

President Kent Fuchs
State of the University Address
UF Faculty Senate Meeting
August 25, 2020

Welcome to the start of a historic academic year.

Over the summer, as I planned for this fall, my personal perspective has changed. I began the summer feeling sorry for myself. Feeling sorry that I would have to live and work in the midst of COVID, not just for this past spring and summer, but for the entire new academic year. As the summer progressed from May to July, I gradually realized that the coming year would be historic and that it was a real privilege for me, and all of us, to be at UF at this historic moment for our university. I've come to a personal understanding that our university, our colleges, schools, and departments need us, and our students are depending on us. Thus, I've come to no longer feel sorry for myself, but to count it a privilege and responsibility to participate in this historic new academic year.

UF has had historic years in the past. For example, in the fall of 1906 UF first opened its doors for classes here in Gainesville. There were 102 students and 15 faculty members, including the president, that first academic year. In 1918 the historic influenza pandemic struck UF. Students died, one of the faculty members died, and even President Murphree contracted the virus. Another historic academic year, and a historic leap forward, was when women joined men as UF students in 1947. Eleven years later George H. Starke Jr., the first Black student, enrolled at UF, another great advancement. In 1985 UF was admitted into the prestigious Association of American Universities, or AAU. And now, the year 2020 will be added to that list, and we are about to be a part of that history.

In today's State of the University address, I am going to make two personal asks.

My first ask is that each of us be unreasonable with our expectations for this academic year. I ask that we be unreasonably hopeful, and that we set unreasonably high expectations, in making this year the best ever for our departments and colleges, and the best ever for us personally and professionally.

I acknowledge that this ask is unfair. Let me share some of the obvious reasons why it is unfair.

The first reason is because of what has occurred over the past six months. The past six months have been traumatic. Superhuman effort was required from each of you to finish the spring semester and to complete the work of the summer. The personal and professional effort required to accomplish our jobs and to be healthy and to help others stay healthy is unbelievable. Our bodies, minds, and spirits are exhausted and fragile.

In addition, the university took necessary action this spring and summer that has made our work more challenging. We put a pause on hiring, which reduced the number of people working with us, and we put restrictions on things like university funded travel. Budgets across the university have been reduced and are stressed.

The second reason my ask is unfair is because of what we see occurring right now at many other universities. We read daily about universities with flareups of COVID that are abruptly changing their plans to reopen.

The final reason is because of the real challenges we will face here at UF this new academic year.

First, COVID will certainly be with us throughout the fall semester and we should be prepared for many cases, quarantines, and isolation. If only 1% of our students test positive and 1% of our employees test positive, that is more than 500 students and 300 employees. This would result in 800 people in isolation and 1000s in quarantine, and likely many in hospitals. This is extremely sobering.

Second, we face severe budget challenges this academic year. Although we have worked hard to protect the jobs of our staff and faculty, it is unlikely we will be able to fund salary and wage increases this year. Our core budget is funded by the state and by tuition. Tuition hasn't increased for many years and certainly won't this year. Meanwhile the state has held back 6% of our allocation to help cover its revenue shortfall, and we have been asked to plan for even greater cuts. We have also incurred considerable additional costs, including \$15M for COVID testing and PPE supplies, and greater than \$30M in lost revenue to centrally managed enterprises, such as housing, parking, performing arts center, and so on. Some areas, such as the UF Health Shands Hospital have had even greater losses in revenue, during the shutdown, and others, such as athletics, are expecting significant losses this fall. Overall, enterprises separate from the core budget have had a more dramatic decrease in revenues, but are expected to have a more dramatic and faster full recovery.

Finally, we also face long-term persistent threats that we must address. The first is systemic racism. This is the year in which we must and will address this threat. This threat is real. Like COVID, racism threatens our university and our personal wellbeing and therefore we must fight racism with the same energy and focus as we fight COVID.

The second enduring threat is the number of international students and our international engagement. Every year since 2017 my State of the University address has discussed the need to grow the number of international students and our international engagement worldwide. Last year we had 1,400 new international students on campus in the fall. This year it appears that number will be 300, and we expect only a few new international students online. This is a staggering decline. This has become an even more urgent issue than previous years.

Let me pause to make a comment relevant to our engagement with China and our Chinese colleagues. First, I acknowledge the real tension between our nation and China. All of us must comply fully with every university policy and every state and federal law and policy. This includes, as always, full disclosure of potential conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment and disclosure of all international engagement. And we must protect our intellectual property and our nation's national and economic security. At the same time, we must be absolutely clear that UF is a university where international students, faculty, and visitors are welcome and embraced. Our commitment to diversity and inclusion applies to all. If our international colleagues and students do not feel welcome and supported, particularly those who are Chinese, then we have failed, and our future is threatened.

Given all the threats and challenges we face this academic year, why do I believe this can be our best year ever? Simply, because I have come to know the people of our university. I have observed what you, the faculty, staff, students, and friends of UF, have accomplished over the past six months of COVID and what you accomplished in the years before COVID.

Let me remind you of some of those accomplishments, across the university.

I've watched with awe the 1000s of courses taught in the midst of COVID last spring and this summer and the 1000s of students who completed courses and degrees. I've watched how clinical work, laboratories, studios, and research took a blow but now have recovered. I've watched how faculty, departments and colleges have decided on the best balance of online and in-person teaching and have worked to make teaching even more effective than before COVID-19.

I've been so impressed with our employees who continued to work here on campus, taking care to be safe and also keeping our campus functioning. This included facilities and grounds staff, police, custodians, healthcare workers -- literally 1000s of employees.

The preparations and plans for the start of the academic year have been truly remarkable. We are so blessed to have a world-class academic medical center and faculty in areas such as epidemiology. UF Health has guided us in preparing for the fall and now we are all implementing that plan, including a rigorous campaign to assure compliance by all with the requirements and policies that will help us stay healthy. Our epidemiologists and healthcare experts are continually enhancing our testing, tracing, treatment, and Covid plans.

Even with the tremendous guidance of UF Health, the decisions aren't easy. Our highest priority is to keep our UF community safe and healthy. I also feel a commitment to our students in their education and progress toward graduation to pursue their dreams. I feel a commitment to all of the people who depend on our university for their work, professions, families and communities. I know that many of you share those commitments and I am grateful for your efforts to help us get all this right.

I've also observed over the past six years how the faculty, staff, and students of UF are committed to always improving and always achieving greater excellence, including in our mission of education.

Due to the extraordinary work of the faculty and staff in every academic department, in the offices of the department chairs, deans, and provost, UF will become this fall one of the few universities and colleges nationwide to achieve designation for Excellence in Assessment. This designation recognizes colleges and universities that successfully integrate assessment practices throughout the institution. It is a remarkable recognition of how assessment is used effectively across the university to continuously improve our academic programs. Congratulations and thank you to the 54 Assessment and Accreditation Coordinators across the campus, the 587 assessment oversight faculty in the colleges, and to Prof. Tim Brophy, director of institutional assessment, who led this effort.

This continual commitment to excellence is reflected in a number of metrics. For example, since the freshmen class that entered in the fall of 2000, the four-year graduation rate has increased 13 percent and the six-year graduation rate has increased 10 percent.

There is also a growing demand for a UF degree. Undergraduate applications rose from 29,000 in 2014 to a record 42,000 last year. This year there were nearly 50,000 applications for admission to UF. Even in the midst of COVID-19 we have not seen a significant decline in students registering for this fall, despite the drop in international students. We currently have nearly 52,000 students registered for this fall semester, including nearly 6,500 first time in college students, which was close to our original goal for this year.

The scholarly and research accomplishments of our faculty, staff, and students have been amazing. One indicator of that success is the amount of research funding, awards and expenditures. Last year, I reported that our research expenditures had reached \$865M, an increase of over 22% since 2014. This year in February, we reported record research expenditures of \$929M.

We also gained in research awards, rising from \$776M in FY 2019 to a record \$901M in FY 2020 – closing in our \$1B goal – despite many activities being paused for more than two months by the pandemic.

UF has also made dramatic progress in the national rankings. As you know, we are committed to being broadly recognized as one of the nation's top-5 public research universities. UF moved up from 19th to 14th among public research universities in the U.S. News ranking in 2014, then to 9th in 2018, 8th in 2019 and 7th in 2020. Later this fall we will learn our ranking for the coming year. In the most recent US News ranking we were only 1 point out of 100 away from being tied for 5th, so we are close to achieving our goal.

Earlier I shared the challenges we face with budgets due to COVID. However, more importantly, I want you to know the commitment of our State officials, the Board of Governors, and our Board of Trustees to obtaining the resources we need to achieve the increase in stature necessary to be a top-5 public research university. This includes not only the growth of 500 faculty, which we have achieved, but also adding another 100 faculty with a particular focus on Artificial Intelligence across the disciplines. It also includes compensation for our faculty and staff that is equal to our top-5 peers, based on market and merit.

In addition to the investment by our state, our friends and alumni are also investing in their university. Over the past six years, our annual alumni participation rate in giving back to UF has increased from 12% to 18%. The fiscal year that just ended brought \$523M in new gifts and commitments. This was the second year in a row that UF fundraising topped \$500M, even though five months of the fiscal year were in the midst of Covid. We have already raised over \$2.7B toward our \$3B campaign goal, and we are more than a year ahead of schedule. I expect that we will achieve our goal of \$3B in this historic academic year. In the midst of COVID, we have also launched the AI University initiative with the support of a \$50M gift.

Another reason I am optimistic is that we have new faculty, new staff, and new leaders who will help us make this the best year ever. We begin the academic year with 411 new faculty hired since last year. A special shoutout to everyone at UF who in the past year has taken on a new leadership position, particularly in this historic year. If you have taken on new responsibilities as a director or chair, new responsibilities in the dean's office or maybe in the office of the provost or a vice president, I thank you and am so grateful. I do want to acknowledge a few new senior leaders:

- Student Affairs VP D'Andra Mull started in January
- IFAS VP Scott Angle started in July
- Dean of Business Saby Mitra started this month, and
- University CFO Chris Cowen started last week.

My final reason for why I believe this will be the best year ever, is that we will take steps to address systemic racism. Not only have we begun the steps outlined this summer, but all across UF this year, including in Faculty Senate meetings, there will be a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion with a particular focus on ending racism against Black people.

We have committed to being transparent about the areas where we make progress and when appropriate, to celebrate success.

Again, why do I make my audacious and unfair ask that this be the best year ever for each of us, for our students, and for our departments, colleges, and university? Because I have come to know you. Not just your accomplishments, such as the examples I have shared, but also who you are, your values and your character. Our values and our character, personally and as a university, will determine what we accomplish this year and the impact of this new academic year on the history of our university. This was true in 1906, when a few pioneering students and faculty began the first academic year in Gainesville; in 1918, when a small community of students and scholars persisted through that pandemic; in 1947 and 1958, when women and Black students led the university into fairer and more just times; and it is true today.

And now for my second and final ask. I ask that each of us be kind. I ask that we be kind to ourselves. Be kind to your body, mind, and spirit. Keep yourself well. I ask that you be extraordinarily kind to those around you, including your friends, family, colleagues and students. This is a year above any other year where kindness, compassion, and love by all of us are desperately needed and I ask that we lead with kindness.

To close, it is a privilege to be your colleague as we begin this historic academic year. I cannot think of any other place I would rather be than here with you as we make history together. Thank you.