

GUEST COLUMNIST

Change is at the heart of university's success

By JOHN LOMBARDI

Universities, among the most enduring and effective of American institutions, often present a solid unchanging appearance.

Each new academic year students flood our campus with the enthusiasm and energy characteristic of any adventure.

Each year we graduate people whose accomplishments have earned them degrees of varying kinds and levels.

Each year our faculty teach, produce internationally recognized research, and provide outstanding service to the state and the nation.

And this ritual sameness of our annual cycles of accomplishment creates the illusion of stability, an aura of unchanging competence and institutional conservatism.

Not so, at least not at the University of Florida.

Here, and at most great universities, the annual rite of fall with the re-initiation of the academic year brings yet another cycle of controversy and change, of initiatives and challenge, of growth and adjustment.

We never stay the same even if our core missions of research, teaching and service remain the same.

We never repeat the cycle of previous years, because the students who join us each year come with new ideas, perspectives, and questions that require us to rethink our understanding of our disciplines and our concept of the university.

We cannot repeat this annual cycle precisely because we welcome new faculty with their differing perspectives, because our returning faculty have progressed with their research, identified new insights into society or the humanities, or found new forms of artistic expression, and each of these must become part of our academic and intellectual lives.

We cannot repeat the annual cycle because the community and world around us change, bringing new opportunities we must capture as well as new constraints that we must address.

Over the past few years, this university and its community have confronted a remarkable series of challenges, from personal tragedy to budget cuts.

Each year when we wondered whether we could sustain the energy and vitality that has been a key characteristic of this place, we found that the people of this university and this community could indeed withstand the pain of these events and find in the experience opportunities to strengthen themselves.

We found in our common ability to confront traumatic personal tragedy that we could set aside our differences of interest to focus on our common need for support and the comfort that heals not physical wounds but the damage to our spirit.

We found in our common ability to confront sequential budget cuts that we could cope with financial hardship without damaging the core missions of our university or the organic connec-

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tions that link university and community.

None of these achievements come without cost. Our encounter as a community with personal tragedy left us with a residue of fear and uncertainty and an acute sense of life's fragility.

Our encounter with financial adversity left us with a university whose services for students, faculty, and staff — financial aid, instructional or library support for example — lie perilously close to being totally insufficient.

Yet in accepting the changes forced on us by events beyond our control, we found it possible to continue the process of building a great university and collaborating with our community.

We have found ways to enhance our teaching, to initiate new degree programs by drawing on collaborative structures rather than requiring new dollars, to enhance research productivity by increasing our successful capture of external dollars, and to enhance the physical space for our programs by competing successfully for private dollars and state support.

Recognizing this strength, our student population continues to expand slowly, the quality of our students continues to remain very high, and the diversity of our students, faculty, and staff continues to improve.

While we celebrate our ability to harness change to the needs of our university, we must also recognize the changes yet to come.

Some of these involve the continued adjustment in our programs and operations that meet the needs of an increasingly demanding public, but others involve a recognition that our future as a great university remains inextricably linked to the economic strength of our community and our state.

We often like to think of ourselves as somehow self-contained, as somehow existing in a time and space attached but separate from the time and space of Gainesville, Alachua County and Florida.

We know better, but sometimes we talk and act that way. After our experience with personal tragedy and budget

crisis, however, none of us can believe such a fiction.

We at the University of Florida, faculty, students, and staff, we all belong to this community, and our success as a university depends on the health of this community and this state.

If greater Gainesville continues to deteriorate as an economic enterprise, the university will deteriorate.

If greater Gainesville finds itself without jobs for its citizens, the university will find itself with a declining environment, an inhospitable place for students, and an unwelcome place for faculty and staff.

And if we should ever reach a point where this community becomes inhospitable for our students, staff and faculty, our chances of remaining a great university will disappear.

The university, of course, cannot solve Gainesville/Alachua County's problems, nor can the city and county solve ours. But because we are so inextricably linked, we share the consequences and we must share the solutions to each other's problems.

The university has an effective and powerful research enterprise, for example, from whose laboratories come inventions and ideas with a commercial future. We do not know how to turn these ideas and inventions into business much less operate those businesses, but we know that others have this expertise.

We have been working for years to transfer this technology to market with some success, but we have found that many of our city and county friends see this activity as our problem, not theirs, as our opportunity and not theirs.

So we move that technology as best we can and sometimes we move it out of our city and county and out of our state. Not because we want to but because it appears to be the only way to get it to happen.

During the coming year, we expect to engage with the city and county's newly aggressive economic-development effort to find ways to enhance the integration of university creativity and productivity with city and county economic development.

We do not do economic development, but we can surely support it better, contribute to it more fully, and, perhaps most importantly, recognize that each of us has an obligation to assume responsibility for the changes this city, this county, this university and this state must make if we are to have the Florida that supports a great university.

Change, then, is the constant of a university's operating style, and is at the center of its success as an institution.

We begin this new year anticipating change, welcoming change, recognizing the controversy and conversation change brings, but celebrating the energy and intellect that can engage in the conversation that makes the most of every opportunity and seeks an opportunity in every adversity.

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