

Graduation rate improving, FAU wins top spot in Florida scorecard

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2014 aerial photo of Florida Atlantic University campus in Boca Raton. (Photo courtesy Florida Atlantic University)

Only two years after facing a \$7 million penalty from the state for rock-bottom graduation rates, FAU beat out the University of Florida and Florida State for the top spot in the Florida Board of Governors' "performance-based funding" grades. The University of Central Florida tied with FAU for first place.

The state report card rewards improvement as much as actual performance. So even though FAU still lags far behind UF and FSU in graduation rates, the Boca school scored extra points for raising its game.

Fully 48.4 percent of FAU students now graduate within six years of starting school, up from 40 percent two years ago. Among the 11 schools on the scorecard, FAU continues to rank at the back of the pack in

graduation rates, trailing UF's 86.5 percent graduation rate, FSU's 79.3 percent and even Florida International University's 56.8 percent.

[FAU President John Kelly](#), who took his post two years ago, addressed the school's low graduation rate by raising admissions requirements. Entering freshmen in 2015 needed a high school grade-point average of 3.3, up from 3.0 a year earlier. This fall, that admission standard will rise to 3.6.

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Florida Atlantic University President John Kelly (Photo provided)

“This is a wonderful achievement and everyone associated with FAU should be very proud of all we’ve accomplished in the last two years,” Kelly said in a statement. “We will continue to hire stellar faculty and do everything possible to help our students succeed and receive a world-class education.”

FAU's high score could translate to millions of dollars of state funding, although Kelly said in an interview Wednesday that he's not sure how much the school will receive. FAU will use the money to hire faculty and advisers and beef up its career placement office, Kelly said.

The state Board of Governors looks at a variety of metrics, including the number of degrees offered in high-demand industries, the number of degrees given to low-income and minority students and even U.S. News and World Report's college rankings.

FAU grads enjoy at least one advantage over alumni of more prestigious state schools — higher

salaries. The typical recipient of an FAU bachelor's degree makes \$36,500 a year after graduation, compared to \$35,200 for UF grads.

Only FIU grads had higher salaries, at \$36,900. One caveat in that measure: It counts only recent grads employed in Florida, so even if UF had more grads heading to Wall Street and Silicon Valley than FAU, their pay wouldn't be measured. Another caveat: Because FAU attracts more adult students than UF, many grads already have jobs while they're earning degrees.

FAU also improved its "academic progress rate," which measures the share of students still enrolled as sophomores and with a GPA above 2.0.

"Moving all these numbers, especially the graduation rate, is incredibly difficult to do," said Christopher Beetle, an associate professor of physics professor and president of FAU's faculty senate.

Beetle said FAU began a mentoring program for physics students, an effort to give students more guidance from their professors.

"We want to have a better relationship with our students, so that we can encourage them and keep them on track," Beetle said.

Those sort of programs have been a focus for Kelly, who has aimed to usher students through their courses more quickly.

"We had been a little bit lax," Kelly said. "We have put programs in place to help them decide earlier what their major is going to be."

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