the part
of this community to turn Boca into anything closely resembling a “college town,”
although most are happy to have the stadium and sports teams in their backyards.

They want FAU to be a place that provides the advantages that a great university brings
to a city: academic, healthcare and research assets that attract a talent pool, new
businesses and cultural institutions. There are some who believe that FAU made a big
mistake when it agreed to locate Scripps and Max Planck in Jupiter as opposed to Boca.

It is also no exaggeration to say that all of the participants in the focus groups would like
the campus to be more user-friendly and accessible. With a large community of retired
people who have “chosen to live in Boca”—as opposed to moving there for professional,
academic or personal reasons—they particularly enjoy the lifelong learning opportunities
and interesting speakers for their volunteer activities and clubs that FAU can provide. It
is, however, currently too remote, complex, inaccessible, and insular to the community
of Boca Raton, and this perception exists even with the businesses that are tenants in
the University’s own research park.

Student leaders at FAU’s Boca campus fully understand that they may be “seen but not
heard” in Boca Raton. They feel this keeps the University from becoming a great
university, because there are few outlets for the out-of-classroom activities most
undergraduates desire when they go to college. Many good students transfer from the
University so that they can have a more active undergraduate experience. They say that
most of the students behave well, are willing to take “safety vans”—if provided—to the
remote bars, restaurants and stores they want to and can afford to frequent, but they
believe that the Boca culture is mainly unwelcoming to them and their needs.

In spite of all of this incompatibility, community members are proud of the advances
FAU has made, mainly seeing the opportunities and advantages it can provide rather
than the negatives. And the student leaders enjoy FAU as an academic environment
and a place where they can be leaders in an institution that they believe is “on the
move.”

The Differences between FAU and Other Regional and State Institutions

Although many participants claim to know the University only in pieces, the majority of
them do see the differences between FAU and the other state colleges and universities
around them. For example, they know FAU as having:

- Jupiter: The Honors College
- Engineering, science and mathematics
- The ability to be an economic engine
- An entrepreneurial center
• Spawned Dr. Charles Hennecker, developer of the baby aspirin, and Dr. Ruth Tappan, the first provider of preventative care for the elderly to prevent hospital readmission
• Biomedicine
• The advantages and disadvantages of being a young campus
• A LEAD gold building for Engineering
• A strong STEM program
• A new medical School
• Max Planck and Scripps

I know the University in pieces—through peepholes.

I got to go through orientation with my stepdaughter and got a totally different picture of [FAU]. While I’d known it in fragments before then, I got to understand it as a whole. Perhaps more people should be taken through orientation, just like the students are.

While I think I know FAU, I’m always discovering new things about it. It’s a dynamic organization, and the value of my degree has gone up exponentially.

FAU is very young and was a commuter school in a skinny and long state.

I had a real opportunity to learn about FAU and the campus, when I taught on the campus as an adjunct faculty member for the College of Business. I learned a lot by being inside.

I think something was missed by not having Scripps and Max Planck on the Boca campus.

FAU needs to be able to distinguish itself from all the other universities in Florida.

There are very few minorities in the University’s leadership. [NOTE: There were very few minorities participating in the interviews and focus groups.]

Participation in FAU Activities, Events and Community Outreach Efforts

Boca Raton community members interact with FAU through:

• The Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce
• An annual golf tournament
• Social events
• Being an adjunct faculty member
• Participation on committees, boards and the Alumni Association
• Lifelong Learning courses, which they believe should be much more robustly embraced and advertised

There is a golf tournament every year, and FAU sent a foursome who never interacted with anyone else year after year. MJ has made great strides for FAU.

There’s a major disconnection with community leadership organizations, because athletics beat them up with fundraising requests.

FAU isn’t very user-friendly for the community, and there should be a better relationship between the public schools and FAU. Unfortunately, FAU is more about materialism than altruism. The initiative for collaboration usually comes from the outside to FAU rather than the other way around.

I thought FAU was a CIA operation.

Everyone in Boca knows about FAU, but they don’t know what it does.

They start a lot of things that drop by the wayside.

The Lifelong Learning courses attract a very large population from Boca, but there’s no easy parking for the elderly and the police act like the Gestapo. The campus community is also not very welcoming.

Recommendations for FAU Outreach to the Community and the Region

The participants in the Boca focus groups are full of ideas about how the University can serve and engage them more. For example, FAU could provide:

• Social interactions with the faculty
• Faculty expertise in conjunction with businesses, organizations and activities
• Student interns for businesses and organizations in the community
• A list of FAU’s priorities, distinctions and talking points to enable organizations, businesses, FAU committees, the Chamber, etc. to talk about FAU with sound knowledge and pride
• A “Group of 50” people to accept the responsibility of being a communications network for the University and informally “talking FAU up” around the community
• A “Faculty Experts List” and a regular event, hosted by a faculty member
• Ways to bring the younger generation into the alumni circle
• Responsibility for the Alumni Association to be a “welcome mat” to the University
• More FAU professional training programs for employees
• Help to the Alumni Association for generating more academic interaction with the community
• Tours of the campus to the public
• A site for the “Robotics” conference (which attracted 25,000 high school and grade school students to St. Louis over the last few years) as well as for a variety of other innovative, national, regional and local conferences
• FAU students as hosts for high school students (from local high schools) to “tail” in order to find out about the academic and out-of-classroom college experience so that they are better prepared to go to college
• Hosted discussions between FAU faculty and public school teachers at local high schools and elementary schools to discuss how young people are underprepared for college today
• More leverage to the Lifelong Learning Society as a major asset to Boca
• Outreach to the city and county leaders to convince them to embrace FAU, perhaps by having a “Leadership FAU” meeting in the community
• Better advertising and other promotion for its theater and other cultural offerings
• Better signage and parking for outsiders around and through the University
• An attraction for parents and community organizations by using games in the stadium to showcase community groups and organizations, e.g. brownies, girl scouts, boy scouts (on the field with photo opportunities that are published locally)
• Access to the medical college so that it is more tied into the wellness of the community
• Stronger alumni clubs that also attract the younger generation of alumni
• Better treatment to the donors who give less
• Speakers to the clubs that exist in the gated communities in Boca Raton, e.g. Women’s Clubs, Welcome Clubs, Bridge Clubs, etc. (FAU could even raise scholarship dollars from them, since this is something they like to support.)

We don’t tend to have much interaction with the FAU faculty, and the more [FAU] shows off the faculty, the more people will want to get a graduate degree and the more alumni the University will have here. Faculty expertise also attracts business. The decision to turn the Boca campus into a traditional campus was a great one, because it is something that attracts economic development.

How do we “incentivize” community involvement for faculty? What’s in it for them?

The faculty and deans of the Colleges are thrilled that the Alumni Association reaches out to the academic side.

The Dean of Engineering at MIT got a standing ovation at the “Robotics” conference in St. Louis. I’d love to see our dean of engineering be welcomed by young people the same way.
Florida is stuck in the 60s and FAU could change that! It could be much more of a regional presence.

Lifelong learning is a jewel that FAU doesn’t use nearly enough, although it’s big in the community.

FAU has the legal responsibility for teaching about genocide and Jewish history, since Boca Raton has the largest population of Jewish people per capita outside of Israel: 51%.

FAU could be a beacon in this community.

FAU is too inward-looking.

If you take UF out of Gainesville, you’d not have a Gainesville. If you take FAU out of Boca, it would still be Boca.

The administration has been involved with the community, but the faculty should be more accessible.

FAU needs to make the public feel welcome on its campus.

There’s a lack of continuity in the development office.

Information from FAU That Would Be Most Likely to Gain Attention

Participants say that FAU would be more likely to gain attention, if it:

- Uses every channel of communication
- Develops more University-wide information channels to “get over” the silos
- Creates a video of the “State of the University” address the President has given to the Broward Chamber of Commerce and circulates it throughout the community
- Sends e-mails that teach something
- Does mailings that demonstrate to the community that they can put aside their fears about FAU being a rowdy place like UF and FSU
- Provides a Lifelong Learning Center newsletter—with lots of photos and courses and activities—six times a year
- Has regular messages from the President

It’s important to get around FAU’s silos and get the messages out into the community about the WHOLE University. It’s currently all about athletics. How do we get out the REAL learning and discovery of FAU?
The greatest fear about FAU [in the community] is the people’s old memories of going to UF and FSU and knowing that the students controlled the cities in which they resided. This city—Boca—was here long before FAU and when [the University] began, it was a commuter school and much smaller than it is today.

There needs to be a new interchange at Spanish River Blvd. to reduce the traffic [and make the University’s congestion less problematic].

Preferred Method of Receiving Information from FAU

- E-mail
- Use the social media more

I don’t read the e-mails from athletics anymore; they send out far too many of them and it hurts the rest of the University’s e-mails.

The Residents at FAU’s Research Park

Because one group comprised only residents of the University’s Research Park, it provides an opportunity to gain some first-hand insight into the relationship between FAU and what should be one of its more connected populations, the businesses in its backyard.

This group reports that it is extremely difficult to get good talent in Boca Raton and that they have been trying to work with FAU on this challenge. Unfortunately, the University has been a hard nut for them to crack. The Research Park asks for proposals for companies to develop about the relationships they would like to have with faculty and students at FAU, but there is a lack of communication and knowledge on both sides that creates an obstacle to obtaining this information. One person in the group articulates the condition best by saying, “FAU isn’t ‘silos’; it’s ‘eggs.’ There’s a huge resource out there, but nobody can access it.” This individual had the idea of a “student library” where the businesses in the community could check out a student for an hour or a day. Because it is very difficult to find a good channel of communication into the University, it is impossible to create initiatives like this. Another person said, “You can get good interns, but you have to take the time yourself to make relationships with faculty who in turn provide the students.”

FAU is a large university today, but it still acts like a small commuter school. There are tremendous research opportunities between residents of the Research Park and faculty and students at the University, but there is the feeling that there is a “lack of desire” on the part of the University to communicate. Research Park businesses would like FAU to “make the switch from ‘a university’ to ‘the university.’”
Students at FAU

Like the residents in FAU’s Research Park, the students convened as a group, which makes it easy to note their comments in particular.

The major focus of the students’ conversation centered on the fact that they enjoy the University academically but that the community of Boca Raton stifles their ability to have fun and engage in social activities off-campus. The students’ understanding of this fear is that Boca residents are afraid of Boca becoming like the communities around the University of Florida in Gainesville and Florida State University in Tallahassee. The result of this is that FAU is set off like an island with very few restaurants, stores and other outlets that students can afford. (They note that they cannot afford the University Plaza, which has mainly high-end stores that serve the Boca community but not FAU students.) The students have proposed a safety van to take them to and from establishments that serve alcohol, but this has so far not been done. The Subway at the stadium is very good for them, but its service area is too small.

FAU offers quality academic programs, particularly in the MPA program, which is one of the top in the State, engineering, the biosciences and biotechnology, etc., but the students worry about the “badmouthing” faculty do both on- and off-campus. In the General Education classes, faculty members “allow students to get away with a lot and don’t engage them.” The result is that many students decide to transfer both because they lose interest in the General Education courses and because they tire of the negative attitudes of the faculty toward them. The students believe that it is important for faculty to show their respect of students.

Students also believe the University should “try harder to help students who are having problems.” They recommend that both freshman orientation and the advising center should be beefed up to underscore where students can go to get help with issues and problems. For examples, a number of students come to FAU for the Nursing Program, but when they cannot get into the program, which has a limit of 31 students, they transfer. These students could be assisted in finding other programs that suit their talents so they feel they still have a home at the University.

Only 6% of students are members of Greek life, but these students are the most active students on the campus and provide a number of formal and informal activities for the rest of the student body. All of the students who were part of the focus group, for example, are members of fraternities and sororities. The University should be more supportive of Greek life in general and should particularly revisit the policy that students of fraternities and sororities cannot live together in their own houses. “There’s some ancient law that says that women can’t live together, because that’s a brothel, and the men can’t either because the women can’t.”
The students feel that FAU needs to expand its recruitment area to have more students from other areas in the State and from around the United States and abroad. Their sense is that this would greatly enrich the student experience and create a more loyal and proud student body. The stadium and football has helped to move the needle in the right direction, but participation at the games would be more exciting if there were people there from more geographic areas. This would help to build a greater sense of Owl pride to rival the Gators and FSU.

OVERARCHING THEMES

An Island in Boca Raton

Unlike a pebble skipping across a pond where every jump spreads more ripples outward toward the land, Florida Atlantic University is perceived by many people—including even those in Boca Raton—more like a pebble that fails to skip. It is very Boca-centric, complex, insular, and isolated.

It is recommended that FAU make every effort to become a skipping pebble by using communications techniques that are community-based, simplify how to engage with the University and overcome the sense of the University as an island. This can happen through signage on all the campuses, descriptions of the central offices that serve the public with the names of the people to contact, and the constant inclusion of all the campus names on every communication. It is also an idea to determine how best to make it appear that outreach resources are available on every campus, even if most of these services are provided on the Boca Raton Campus.

A STEM, Health Care, Neurosciences and Biotechnology Brand

FAU has clearly made large strides in communicating its strength in STEM programs, health care, neurosciences, and biotechnology. Many participants in the focus groups mention these strengths. They appear, however, to be less informed about other aspects of the University’s strategic programmatic strengths.

It is recommended that FAU make its brand more accessible to members of the community, e.g. providing more events, speakers and outreach activities that specifically focus on the three priorities in FAU’s strategic plan and emphasizing both those programs that are most prominent in specific geographic locations as well as those that exist primarily in Boca Raton. Members of the focus groups seem to “get it,” but they do not feel like they are experiencing “it” in their own neighborhoods and activities.
A University On-the-Move

While they may say that FAU is unknown to them or only seen in pieces, the majority of the participants in all of the University’s communities perceive it as an institution that is going places. This particularly stands out in the survey where they describe the current and future university in single words or phrases.

It is recommended that the President share FAU’s strategic plan with some important community groups so that they know there is a plan and what its directions are. It is also recommended that the University adopt quickly several of the recommendations made by members of the focus groups. Two excellent examples are the provision of a central clearing house for student interns and faculty experts/speakers and the creation of “500,” a group of community members that live around each campus who are invited by the President to broadcast FAU’s strengths whenever and wherever they can. This group can be provided with training and special treatment at FAU events. There are clearly other stand-out recommendations, but these two could be fairly easily and quickly implemented and will go a long way in spreading the word and the brand.

Using Faculty and Students for Outreach

It is clear that the best way FAU can engage and serve its communities is by setting up a well-organized and accessible program that places students and faculty in businesses, organizations and clubs as consultants, interns, partners, speakers, discussion leaders, and hosts at social events. Every group emphasizes how much they would like to connect to both faculty and students (as long as the students behave themselves).

The recommendation is made above to centralize an organization that provides speakers, experts, interns, and other University resources to businesses, organizations and clubs in all of FAU’s communities. This is where it may be possible to individualize some of the offerings in order to demonstrate that FAU understands that each of the communities in which its campuses reside have distinctive cultures and identities. (See below)

The Power of Recognizing the Differences between the Communities

FAU serves communities that may not be far apart in driving miles but are certainly different in their sense of themselves. Jupiter, Fort Lauderdale, and Boca Raton: they all see themselves as very different places and want to be treated as very different places, particularly Jupiter and Fort Lauderdale from Boca Raton. It would behoove FAU to take each community’s distinctions into account as it plans how best to connect to each community. There hopefully will be opportunities for the same program to serve multiple places, but it will be essential to have one or two offerings that are obviously based on the particular needs of one community over another.
Harnesing the Power of the Unknown

FAU is apparently “unknown” to a number of members within its own communities. It is recommended that the University launch an identity campaign that plays off of the concept of “Knowing the Unknown.” This could link FAU to its academic and research mission by providing nuggets of information that people might not know—and then connect these nuggets to FAU’s name. Things that are unknown, when carefully selected, have the power to pique one of the strongest of human traits: curiosity.

LANGUAGE

In the April 11 report, the word analysis found that every individual’s words and phrases contained a mixture of the positive and the negative: “the opportunity of greatness amid a totally disconnected present. The word analysis in this report is far more positive in its depiction of Florida Atlantic University today.” As the chart below shows and taking into account the difference between the number of respondents for the two samples (23 for 2011 and 84 for 2013), there are 130 positive words or phrases as contrasted to the first report’s 26, and 49 negative words or phrases in contrast to the first report’s sixteen. The descriptive words and phrases also reflect much more texture than those in the first report with a whopping 41 words describing FAU’s large size and numerous descriptors for the University’s academic programs and connections. The one negative that stands out is that it is described fairly frequently as a local, commuter, and home-grown institution rather than as the regional and comprehensive university in the first report.

Overall, the participants’ choice of words suggests a community that feels it can be both very positive about the University and also candid about its concerns because FAU is in a stronger position to accept and do something about their criticism. This finding is also supported by the extremely good feedback they provide to the University in terms of the activities they believe will fruitfully connect the University with their communities. They clearly want FAU to be an integral part of their communities both to strengthen who they are and to give them “crowning rights” with their friends around Gainesville and Tallahassee.

Finally, the surveys also include words describing what the participants hope will describe FAU in the future. These have not been included in the body of this report, but they are included as Appendix 2. Once again, the hope is that this will be helpful to the Office of Communications and Marketing in its work on behalf of the University.

To facilitate comparison of the two word analyses from the previous April 2011 report and this one, both are shown below.
### Word Analysis from April 2011 with a Total of 23 Respondents

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<thead>
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<td>Hopeful</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
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<td>Local Connection</td>
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<td>Science</td>
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<td>Student-centered</td>
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<td>Regional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
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<td>Unrecognized</td>
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<td>Spread Too Thin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Underfunded</td>
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<td>Fractured</td>
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### Word Analysis from January 2013 with a Total of 84 Respondents

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<td>Dynamic, Innovative, Experimental, Entrepreneurial, Progressive</td>
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<td>Football, Stadium, Owls, Athletics, Sports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partnerships, Relationships, Collaboration, Resource</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evolving, Changing, Transition, Advancing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Driver, Impact, Business Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gem, Quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong Academic Programs</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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<td>Scholarly</td>
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<td>Potential</td>
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<td>Fun, Exciting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Industrious, Resourceful, Relevant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awakening, Blossoming</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Resource</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>President</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious, Aspiring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality Instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Friendly, Welcoming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
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<td>TOTAL=130</td>
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<table>
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<th>GREEN=DESCRIPTIVE</th>
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<td>Diverse, Accessible, Inclusive, Opportunity</td>
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<td>Medical School, Medical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lifelong Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bioscience, Biotech</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
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<tr>
<td>RED=NEGATIVE</td>
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<td>Undiscovered, Unknown, Best Kept Secret, Hidden Assets</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Splintered, Silos, Lack of Synergy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unclear, Unfocused</td>
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<td>Underserved, Financially Challenged</td>
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<td>Underappreciated</td>
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<td>Bureaucracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Communication</td>
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<td>Underutilized</td>
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<td>Missing Link to Local Industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unwelcoming (to Lifelong Learning students on Boca campus)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
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<td>Overshadowed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behind</td>
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<td>Small Town Mentality</td>
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<td>TOTAL=49</td>
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</table>

**CONCLUSION**

Once again, conducting focus groups and interviews at Florida Atlantic University has been another learning experience for me about a university that is clearly on the flight path to take-off. The findings are on the whole extremely positive for the University in terms of both the richness of the recommendations they yield for building FAU’s relationship with the communities it serves and the perceptions its communities have about the University, its current brand and its future opportunities to increase its visibility. It is clear that the strategic priorities FAU identified as part of its strategic plan are already taking root and beginning to show early signs of growth.

Once again, it has been a pleasure to work with FAU. I want particularly to acknowledge the Office of Community Engagement—Dr. Jennifer O’Flannery Anderson, Pamela Landi and Harriet Steffen—for the hard work, patience and assistance they provided before,
during and after my visit to South Florida to conduct these focus groups. They were professional, welcoming, instructive, and generous with their time. Thank you all.