

An Experiment in Florida

Gulf Coast University tries faculty contracts, no tenure

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APRIL 30 WILL BE an important date in the brief history of Florida Gulf Coast University, where 85 percent of the faculty has been hired on multi-year contracts instead of tenure-track positions.

By then, about 50 professors with three-year contracts will know if these agreements have been renewed or if they should plan to look for jobs elsewhere. Although most expect to be renewed, an air of anxiety hangs over this small campus, built on swamplands at the edge of the Everglades.

"I'm a little nervous about it, to tell the truth," said Eric Strahorn, a young history professor who has taught at Florida Gulf Coast since the campus opened in August 1997. "Everybody says most of us will be renewed, but until I have it in my hand, I'm going to be nervous."

Maria Roca, an associate professor of communications who has a five-year contract and thus is not being evaluated for renewal this year, put it this way: "If we renew as many contracts as people think we will, this will allay a lot of the fears about multi-year contracts. It will show that this campus isn't going to be a revolving door."

The no-tenure policy is not the only unusual feature of this, the newest of Florida's ten state universities.

The very existence of the campus, in an area more hospitable to alligators than to humans, is surprising. It took

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more than 500,000 tons of landfill to provide a foundation for the first group of campus buildings. "We had to build the land up four and a half feet to get the campus above flood level," President Roy E. McTarnaghan explained.

On all sides there are tall, skinny Melaleuca trees, which were imported from Australia several decades ago to soak up swamp water but

which also have consumed much of the natural vegetation.

To end one of the many environmental skirmishes that were fought before the campus site was approved, the university promised the Army Corps of Engineers that it would eradicate the Melaleucas, a task one faculty member likened to "eradicating dirt." Periodically, groups of state

Photos by Cindy Karr, Black Star, for CrossTalk



Students at Florida Gulf Coast University are warned not to feed the many alligators who live on or near the swampy campus.

prisoners are bused onto campus to hack away at the trees, but progress is slow.

Signs warn students and others not to feed the alligators that live in several man-made lakes (the result of another environmental agreement) and that periodically can be seen sunning themselves on campus. There are also wild pigs and turkeys, fire ants with nasty dispositions, and a variety of snakes.

But there have been no sightings of the Florida Panther, an endangered species believed to roam the area. The Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service required the university to buy \$2 million worth of land for panther habitat, but so far none have dropped by for a snack.

Officials cheerily point out that all of this flora and fauna provide excellent material for a "collegium" called "A Sustainable Future," an interdisciplinary course, required of all undergraduates, that is intended to provide students with "an ecological perspective," to quote the campus catalogue.



The semi-tropical climate at Florida Gulf Coast University provides a suitable environment for a required undergraduate course on “A Sustainable Future.”

“The campus itself becomes a laboratory,” said Jack Crocker, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Crocker is a strong supporter of the interdisciplinary approach. All Arts and Sciences graduates earn the same degree—Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies, with a “concentration” in history or computer science or any one of a dozen other subjects. All must complete a 21-hour core of interdisciplinary courses—one-third of their upper-division work—organized around such themes as “Issues in Culture and Society” and “Issues in Science and Technology.”

“We want students to think on their own and relate one thing to

another, not just sit in lecture classes,” Crocker said. “We got some resistance in the beginning. Students arrive with the mindset that they have to ‘major’ in something, but now I think there’s a lot of acceptance.” However, some undergraduates still worry that their “liberal studies” degrees might not get them into top-flight graduate or professional schools. It is too soon to know if their fears are well founded.

The campus is heavily into “distance education.” Many of the 2,900 students (average age 33) have jobs and find that courses taught over the Internet or by two-way video are easier to fit into their schedules than classroom appearances.

More than 90 distance education courses have been developed. This spring 62 courses were offered and more than 20 percent of Florida Gulf Coast (FGCU) students took at least one.

The lecture halls have podiums and overhead projectors but no blackboards (or “whiteboards”) on which professors can scrawl. “We wanted this to be a different kind of place,” President McTarnaghan said.

The Florida Board of Regents hopes that lessons learned at FGCU can be applied at the state’s other universities. Like California, Texas and other “Sun Belt” states, Florida faces an explosion of postsecondary enrollments over the next decade. There won’t be room for all these students in traditional campus settings, and the likelihood of building many new campuses is slim, so the hope is that distance education can relieve the pressure. That is one reason McTarnaghan, a technology enthusiast, was picked to run

Florida Gulf Coast.

But McTarnaghan has announced he will leave at the end of this semester, and many on campus wonder if his successor, who will be named soon, will be equally enthusiastic about educational technology.

Peg Gray-Vickrey, associate professor of nursing in the College of Professional Studies, has taught several courses through distance education (or “distributive learning,” as she prefers to call it). “Many students are hesitant to speak up in class, and the Internet makes it easier for them to reflect and write,” she said.

But Maria Roca, who teaches communications, thinks this approach “is good for highly motivated students but not for many others,” who require face-to-face contact with faculty members and other students.

“I’m very cautious about the uses of electronic communication,” Roca said. “We’re supposed to be advancing student learning, and I wonder sometimes if we are so enamored of all these toys that we forget what this is all about.”

Many faculty members are finding that teaching online takes far more time and effort than traditional instruction—time to develop and test courses (one Public Administration professor said he spent more than 600 hours developing a single Internet course), time to communicate with students through e-mail.

Some love it. Roy Boggs, an associate professor of computer information systems in the business school, spends three or four hours a day answering e-mail queries from students, in addition to teaching classes and serving on university committees.

“I couldn’t believe, at the end of my career, that I’d have this opportunity,” said the 60-year-old Boggs. “Right now, this is a way of life for me—seven days a week, day and night. The kids are gone, the dog is dead and this is what I do. It’s been a kick. Of course, sometimes my wife wonders if I still live there.”

But Boggs’ feelings of jubilation are not shared by all.

“I don’t have the sense of being a mentor or an expert that I used to have,” one professor said during a videotaped discussion of distance learning. “Now I’m a manager trying to figure out what ‘downlinks’ I need. Instead of reading scholarly journals, I read Microsoft documents. What good will that do me when it comes to promotion?”

“They’re burning people out here,” said Edwin J. George, a 32-year-old assistant professor of educational technology. “I can’t remember ever working as hard as I did last year. I stressed myself out three or four times. But I think that’s what happens at a new place. It’s been a little better this year.”

George left a tenure-track position at the Cortland campus of the State University of New York, because “they couldn’t support me and my technology needs,” but he did

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not anticipate the workload that awaited him in southwest Florida.

George has been developing and teaching both classroom and online courses, running a summer technology program for teachers, serving on university committees and trying to do some original work in his field.

“We’re not a research university but my supervisors have made it very clear to me that research is expected,” he said. “And I have to publish to be sure I can get a job elsewhere, if I have to.”

Many FGCU professors “are struggling with this issue in a very big way,” Maria Roca said. “To be credible, our people need to be engaged in scholarly activity but it’s hard to find the time for it.”

Suzanne L. Richter, vice president for academic affairs, agreed that “the first semester we were here, there was too much of everything for everybody to do.” But she said demands have lessened since then.

“Once faculty members get the (course) development work done, and learn to manage their time better, things improve,” Richter added. “You don’t have to answer every e-mail message the instant you get it.”

Richter said she was “insistent that we not abuse our junior faculty...I don’t want them penalized for teaching here.”

However, Chuck Lindsey, associate professor of mathematics and chair of the faculty senate, said, “everyone is pretty laden at this point.”



Demands on young faculty members at Florida Gulf Coast have been heavy, according to Ed George, an educational technology professor who said, “I stressed myself out three or four times last year.”

Lindsey said a faculty-administration taskforce is studying the possibility of offering higher pay or a reduced teaching schedule to professors who are developing new online courses.

Both Richter and Kathleen Davey, dean of instructional technology, have been somewhat taken aback by complaints about the demands of distance education. After all, they thought, faculty members knew about the technology plan when they were hired, and most expressed enthusiasm for the idea.

But last summer, more than half of the faculty surveyed said they did not think distance learning was an effective alternative to traditional instruction. “Where is this resistance coming from?” Davey wondered. “I thought I was back at Ohio State.” (Before coming to Florida, she was associate director of academic technology at Ohio State University, where faculty enthusiasm for distance learning was limited.)

But Davey has decided that “the resistance is healthy, the tension is good... We’re not having a revolution, but the future of distance learning here will depend somewhat on the new president.”

Community support for the new campus has been strong, although there has been some grumbling because FGCU does not plan to field a football team for at least a decade. President McTarnaghan and others have raised more than \$30 million in private gifts—a large sum for a new public campus.

McTarnaghan said one of his biggest problems has been trying to make rigid state funding formulas, as well as systemwide university rules, fit his experimental campus.

“We basically need less money for bricks and mortar and more for technology,” he said, “but our laws and rules so far do not permit that kind of flexibility.”

The president said he had to eliminate two buildings from the “first phase” of campus construction in order to

Florida Gulf Coast University by the Numbers

<i>Spring 1999 enrollment</i>	2,898
Freshmen	381
Sophomores	175
Juniors	586
Seniors	748
Graduate students	394
Non-degree students	614
<i>Racial/ethnic enrollment (fall 1998)</i>	
Hispanic	6.72 percent
African American	3.36 percent
White non-Hispanic	85.80 percent
Other	4.12 percent
Total faculty and staff	555
Full-time faculty	183
Part-time faculty	117
Value of campus facilities	\$51 million
(under construction)	\$15 million
Monthly payroll (approximate)	\$1.9 million

(Source: Florida Gulf Coast University)

have enough money to properly equip the rest.

McTarnaghan spends a lot of time in Tallahassee, the state capital, trying to persuade legislators to provide more flexibility for FGCU, but it has been a tough sell. “Most legislators graduated from the University of Florida or Florida State, where they do things the old way,” he said.

Confusion over Florida Gulf Coast’s accreditation has been a major headache in the first two years.

For many years the University of South Florida (whose main campus is in Tampa) maintained an upper-division branch in Fort Myers. That campus closed when FGCU opened, and many of its students transferred to the new campus, some thinking accreditation would be transferred automatically from one school to the other.

But the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the regional accrediting body, said the campus could only be a “candidate” for accreditation until its first cohort of students had graduated, an exhaustive self-study had been completed and there had been an evaluation by an SACS visiting committee.

Some transfer students told Florida newspaper reporters they had been assured by FGCU officials that the new campus already was accredited, a charge denied by Vice President Richter. Last spring, 237 of the 318 members of the first graduating class received University of South Florida degrees, while many others delayed their degrees until accreditation questions could be answered.

“This is one of the most frustrating experiences I’ve had here,” Richter said. “Neither the students nor the press seemed to understand the difference between ‘candidacy’ for accreditation and accreditation itself.”

Now the problem seems to have been solved. The self-study has been completed. The SACS team has made its visit, finding no major problems at Florida Gulf Coast University and issuing eight “commendations”—an unusually high number—in its report. Full accreditation is expected when the SACS “college commission” meets in June.

But the viability of multi-year faculty contracts remains in question.

Florida Gulf Coast is not alone in seeking alternatives to the tenure system. A few experimental campuses, like The Evergreen State College, in the state of Washington, and Hampshire College, a private liberal arts school in Massachusetts, have used contracts for years.



Kathleen Davey, dean of instructional technology, was surprised by faculty resistance to distance learning. “I thought I was back at Ohio State,” she said.

Post-tenure review has become almost routine on the nation’s campuses (although the number of faculty members eliminated by such a process remains small). Merit pay plans, rewarding professors who do not rest on their laurels after receiving tenure, have been adopted by the California State University system, among others.

A common tactic has been to stop hiring tenure-track faculty and to replace them with part-time professors who have no job security and few benefits. The proportion of tenured faculty at four-year institutions has changed only slightly over the last 20 years, from 52.3 percent in 1975 to 51.7 percent in 1995, the U.S. Department of Education has reported. But among new hires there is a strong movement away from tenure. The proportion of full-time faculty members working on contracts increased from 19 percent to 28 percent between 1975 and 1995, while the proportion of those with tenure-track jobs dropped from 29 percent to 20 percent.

College administrators and governing boards love no-tenure policies, which they believe enable them to eliminate faculty “deadwood” and to shift financial resources more easily from one academic area to another.

The Florida Board of Regents had hoped to impose multi-year contracts on all ten state universities, but the faculty union, the United Faculty of Florida (UFF), strenuously opposed the move. In a compromise, the union agreed to what UFF Executive Director Llona Geiger called “an experiment on one campus (Florida Gulf Coast), in which multi-year agreements would supplement, but not supplant, tenure appointments and promotions.”

Now, Geiger said, “it is clear that ‘supplement’ is not the right word—they are simply waiting for all the dinosaurs to die, and then they will be replaced by contract people.”

Twenty-eight professors gave up tenured or tenure-track positions at other institutions to teach at FGCU, according to an article in *Change Magazine* by Richard Chait, professor of higher education at the Harvard Graduate School of

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Education, and C. Ann Trower, a senior researcher there.

One of these professors was Peg Gray-Vickrey, who left a tenured job at Lycoming College in Pennsylvania. “I was kind of interested in trying a non-tenured system,” she said in an interview. “There are some good things about tenure, and I would never say it should be abolished, but there are some problems with it as well. Some professors, once they get tenure, just really aren’t active participants in the college anymore.”

The attempt to make multi-year contracts work at FGCU has been complicated by the fact that about 30 professors, with tenure or in tenure-track jobs, transferred from the local University of South Florida branch to the new campus, creating an awkward two-tier system.

“This seemed to be a place where everyone was starting on the same page,” said Gray-Vickrey, who was not told she would have tenured colleagues when she accepted the Florida Gulf Coast offer. “But then the South Florida people turned up and, incredibly, we had a kind of caste system.”

“We’ve tried very hard not to have two classes of faculty,”

said Chuck Lindsey, the faculty senate chair.

But Maria Roca called the mixed faculty—some who have a lifetime job guarantee, or the prospect of one, and some who face contract renewal every few years—“our biggest problem.”

“They have to look for some other way to hold the contract people—with more money or reduced teaching assignments or something else,” Roca said. “Otherwise, we’re going to lose a lot of our best people, and we’re not going to attract people who are as good.”

In their *Change Magazine* article, Chait and Trower reported that the overall quality of the initial faculty “as gauged by degrees, diversity and academic experience, compares quite favorably with similar regional universities in the state and beyond.”

Last summer, more than half of the faculty surveyed said they did not think distance learning was an effective alternative to traditional instruction.

UPDATE **“Rolling Contracts”** **Instead of Tenure** **March 2008**

ALLIGATORS STILL BASK occasionally on the sunny campus of Florida Gulf Coast University, just as they did when *National CrossTalk* first reported on the new school in its spring 1999 issue. But just about everything else has changed.

Enrollment has soared, from fewer than 3,000 students in spring 1999 to more than 9,300 in fall 2007. The faculty has grown from 161 to 370. Class size has increased, and the only two lecture halls on campus “are booked for every hour,” a dean said. Half a dozen new academic programs have been added each year, along with 20 new

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faculty positions, according to Interim Provost Peg Gray-Vickrey.

The original emphasis on interdisciplinary studies has given way to a traditional structure of separate departments, each offering its own major.

“We’re still creative, we still have many innovative faculty, but rapid growth tends to dull the edges” of non-traditional approaches, said Jack Crocker,

who was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences when the campus opened in 1997 and has since retired.

Growth slowed somewhat in 2007-08, when a state budget deficit forced legislators to trim higher education spending by four percent. Florida Gulf Coast lost \$1.8 million in state support. As a consequence, the campus was ordered to hold fall 2008 freshman enrollment at the same level as the year before.

In addition, the campus imposed a hiring freeze, restricted faculty and staff travel, and delayed the start of master’s degree programs in engineering, environmental studies and mathematics.

One innovation that has survived is a no-tenure policy for faculty. Instead of tenure, faculty members sign “rolling contracts” for three to six years. Each instructor is reviewed each year, and if he or she is judged to have performed satisfactorily, another year is added to the contract.

Florida Gulf Coast “has not faced any particular challenges in hiring, without a tenure system,” Gray-Vickrey said, although she acknowledged that occasionally a prospective faculty member turns down an offer in favor of a campus with a tenure system.

The rolling contracts approach “really does make us feel pretty secure, but it creates recruiting problems,” said Maria Roca, dean of the Department of Philosophy and Communications. “If a candidate has a choice between our policy and tenure, most often they’ll choose tenure.”

Although rolling contracts have been around for some years, Florida Gulf Coast is one of the few colleges or universities to adopt this approach. Others include Hampshire College, in Massachusetts, and Georgia Gwinnett College, the newest campus in the Georgia State University system. The Evergreen State College, in the state of Washington, began with fixed eight-year contracts but shifted to “continuing contracts for life,” which Provost Don Bantz called “pretty much the same as tenure.”

—William Trombley

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Said Chuck Lindsey, “We were able to hire very good people because we were new and different. Now the question is, can we keep them? Can that level of quality be sustained?”

So far, 20 professors, more than ten percent of the full-time faculty, have resigned, a far higher defection rate than other faculty contract schools, like Evergreen State or Hampshire College, have experienced.

Vice President Richter said many of the resignations have been in the business school, “where faculty are very mobile because of high demand” for their services.

But others suggested that the combination of a heavy workload, doubts about faculty evaluation procedures and the “two tier” mix of tenured and contract professors, among other reasons, have made FGCU a less attractive alternative than some expected.

Academic freedom, presumably a major advantage of the tenure system, seldom was mentioned during interviews with FGCU faculty members. However, several said they were reluctant to criticize campus administrators because they feared reprisals.

“Since I learned that our collective bargaining agreement does not guarantee the right to speak out on campus issues, I’ve found I had much less to say about things like university governance,” said historian Eric Strahorn, whose contract is up for renewal.

“There’s an orthodoxy here, and you have to repeat it even if it isn’t true and you don’t believe it,” said a professor who does not expect contract renewal but still was reluctant to be identified.

But others disagreed.

“Our faculty senate meetings are open, and I haven’t seen any reluctance to speak up,” said Chuck Lindsey, the senate chair. “I know some people feel that way, and the only way to deal with it is to establish a solid track record.”

President McTarnaghan brushed aside suggestions that complaining faculty members might not have their contracts renewed. He said these were the comments of those who “want to blow up bridges, not build them.”

“We have had very good luck in our staffing, and I expect most of the contracts will be renewed,” McTarnaghan said. “The union said we were going to hire a bunch of people on contracts and then fire most of them. Why would we do that, after spending hundreds of

thousands of dollars to hire and train them?

“If I had listened to the union, the world would have ended several times by now,” he continued. “In 1993, when we were planning this campus (McTarnaghan was then a



Roy E. McTarnaghan, founding president of Florida Gulf Coast University, will leave the job at the end of May.

systemwide university official), the union president said, “We will bury you! You will never open! No faculty will apply!”

But faculty members did apply, in large numbers, and the doors opened on time, despite environmental battles, construction delays, the accreditation furor, the inflexibility of state laws and university regulations and a host of other problems.

“I’d say 95 percent of what we planned to do has worked out,” said McTarnaghan, now nearing the end of his six years as the campus’ founding president. “I feel like I brought home a new child to a family that was waiting for one.”

A somewhat more measured estimate of campus prospects was offered by Jack Crocker, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences: “Much will depend on how we handle the research issue, how we treat faculty, how we handle academic freedom. And it’s going to be a few years before we will know any of that.” ♦

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