

Features



GRASSROOTS GATORS: Gators for Higher Education legislative advocacy program

By Lindy McCollum-Brounley

Tough economic times typically call for belt-tightening, but the fiduciary fall-out of Florida's \$2.6 billion budgetary shortfall last year felt less like belt-tightening and more like garroting — especially for already hard-hit sectors like higher education in which state support has been on the wane for years.

In early 2009, as the opening of the state legislative session loomed weeks away, state revenue and budget projections were bad and the outlook for the state's universities looked even worse. The University of Florida, already reeling from more than \$69 million in budget cuts over the previous two years, found itself staring down the long barrel of another \$45- to \$90-million net cut during fiscal year 2009-10. Debilitating layoffs and wide scale program closures seemed inevitable.

Fortunately, UF's leadership had a plan and a powerful, not-so-secret weapon — the passion of the Gator Nation.

With more than 300,000 UF graduates living in 100 countries across the globe and in every state in the nation, the Gator Nation truly IS everywhere — especially in Florida. That's the strategic premise behind the University of Florida Gators for Higher Education program. Rolled out with an e-mail from UF President Bernie Machen to UF alumni and friends in February of 2009, the program is an innovative grass roots advocacy initiative that has proven enormously successful in harnessing the passion of the Gator Nation to advocate on behalf of UF in Tallahassee.

"Since I came to UF in October of 2004, I have been approached numerous times by alumni who say to me, 'We need help in the legislature. What can I do to help?' " said Jane Adams, UF vice president for university relations. "That's what Gators for Higher Education is all about, reaching out to people who care about the university and who want to help us in the legislature."

A partnership between the university and the Alumni Association, Gators for Higher Education has, in less than one year, grown to include nearly 4,000 UF alumni — a whopping 22 percent of who are UF Law graduates — and friends who have logged on to <http://gatorsforhighered.ufl.edu> to sign-up as grassroots Gators. During the 2009 legislative session lawmakers received more than 1,000 e-mails and faxes from Gators in support of UF's legislative efforts because of the program's calls to action. This support contributed to the passage of an appropriations bill that avoided crippling cuts to higher education and a differential tuition bill that allows Florida's public universities to increase tuition in increments of 15 percent until it matches the national average. Inevitably, the budgets of the state's public universities did suffer cuts, including a \$72 million cut for UF, but the cuts were not as deep as had been expected and non-recurring funding combined with federal stimulus money helped soften the blow for UF.

"Clearly, this downturn shows us that Florida must do a better job of attracting biotech, and in general, making the switch to a knowledge-based economy. The University of Florida is uniquely positioned to help Florida make this leap."

Making an Impact

In addition to its nearly \$6-billion annual impact on the state's economy, which represents a return on investment of \$8 dollars for every \$1 of state money appropriated to it, the University of Florida is the state's unrivaled graduate education and research powerhouse. Ranked No. 13 nationwide amongst all public universities and No. 19 among public and private universities in research expenditures during fiscal year 2008 by the National Science Foundation, UF is among the most productive research universities in the country. Scientific discovery and the education of a highly-skilled workforce are UF's unique potential for and significant contribution to Florida's growing innovation economy.

"It is the amount of sponsored research that differentiates us from the other state universities," said Adams. "We are uniquely equipped to generate jobs, do tech transfer and build technology incubators... all of those things that mean a lot to the state in terms of economic development."

These assets make UF a valuable partner in collaborative efforts like the Florida High Tech Corridor and the Burnham Institute for Medical Research. The Florida High Tech Corridor Council (www.floridahightech.com) is a collaboration of state and local governments and the universities of Florida, Central Florida and South Florida that seeks to attract and foster the growth of high-tech industries in 23 Central Florida counties. In addition, UF and UCF are academic partners with the Burnham Institute for Medical Research at Lake Nona in what the Orlando Sentinel recently described as, "Orlando's emerging cluster of biomedical facilities, sometimes called 'medical city.'" The UF Academic and Research Center at Lake Nona will house the College of Pharmacy doctoral program and biomedical research laboratories that are envisioned to become a center of comprehensive drug development.

"I think the University of Florida brings tremendous financial resources and clout because of its history and ability to bring in grants and fund research, as well as support from its very successful alumni," said Frederick W. Leonhardt (JD 74), senior partner and chairman of the Policy Board of Directors for the Orlando, Fla., firm of GrayRobinson, P.A. "The University of Florida has an important leadership role and continues to demonstrate that leadership. On the other hand, I believe the university has to reach out and form collaborative partnerships with the other major universities."

UF's effort to establish a research facility at the Burnham Institute near the UCF campus will be a major legislative priority for the university during the 2010 legislative session, as will expanding its presence in the High Tech Corridor. Leonhardt noted growing consensus among lawmakers that dollars invested in these collaborative initiatives will have long-range impacts to the state's goal of broadening its economy to include high tech businesses.

"The legislature is becoming more aware of the importance of economic impact to our state's financial success," Leonhardt said. "I think they are interested more in economic development, financial impact, how dollars invested in higher education turn over in the economy and how they create more economic impact because of these resources being smartly and wisely used."

As a member of UF's Governmental Relations Advisory Committee, Leonhardt and the university's government relations team take every opportunity to advance UF's message of high-ROI amongst legislators and business leaders. Leonhardt also serves as a gubernatorial-appointed member of the Board of Directors for Enterprise Florida, a public-private partnership charged with developing new jobs and businesses in innovative, high-growth industries for the state. Leonhardt said the Enterprise Florida board of directors is comprised of business and governmental leaders with an interest in diversifying the state's economy and an appreciation for the value of investment in higher education and the University of Florida.

"They're aware of the University of Florida's huge impact on the state and how things

that are good for the University of Florida are good for the state's economy," he said. "That reciprocity is a compelling story."

Grass roots to grass tops

Nonetheless, the upcoming 2010 legislative session and inevitable wrangling over scarce resources during the appropriations process remains a daunting prospect for UF and higher education in general. Although there are signs of recovery, Florida's projected revenues still fall short of what will be necessary to fully fund state government and its services, and more cuts to a UF budget already cut to the quick are likely. Legislators, though working on behalf of the state as a whole, will be exquisitely sensitive to the needs and desires of their hometown constituents. The goal of the Gators for Higher Education program in this environment will be to ensure UF is positioned as the state's flagship institution of higher learning and scientific discovery, rather than as "Gainesville's university."

"That's the whole point of Gators for Higher Education," said Jeff Jonasen (JD 88), a partner in the Orlando firm of Baker Hostetler and the president and member of the Board of Directors for the University of Florida Alumni Association. "What legislators need to hear from alumni in their districts, their constituents, is 'Mr. Legislator, Ms. Legislator, the University of Florida is important to me, and if I'm important to you as a voter, as your constituent, then the University of Florida and its priorities should be important to you.' That's a compelling message that only alumni, only people who care about the University of Florida, can deliver to a legislator."

Jonasen, who is a member of the UF Government Relations Advisory Committee, notes the need to engage advocates statewide, especially in the more heavily populated areas of the state with larger legislative delegations, and on many different levels.

"The idea really is two-pronged from the university's perspective," Jonasen said. "One is to engage the grass roots, which is Gators for Higher Education, and then also engage the 'grass tops,' if you will. Many of our alums are involved in the political process in their communities around the state, and, of course there is the Gator Caucus in the legislature. ... So, UF has a strong grass tops advocacy program, and the piece that has been missing, until recently, has been the grass roots piece — I think we're going to find that the Gators for Higher Education program is going to add a lot to the strength of our advocacy program and that every legislator in the State of Florida will be familiar with Gators for Higher Education within the next five years."

Advocates enrolled in the Gators for Higher Education program receive e-mailed updates with calls to action on specific legislation. This enables the university to carefully target and time its messages to avoid "advocacy overload" in the legislature, when advocacy is poorly-timed or off-point.

"You want to be careful that you don't allow advocacy to overrun the process," said Lakeland Representative Seth McKeel (B.A. 97), chairman of the Gator Caucus, chair of the State Universities & Private Colleges Policy Committee and die-hard Gator. "It's a big initiative to organize those who want to advocate on behalf of the university, and it's great for the advocates to have a Web site, a central bank of knowledge about how and when they can be the most helpful — to understand what they can say, when it's most effective to say it, and how it will benefit the university. That's going to be tremendously beneficial to the university in the long term."

In the hurly-burly of the legislative session, during which thousands of pieces of legislation, moving at lightning speed, will be introduced and voted on, effective advocacy can make or break a bill — as can collaborative lobbying efforts amongst universities in support of common interests.

"Both years that I've been the chair of the Gator Caucus, we have had at least one joint meeting between the UF and FSU caucuses with the goal of finding what priorities are out there that are of joint interest to both universities," said McKeel.

As examples of universities working together to achieve joint goals, McKeel points to the collaborative effort between the UF and FSU during the last session to pass the tuition differential bill and the UF and USF collaboration on medical school funding.

"Obviously, if you can get everybody on the same page about a joint priority, you've got a pretty good chance of making it happen," he said.

Gators for Higher Ed, 2010

Ironically, the Gators for Higher Education program, conceived as an advocacy program to benefit the University of Florida in Gainesville, has been successful in supporting higher education statewide.

"Gators for Higher Education is not just focused on the University of Florida," said Melissa Orth, UF director of government relations and coordinator of the Gators for Higher Education program. "It's about promoting higher education for everyone in the State of Florida — it's about UF, it's about UCF, it's about all the universities and the lack of funding, in general, for higher education in our state."

Legislative collaborations between the state's universities will continue to grow, Orth said, as university partnerships in the Florida High Tech Corridor, the Burnham Institute for Medical Research and other economic development initiatives flourish. In addition, she anticipates more and more Floridians will become engaged in advocating for higher ed as other Florida universities follow UF's lead in mobilizing their alumni bases.

"We've had several institutions reach out to us after we launched Gators for Higher Education to ask, 'How did you do this? When did you get started? How can we do something similar?' " said Orth. "They've seen the success the program had during the previous session, when the program was just launched. ... And, we feel like we have an opportunity to have such a great impact during the coming legislative session."

To make it easy for grass roots Gators to become involved in the 2010 legislative session, scheduled to open March 2, the Gators for Higher Education Web site (<http://gatorsforhighered.ufl.edu>) provides people with a finder to identify their state legislators, legislative contact information, descriptions of UF's legislative priorities with associated bill numbers and action dates, and e-mail templates with text containing the university's core messages. The expectation, based on the success of the program during the last session, is that advocates will use the copy provided in their own e-mailed or telephone communications with their legislators.

"Certainly, we provide advocates with all the information and written messages they can cut and paste into an e-mail, but we also want them to use their own thoughts and words," Orth said. "We want them to speak from their hearts and say, 'This is why the University of Florida is important to me.' "

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