

President Kent Fuchs
State of the University Address
Thursday, Sept. 24, 2015 (3 p.m.)
Reitz Union Auditorium

Thank you, Professor Davenport, and thanks to all of you for being here this afternoon. I appreciate this opportunity to reflect on the University of Florida with you in my first State of the University address.

As most of you know, I began my service in January. My strategy during these nine months has been to listen and learn while continuing the momentum of the past several years to raise the visibility and stature of the university. We have worked to bring resources to UF through state funding and philanthropy, and we have sought to chart our university's aspirations and goals for the future.

I've met with donors, elected officials, alumni and editorial boards statewide. I've sipped café con leche with community leaders in Miami, kicked the soil with IFAS extension agents in some of the most rural regions of the state, and had many meals with Florida's leaders in Tallahassee.

As much as I have gained from all these experiences, nothing has compared with the time I've spent with many of you engaging in your work on behalf of this university and its future ... and, in some of your classrooms and laboratories, getting a first-hand look at the excellence that exists on campus. The word preeminence may be overused, but in your work with students ... in your scholarship that I have been exposed to ... and in the positive difference you are making globally and locally ... I have seen preeminence.

I know you are interested in my perceptions and vision for our university's future – and that is where I would like to start.

We are in a position of incredible strength, from the quality of our faculty and professional staff, to the generosity of our alumni, to the excellence of our students. This is clearest from our macro numbers ...

Faculty set a research funding record of \$707 million this past year.

Alumni and friends for the first time gave over \$300 million, for a new record of \$315 million in gifts and commitments.

We have 9,300 new undergraduates, of which 6,900 are new first-year residential students, and the remainder are new transfer or online students. In addition, we have 5,300 new graduate and professional students. All have superb academic credentials.

Our financials are solid. Legislative leaders this spring provided UF with a new \$19 million for meeting performance goals, allowing us to invest in our people, including \$1 million in raising the minimum wage from \$10 to \$12 per hour. The state added a new \$5 million in preeminence dollars, enabling us to add new faculty to our recent hires across campus.

As the rapid completion of the Reitz Union and the crane over the New Chemistry Building remind me daily, our infrastructure is being renewed.

In fiscal year 2015, we completed six major new facilities, totaling 365,000 square feet in building space. We have five major construction or renovation projects underway this year, totaling 342,000 square feet. The thoughtfulness and care that goes into designing this space is remarkable, as I have seen at many ribbon-cuttings. We also have plans for many more construction and renovation efforts.

Finally, we continue to attract superb new leaders and faculty.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated the many contributions of Michael Blachly, who is retiring as director of the Phillips Center for Performing Arts. In November, we will be pleased to welcome the new director, Brian Jose. Since last fall, we gained Evie Cummings, director of UF Online; Isabel Garcia, dean of the College of Dentistry; Mike McKee, chief financial officer; Dave Richardson, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Laura Rosenbury, dean of the College of Law.

Would all of you please stand so that we can recognize you? Thank you.

I've learned from my 30 years in higher education that the most critical leadership roles are often those of department chairs and directors of programs. Will those who are currently serving as department chairs and directors please stand so that we can acknowledge you? Thank you.

Nine months in, my assessment is that UF has incredible strength and momentum, creating a moment of crucial opportunity. We can seize this moment through working together to reach our most ambitious shared aspirations. To define our shared goals, I appointed a task force of 17 university leaders, faculty and students this spring. Members spent several months soliciting input and gathering feedback. Many of you participated in the process and we thank you.

The task force has agreed on seven overarching goals, as well as accompanying draft objectives and metrics. These goals, objectives and metrics set forth a path that both enlivens current strengths and breaks from tradition.

Let me outline some of the contours of that path now, beginning with Draft Goal Number One: “An exceptional academic environment that reflects the breadth of thought essential for preeminence, achieved by a community of students, faculty and staff who have diverse experiences and backgrounds.”

I am pleased that academics are given such prominence in the very first of our goals. We will enhance our focus on academics in part through our longstanding practice of seeking students and faculty from diverse races, cultures and backgrounds, particularly those from underrepresented minorities.

In addition, we will address geographical diversity.

In this spring’s *Business Journal’s* ranking of universities, UF was #7 in the nation among all public universities. One reason that our score was not higher was our weak geographical diversity within our student population.

Following longstanding tradition, only about seven percent of our undergraduates come from outside Florida. As a result, very few of our students have the opportunity to establish networks outside Florida and gain perspective beyond state borders. And, very few undergraduate students from other states and nations benefit by coming to UF to study.

This is increasingly out-of-step with our globalizing society. It also reduces UF's visibility, stature and influence nationally and globally.

We are committed to two things. One, continuing to rise as the destination of choice for Florida's very best high school students. And two, enhancing the geographical diversity of our undergraduates.

Goal two is "An outstanding and accessible education that prepares students for work, citizenship and life."

Let me focus on the word "accessible."

I was tremendously proud last week when the New York Times ranked UF sixth in the nation among both private and public universities among "Top Colleges Doing the Most for Low-Income Students."

The New York Times also ranked UF No. 2 among all universities in the share of freshmen who received a Federal Pell grant and were likely to graduate. Federal Pell grants generally go to families earning less than \$70,000 annually. More than a quarter of our students receive Pell grants, and our six-year graduation rate is in the top-ten among all public universities.

Usually, universities with high graduation rates have relatively few students with Pell grants. Also, having many low-income students usually correlates with lower graduation rates. Not at UF. We are different.

Being #2 in the nation in the percentage of freshmen who received a Pell grant and are likely to graduate is very special indeed.

Colleagues, we owe this national leadership to your teaching and mentoring of these students. Your hard work and commitment to excellence is what attracts these students to UF and enables them to graduate. You are truly making an enduring difference in the lives of multiple generations of students and society.

Please note that we are also committed to creating an environment where all the members of the UF community can be successful.

I was proud that UF chose to participate in the survey of sexual assault on university campuses conducted by the Association of American Universities, and that we released the results this week. Not all of our peers participated, nor did all our peers release their results. The findings will help make UF safer for all of us.

In late October, we will ask for your participation in a UF Faculty and Staff Climate Survey to learn about and improve the university's workplace environment.

Goal three and four both involve faculty, so I would like to discuss them together.

Goal three is "Faculty recognized as being preeminent by their students and peers."

Goal four is "Growth in research and scholarship that enhances fundamental knowledge and improves the lives of the world's citizens."

I view these goals as at the center of our agenda for the next decade. I'd like to preface my remarks with some personal context.

I spent nearly a dozen years as a faculty member at the University of Illinois. There, I personally experienced the many responsibilities and demands placed on the faculty. I understand what it is like to lead a large research program while shouldering a heavy teaching load, including teaching numerous classes to thousands of students. I experienced all the associated pleasures of having students sleep during my lectures and criticize me in their evaluations, as well as their less-frequent praise.

Because we work in an environment where we are constantly evaluating and criticizing, it is good to also be reminded of the joys of working at a university, particularly UF, and how we are affecting many generations of people's lives.

A few months ago I received a touching email from UF alumna, Sarah Thomsen, who I had never met. She wrote “The reason I wish for you to read this is I believe everyone should know at some point in their life how their acts of kindness can have a large impact on people’s lives.”

“[Thirty five years ago] my father (Kurt Thomsen) was serving as an active-duty enlisted member of the US Air Force. At the same time, he was attending the University of Illinois pursuing a [bachelor’s] degree in Electrical Engineering. Despite having a wife and toddler at home he was able to serve our country and simultaneously obtain a degree from Illinois. He graduated, went on to Officer Training School, received a Master’s degree and continued his career in the Air Force working on missile warning systems. He retired from the Air Force while stationed at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, where I went to high school before attending the University of Florida.”

In Sarah’s email she shares that in fall 1979, her father was struggling to complete a senior design course in order to graduate. She wrote that I was her father’s TA for the course. All I remember about the fall of 1979 is that I was a brand-new graduate student, I was struggling to pass my own courses, and trying to be a TA for a course in which I had never been a student.

Sarah writes “My father told me how you helped him with this course and through your help [he] was able to be successful with the course and get his degree. The small act of kindness that you showed my father years ago led to success for him, my family, and myself. Like a pebble dropped in a pond, your small act has had a ripple effect that has touched so many lives ... I know I would not have the University of Florida education I have today, or be able to serve our country through my career [in the Army] if it were not for people like yourself who planted the seed of knowledge with my father over 35 years ago. Go Gators!”

On behalf of Sarah Thomsen, thank you to all those at UF who teach, mentor, support, and show small acts of kindness to our students.

In addition to touching lives through teaching, we are also touching lives through scholarship. Increasing UF’s stature in research and scholarship requires equal ambition and commitment from everyone at UF, particularly faculty and those serving in the administration, including all our academic leaders throughout the university.

I mentioned earlier that the task force has been working on objectives and metrics for all goals. The objectives and metrics for these goals urge us to elevate our level of performance beyond our already high bar.

They urge us to ... produce more high-impact publications ... win more distinguished awards ... take more leadership positions in professional and advisory organizations ... increase participation in leading public debates ... and win more contracts and grants for research.

Taken together, these goals and objectives challenge us as an institution to reach the next level in recognition and global impact. The objectives and metrics also challenge the university and its leadership to create the conditions for faculty and students to soar.

I know this also takes resources in addition to commitment. We will make endowments and gifts for professorships and programs a major priority of our next capital campaign. We will provide the highest level of support services, taking a page from the soon-to-be completed HiPerGator 2 – which will be among the most powerful research supercomputers on any campus in America. We will do much more to put UF squarely in the public eye. As I speak, university communications is developing a “One UF” initiative directed at raising the national and global profile of UF research and academics.

We also appreciate that competitive salaries and support are critical in attracting and retaining the world’s best faculty and graduate students. We are committed to achieving employee compensation and graduate student stipends that match our peers.

Goal five is “A strengthened public engagement of the university’s programs with local, national and international communities.”

We all recognize that a cornerstone of our land-grant mission is promoting agriculture in Florida, an undertaking that the Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences has embraced with incredible success. Yesterday I addressed the board of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association in West Palm Beach. I spoke about athletics, academics, and agriculture. The fruit and vegetable industry contributes \$12.2 billion annually to the economy of Florida, and I am pleased that UF is a critical part of their success.

However, our land-grant mission is not confined to agriculture ... Nor is it solely the responsibility of IFAS ... Nor is it limited only to the State of Florida. All the parts of our university share in this land-grant mission of engaging and benefiting society, from the sciences to the humanities to the arts. We want to pursue this mission not only in Florida, but worldwide.

UF's success in technology transfer provide a model for this approach. Among all universities, both private and public, we are among the nation's top-ten in startups, patents and licenses, according to the Association of University Technology Managers. The intellectual property UF generates will benefit Gainesville and Florida, but it will also have a national and global influence. I have been so impressed by how closely and effectively our technology managers work in partnership with UF faculty and researchers.

This goal seeks to inspire other units to reimagine their mission with that same vision of global consequence and recognition.

Goal six is “Alumni who are successful in their careers and in life and who are proud to be graduates of the University of Florida.”

As alumni contribute to elevating the university’s stature, the value of their degrees goes up in the eyes of their peers and employers. We will rise together. We are finalizing planning for a \$3 billion fund-raising campaign, double the size of our last campaign. We are also committed to doubling the size of our endowment.

Here is our final and seventh goal: “A physical infrastructure and efficient administration and support structure that enable preeminence.”

This goal urges us to complete new and renovated research, teaching and housing facilities. It tells us to remain focused on energy efficiency, sustainability, and timely maintenance. And it stresses the efficiency of administration in size, diversity and the quality of university services.

The phrase “efficient administration” is one of my few specific requests for inclusion by the task force. I firmly believe that the administration, including the president’s office, is here simply to help UF faculty and students be successful. We need to be purposeful in this task, striving for both efficiency and effectiveness.

To recap, here in my view are some of the contours of our path ahead, as put forward by the goal-setting task force:

We will educate our students for global citizenship and commerce by enrolling a greater diversity of students, including geographical diversity.

We will address rising inequalities in our state and society by seeking to become the nation's leader in our endowment to support low-income students.

Our faculty will achieve research of even greater global consequence and recognition, supported by outstanding facilities, services and resources.

Our colleges and units will embrace societal engagement and global impact, extending their unique influence to the nation and world.

We will partner with more engaged alumni in elevating our graduates and our university, and we will do so with an efficient and effective administration.

As much confidence as I feel about these elements of our emerging path, I recognize that I have much more to learn and discover about this university. At the same time, the goal-setting task force's work is ongoing. The task force will finalize its report by December, then assign this initiative to the university's 16 colleges. We will ask colleges, centers and institutes to develop their own, individual strategies and tactics to achieve our goals, a process that will extend into the spring of 2016. It will be my role to support our colleges and departments in achieving their specific goals, and also our shared goals.

There is one more thing. We have an overarching aspiration for UF. I think the words and spirit are just right: “The University of Florida will be a premier university that the state, nation and world will look to for leadership.”

How do we define “leadership?” I suggest the following ...

When the best students in the world make a short list of universities where they want to go to college or graduate school, UF should be on that list.

When performers captivate the audience at the Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall ... and when artists exhibit at the nation’s most prominent galleries and museums ... they should have a UF connection.

When our society experiences new paradigms in technology, agriculture or science, the University of Florida should be one of the reasons.

When The White House or the United Nations need an expert on matters of global concern, UF should be one of the first universities they call.

As I said at the outset, we are in a position of incredible strength and momentum, creating a moment of crucial opportunity. I thank you for joining me in seizing that opportunity.