

Re-imagining an Integrated FIU as the Urban Change-maker for South Florida

This concept paper is submitted to the Florida International University integrating Research, Engagement, Assessment and Learning (FIU iREAL) commission. Specifically, this paper addresses the intersection of FIU's organizational anatomy, its engagement with the community, and its future as a change-making institution for South Florida.

1. Introduction

As a public research university in a unique urban setting, FIU must be committed to addressing societal needs in the tradition of state universities. This notion is reflected in FIU's *Worlds Ahead* Strategic Plan; the seventh goal, "to build collaborative university/community relationships" emphasizes the need to "employ the intellectual capital of the university to solve community problems." At nearly 60,000 students, over 200,000 alumni, billions of dollars in research and economic impact, and a growing number of community partnerships, FIU's capacity to effect positive change in the region is greater now than at any point in its history. To continue, as FIU should and must, in its role as community change-maker, FIU must rethink its internal anatomy to reflect and leverage its new level of influence.

2. The Vision

Before rewiring FIU's internal infrastructure, we must answer the question, rewire to what end? The university must have a clear vision of what FIU is to become with respect to community engagement. We must be able to answer the questions, with whom will we engage? What types of engagement will we pursue? What goals and objectives fall inside FIU's mission?

In keeping with its history, FIU's community engagement vision should be ambitious, aggressive, and consistent with the university's growth potential. FIU has the capacity to position itself to be among the most influential change-making institutions in South Florida; it should have a powerful voice in critical decisions affecting the region; it should be an engine for driving the regional economy. In the twenty-first century, FIU can transform into an anchor institution capable of leveraging its unmatched influence and intellectual capital to effect positive change touching every aspect of South Florida.

FIU must also be a trailblazer. Although the national trend is toward greater integration and collaboration between universities and their urban surroundings, there is at present no clear model that is representative of the end vision of which FIU is capable. Other universities, however, do suggest a path. UCLA, for example, identifies civic engagement as its second strategic goal, and offers a vision in which UCLA injects itself into every aspect of Los Angeles society¹. The [strategic plan](#) reads, in relevant part:

Civic engagement: merging the qualities of land grant institutions and modern research universities to create meaningful interactions among faculty, staff, students, and community at a scale ranging from local to global. Civic engagement at UCLA means working to make a difference in the civic life of Los Angeles. We do so by directing the knowledge and skills of our students, faculty, staff, and senior leaders to address societal problems and improve the quality of life in Los Angeles. In so doing, we will work in partnership with the community for mutual benefit and to set an example of how a public research university can be a leading partner in addressing pressing societal issues. UCLA's status as an international university complements a focus on civic engagement. Lessons learned in Los Angeles have applicability to urban areas worldwide, and international engagement will bring a host of benefits to both UCLA and Los Angeles, ranging from economic impacts to cultural and intellectual enrichment.

¹ UCLA provides a valuable model for FIU's long-term goals. Like FIU, it's a non-flagship, minority-majority, large, public research institution in one of the most important cities in the world. It excels in academics and athletics. It is civically active both locally and globally, and is tightly woven into Los Angeles society and culture. UCLA is also one of the few American universities that has a truly recognizable international brand.

3. The New Anatomy

Consistent with a new community engagement vision, FIU must rethink its organizational infrastructure. Integrating research, engagement, and academics effectively and efficiently is essential to leveraging our intellectual capital to solve problems in the South Florida region. Enhancing integration will mean increasing and improving connectivity and collaboration, both vertically and horizontally, between all parts of the university community to facilitate the flow of ideas and resources.

As policymaking becomes increasingly data-driven and research-based at all levels of government and in the private sector, the influence yielded by universities and the importance placed on universities in the policymaking process will likewise grow. This presents FIU, with the right infrastructure in place, the opportunity to pursue community partnerships that translate FIU's world-class research and academic efforts into real-world policy solutions on a scale far larger than ever before. Examples of how emphasizing integration throughout the university can advance this goal include:

- Fostering a community problem-solving approach that leverages FIU's internal and external linkages, including utilizing research capabilities and community relationships to identify problems, utilizing research capabilities to develop solutions, and engaging university and community partners to implement solutions;
- Encouraging problem-based, cross-disciplinary research that focuses research efforts and resources on identifying the causes of real-world problems that exist in the local community and employing a cross-discipline approach to implementing innovative solutions;
- Continuing the transition towards a residential campus inclusive of the entire FIU community. As encouraging undergraduate students to interact more closely on and around campus has created a more dynamic, robust culture, continuing this trend among the wider community of faculty, staff, and graduate students will build a university community that encourages a greater number of "collision points" and "unplanned interactions" among members, which in turn fosters deeper and more meaningful diverse, cross-disciplinary relationships; and
- Pursuing investments in community programs to strengthen social structures and in infrastructure to shape the built environment and catalyze placemaking to enhance diversity, improve quality of life, and increase connectivity in surrounding communities and throughout greater South Florida.

4. Conclusion

In light of its growth over the past decade and its projected growth over the next, FIU is presented with an opportunity to re-envision its place within South Florida and to re-design its organizational infrastructure to realize this vision of how the university will engage with its community. By enhancing integration throughout the university, FIU will be better able to engage the surrounding community to effect positive change in South Florida. Historically, FIU's vision for itself has been ambitious, aggressive, and consistent with its impressive growth potential. Keeping with this tradition will allow FIU to achieve a level of impact and influence within South Florida to a greater degree than ever before. The vision should be for the university to position itself among the region's most significant change-making institutions, to mature into an anchor institution that engages the community as an important generator of solutions to urban challenges.

To realize this vision, FIU will need to rethink its internal organization. The new anatomy must emphasize integration of research, engagement, and academics to leverage the full extent of the university's intellectual capital to engage the community and solve problems in South Florida. The growth of FIU continues to expand the university's sphere of influence and potential for positive change, and adopting an integrated organizational structure will be key to realizing a new vision for FIU in the twenty-first century.