

Commentary: Criser explains university system's 'performance...

Florida's State University System has never struggled with attracting students, even as the number of schools grows.

That ability to attract students, both in- and out-of-state, has worked well with the traditional funding model of allocating based on how many full-time equivalent students are enrolled at the beginning of the semester.

But while that model provides incentives for colleges to enroll students, a growing number of lawmakers — including in Florida — argue that it provides little incentive to help them graduate. Enter “performance funding,” wherein money is essentially allocated based on the number of students who complete courses and degrees.

To implement to this more “businesslike” funding model, Florida's Board of Governors tapped Marshall Criser III as its new chancellor in November. The Palm Beach County native, and UF graduate, is well-known in the state's business and political establishment. With more than 30 years with A&T Florida (and BellSouth and Southern Bell before), plus stints as chairman of the Florida Chamber of Commerce and Florida Council of 100, Criser must sell everyone from lawmakers to university officials to parents and students on this new approach.

After studying other states' systems and spending a year developing a Florida model, Criser hopes to “bring a proposed \$50 million in new money for the system while incentivizing university excellence and improvement.”

+



Marshall M. Criser III

The performance model “is based on four guiding principles: use metrics that align with the State University System’s long-term goals; reward excellence or improvement; have a few clear, simple metrics; and acknowledge the unique mission of each institution,” according to a Feb. 12 memo to the Board of Governors and university officials.

Following are few questions The Post asked Criser about performance funding:

QUESTION: What impact do the efforts by Gov. Rick Scott and the Legislature to drive down tuition costs have on the universities getting the resources they need to be nationally competitive?

ANSWER: Florida has among the lowest tuition rates in the country, while also performing extremely well in national rankings. I believe we can continue to offer an excellent value for our students.

To me, the tuition discussion begins with one question: How well can we demonstrate to our elected leaders the value of investing in our university system? As we demonstrate the value we create, and the imperative to fund higher education, we strike the right balance for our students and their families.

That’s where we move into conversations about performance funding, which is our big push this session. Our elected leaders want to invest in higher education, but they also have called on our universities to demonstrate new levels of accountability and efficiency.

Q: How big of a factor should performance be going forward in what funding universities get?

A: The simple answer is that performance funding should be a large enough percentage of university budgets so that it incentivizes universities to focus and improve on the 10 metrics we've identified as important to our students, our communities and our state. Those include things like graduation rates, retention rates and the cost per student.

We want to provide the best possible return on investment for our students, our taxpayers and our community. And I believe this model will help us do that.

Q: Expound some on your notion of a "Degree Estimating Conference." Does that have to do with collaboration between the state colleges and universities?

A: Our State University System wants to do the best we possibly can in matching degree production with workforce demands. We are steering higher education in the direction to meet the state's highest workforce needs. That's good for our economy, but it's also good for our students because it could help ensure that they will have career opportunities once they graduate. Regular Degree Estimating conferences can help us identify those needs.

When I was Florida's president of AT&T, I was involved in a yearlong effort by the Access and Attainment Commission, in which stakeholders from the universities, state colleges and the business community worked to determine the gaps between the majors of Florida graduates and the types of career choices that are available in our state. Our board is currently in the process of awarding \$15 million in grants, funded by the Legislature, for higher-education initiatives to help close those job gaps. Those grants are a huge step toward aligning the needs of our state with the degrees of our students.

Q: What does this performance funding model mean specifically for Florida Atlantic University?

A: Florida Atlantic University does many things very well. But the performance funding model is designed to incentivize improvements in areas like graduation and retention, for example. I believe that FAU, under its new president, Dr. John Kelly, will make improvements in those areas that over time will yield better service for our students and higher funding for the university.

NEED TO KNOW MORE?

[Sign up](#) for FREE Post

newsletters. Travel, News, Golf and more. Choose your favorites and we'll deliver.

Popular