

Ideas in Action



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The Tenth University

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A quarter of a century has passed since the initial planning was done for the youngest of Florida's nine state universities. At that time, the planners understood that the so-called information revolution was indeed underway, but only a few would have predicted the dizzying speed at which the revolution has progressed. The existing universities and the governmental agencies which supervise and fund them, while recognizing that they must adapt to technological change and the changing mind sets that accompany it, have for the most part remained rooted in the habits of a process-oriented past.

As Roger Kaufman set forth so lucidly in the October 1992 "Ideas in Action," the advent of the tenth university provides the people of Florida not only an opportunity but also a requirement to design and build a university for the 21st century. The task will not be easy.

Let's examine some of the factors to be considered in the creation of Florida's tenth university in the southwestern region of the state. As we do so, we should remember that the western university, whose origin dates back to the eleventh century in the Italian city of Bologna, has a long and illustrious history. Its contributions to the well being of the human race have been and continue to be enormous. If that record of service is to continue, however, the university, like other major institutions, must--while seeking to retain the best of the past--continuously adapt to the realities of the present and the probabilities of the future.

1. **MISSION.** In the past it has been our custom to define the university's mission in broad terms as education, research and service. While recognizing that we will continue to use them, we should also recognize that, at most, these terms identify areas of responsibility. They do not even suggest purpose or direction.

Without laboring the point, I would suggest that the methodology which Kaufman has developed in his system of mega-, macro-, micro-planning would be well-suited to the formulation of the mission statement and the strategic planning for a new university. In place of the stereotyped language of the past, the mission of the university, based upon systematic consultation and study, should proclaim the continuing vision of the university and its relationship to the surrounding world in terms that are meaningful, practical, convincing and inspiring.

The primary concern of the tenth university, certainly during its early years, will be Southwest Florida. It should from the beginning seek ways in which it can best serve the people of the Southwest Florida region. It should always place great emphasis on effective teaching--and, I would add, effective learning (the two things are not the same). In its early years its research activities are likely to emphasize applied research which relates significantly to regional conditions. The Board of Regents staff has, for example, suggested that an early emphasis on environmental research would be well suited for the region. I would suggest also that, if the tenth university does indeed commit itself to the fullest possible utilization of developing information and learning technology, it could be well positioned to attract substantial outside funding for the support of an institute for integrative studies of the nature and uses of the national and worldwide information systems. Such studies would not, of course, be limited to regional considerations. As far as I am aware, no such institute presently exists. I see no reason why the formulation of such an institute should not begin almost immediately, even before the arrival of students.

2. **COST/BENEFIT EFFECTIVENESS.** Compared with other leading states, Florida's funding of its newer universities (and, many would argue, its older universities) has been less than meager. At the present time the state's ability to fund a new university is at its lowest ebb since World War II. If the configuration and funding of the new university replicate the patterns of the past, the emergence of an educational program that is at best mediocre seems all too likely. If, on the other hand, the university is allowed to marshal and use its resources in a manner that takes the fullest possible advantage of state-of-the-art information and learning technology, there is a much better chance that it can provide for its students an educational experience of high quality and do so at relatively low cost. Roger Kaufman has given us a number of suggestions as to how this result might be brought about and I will add a few more. All of them will require significant changes in the way that the principal actors in Florida education have been accustomed to view the learning process and the state's institutions of higher learning.

3. **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY.** Let us hypothesize, in some distant millennium, a time when there is total access to total information; that is, every person will have the means of gaining access to any part of the world's store of information. While it is improbable that mankind will actually reach that millennium, the hypothesis marks the direction in which we clearly are moving at a very rapid pace.

Understanding how the information system works will be a vital part of every student's education. Applying that understanding to all of the widely varied activities of the university will be the hallmark of the 21st century university. Florida's tenth university should, from the outset, design its programs in a way that assures an appropriate level of understanding, competence and commitment on the part of both students and faculty in respect to the beneficial uses that the developing information system makes possible.

Understanding and using the modern information system will require students to achieve an acceptable level of ability to use abstract symbols. In large measure, this requirement echoes the familiar "getting back to basics"--reading, writing and arithmetic. We must now add another basic, which falls broadly under the term "computer literacy." To meet this requirement, the university must establish valid measurement practices and work closely with the regional public schools, community colleges and other educational agencies to assure students an opportunity to measure up. Due to the diversity of the university's students, it will be necessary, at least during the early years, to provide alternative means of satisfying this requirement.

4. **DIVERSITY.** While it is true that our world is becoming much more interconnected and in that sense "smaller," the planners of the new university should recognize that it must be prepared to deal with increasing diversity in students, programs and delivery systems. It seems hardly necessary to point out that a progressively more diverse student body and a rapidly changing world will require programmatic variety and flexibility which, to put it kindly, has not been a notable characteristic of our existing universities or university systems. Achieving this kind of capability will not be easy, but it must be undertaken. Intelligent use of modern information and learning technology by a committed faculty and staff may offer the only hope of addressing this change.

While the majority of the university's students will be graduates of regional high schools and community colleges, there will be a substantial and probably increasing number of students with widely diverse backgrounds and objectives: persons seeking or requiring career changes, upward bound professionals, transferees from other universities, senior citizens and others pursuing lifelong learning. The student body will span virtually all age groups. Many will hold part or full-time jobs and will wish to access the university during evening hours and weekends. Driving distances within the university's primary service region will necessitate a broad range of extended learning opportunities. The university's use of up-to-date information and learning technology will enhance its ability to meet these diverse conditions.

As Kaufman points out, it is now possible to tailor educational delivery systems in a wide variety of ways to meet the needs of individual students and a changing world. Although the technology continues to advance, proven delivery systems are already available and should be incorporated in the university's planning from the beginning. The advent of interactive, digitalized video and audio transmission; the exponential increase in electronic storage capacity; the speed and volume of satellite transmission; the marvels of graphic animation; the wider use of protocols which permit electronic information systems to speak with each other--all portend a growing capacity to individualize and introduce variety into the learning process and, at the same time, to improve the level of student comprehension and achievement.

5. **EVALUATION OF PERFORMANCE.** Historically, university performance (and funding) has been measured largely in terms of such readily quantifiable items as student credit hours, full time equivalent students, faculty class contact hours, number and kind of degrees and publications in acceptable journals. Both the budget makers and members of the teaching profession alike have shied away from the evaluation of outcomes on the ground that such evaluation is "too subjective." They fail to recognize that the credit hours or number of degrees with which they are comfortable, while easily counted, are predicated on assumptions that are at least as subjective and less valid than rational attempts to evaluate outcomes.

The tenth university would do a real service to American education if it were to resolve from the beginning to develop and utilize a system of outcome measurement and evaluation that would provide for itself and other interested agencies a realistic appraisal of what the institution, its faculty and its students have actually accomplished. Doing this would open the door for really meaningful "accountability" and provide the basis for continuous improvement.

6. **ADMINISTRATIVE AND FISCAL FLEXIBILITY.** A number of years ago, while I was president of the University of West Florida, we did some careful study and concluded that, if certain administrative and fiscal constraints which we thought unnecessary could be removed, we could operate the university at an even higher level of efficiency on less money. So we drafted a bill that removed a number of the constraints and, as inducement to the Legislature, provided that five percent of whatever total sum was appropriated to the university would be rebated to the state treasury "off the top." The bill moved rather quickly through the House of Representatives and was passed by the Senate on the closing day of the session.

After a premature celebration, I received a telephone call the next day from the secretary of the Senate. The wrong-numbered bill had been engrossed and sent to the governor, and, since the session had now adjourned, our bill was dead. Our study had convinced us that, not only could we have returned five percent of the state treasury but, if the bill had become law, we could have realized a net gain for the university of at least another five percent, all or part of which we could have carried over from year to year, to be used as a "rainy day fund" or for other worthy purposes.

The point is this: If the tenth university is to organize itself and its educational program in a manner that is significantly different from the traditional pattern, the planners should be seeking ways in which it can be accorded the flexibility, without diminution of true accountability, that will be required to meet its goals. Bringing about this kind of change in Florida also will must also not be easy.

7. **CONSULTANTS.** There is no standard blueprint for the building of a university. Each is and indeed must be unique. Carefully chosen, knowledgeable and experienced outside consultants can be of great help in the planning process, especially if they have demonstrated an ability to stand outside the timeworn paradigms that have made higher education so resistant to change. In particular, the consultants should have demonstrated the ability to bridge the gap between the thinking of the university administrator and faculty member and that of the typical computer scientist. This kind of help will be especially important for the tenth university if it does, in fact, undertake change in some of the ways that Kaufman and I are suggesting.

8. **STAFFING.** The Board of Regents staff has wisely suggested that the first president of the tenth university be brought on board as early as possible. Hard experience has demonstrated that delay in the selection of this vitally important officer can severely limit his or her effectiveness and impede the development of the new institution.

Without question, one of the most important, difficult and time consuming responsibilities of the president will be the selection of faculty and staff personnel and the planning consultants who are to assist them. Not only must they be competent and energetic, but they also must be excited by and committed to the objectives of the university. The permanent staff also must be willing to take the risk that affiliation with an as yet unbuilt, unknown institution entails. All should be buoyed by the fact that their assignment is to create a new future, not just to replicate what already exists.

9. **ACCREDITATION.** Accreditation by the established accrediting agencies is important and should be accomplished at the earliest possible time. With accreditation comes standing in the academic community and acceptance of the university's product. Without it, students will find it difficult or impossible to transfer to other institutions and to enter graduate and professional programs of their choice.

During the many years that I have been involved with state, regional and national accrediting agencies, I have found that they are amenable to change, provided the institution seeking to do things differently establishes a well thought out method for evaluating outcomes. Like most of us, however, these agencies do not like to be surprised. I would therefore recommend that any new institution at the earliest possible time establish the closest possible working relationship with the regional accrediting agency (in our case the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) and other accrediting bodies whose stamp of approval it will seek during its early years. It should be remembered that accreditation is not automatic. It must be earned.

10. OPEN MINDS. Some years ago, while I was president of Florida International University, then Chancellor E. T. York and I had dinner with then state Senator Jack Gordon and in the course of our conversation mentioned the severe shortage of funds for library collections throughout the state university system. Gordon commented that books have a long life and asked why PECO funds should not be available to acquire them. Our immediate response was that we doubted that the PECO Amendment would permit such use of these funds. In the next session of the Legislature, Gordon introduced and the Legislature enacted a statute that provided a one-time \$10 million allocation to the state university system for the purpose of strengthening the library collections. The bill became law and the libraries received the funds. I mention this, first, because the tenth university, should it elect to make the heavy use of information and learning technology that has been suggested, may want to explore the possibility that PECO funds be made available for the acquisition of the necessary equipment. Second, although it has been suggested by some that Gordon at times came up with some rather wild ideas, he nevertheless displayed an open-mindedness that might be commended to those thinking about our tenth university.

11. PROBLEM OR OPPORTUNITY? In one sense, every university is a bundle of problems. Dealing with problems is an important part of its business. Beyond that, however, it must be recognized that the establishment of an additional university in Florida at this time, given the state's fiscal situation, severely exacerbates the problems that are inherent to the institution itself. I would hope that the planners and builders of our tenth university, while not blind to the problems, will be inspired by the fact that, for the first time anywhere, Florida has the opportunity to create from the ground up a truly American university for the 21st century.



About the Author

Judge Harold Crosby has served as Circuit Judge, First Judicial Circuit of Florida, and as Regents Professor and Professor of Law, Florida State University. Judge Crosby also served as president of the University of West Florida, an institution which he founded. From 1976 to 1979, he was president of Florida International University. Judge Crosby is currently at work on a History of the Florida Supreme Court.

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