

***Florida State University:
Membership in the Association of
American Universities (AAU) as a
Target for Planning and Decision
Making****

by

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** My visit was conducted strictly on a personal basis, not as a representative of AAU. My comments are, thus, strictly my own.*

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Overall Impression of Florida State University

My overall impression of the university is that it is an institution of impressive breadth and quality.

For a university of this type – a major public research university – FSU has an unusual background, having developed from a college for women to its present role over little more than half a century. The fine programs in the arts and humanities, to be sure, seem to have been able to build on a solid tradition from earlier days but, for example, the College of Engineering was established only twenty-five years ago and the Medical School within the last five years. There is every reason for the university to continue to highlight its strengths in the arts and humanities and to exploit their special capacity for outreach to the public while aggressively pursuing the strengthening of science, engineering, and medicine. The university's tradition in the education of women might be attractive to women who are now being recruited into the whole spectrum of fields offered by the university and might be used as a recruitment tool.

In my view, the university is a highly dynamic institution with administrative and faculty leadership dedicated to continuous improvement of teaching and research. Throughout my visit, I sensed a commitment to what one of the persons with whom I spoke termed “a culture of achievement.” It is my impression that this “culture of achievement” characterizes both the university as a whole and its central leadership and its colleges, departments, and various interdisciplinary programs and their administrative and faculty leadership. I felt throughout my visit that FSU seemed to be a place where the members of the academic community were energized by raised expectations and the availability of opportunities and means for improvement.

The Appropriateness of AAU Membership as a Target for Planning and Decision Making

AAU is an association of public and private research universities that have achieved leadership positions in a broad spectrum of research and scholarship and graduate and professional education. AAU encourages and recognizes such achievements.

As stated in the association's “Membership Principles,” its purpose is “to provide a forum for the development and implementation of institutional and national policies promoting strong programs in academic research and scholarship and undergraduate, graduate, and professional education.”

One of the major responsibilities of AAU is to work with other associations and the entire higher education community to ensure a proper balance between, on the one hand, federal regulation of higher education and the research conducted by higher education institutions and, on the other hand, the traditional autonomy and self-regulation of colleges and universities. One of the important features of our higher education system is the ability of public and private colleges and universities to create their own profiles by setting, and implementing, programmatic

priorities and standards of quality. If the beneficial autonomy of our institutions is going to be maintained, it is, of course, extremely important that the institutions assume the responsibilities that flow from self-regulation and the freedom to create institutional profiles. FSU is to be congratulated on clearly having assumed those responsibilities. The university has established goals and mechanisms that will ensure effective fulfillment of the university's mission to the state and the nation and the maintenance of high standards of quality.

The "indicators" used by AAU's membership committee in considering universities for invitation to membership focus heavily on success in competing for federal grants awarded on the basis of competition and peer review, on membership in the three national academies (the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine) and in other elective learned societies, on the receipt of prestigious fellowships, on the rankings by the National Research Council, on citation data, on the breadth and productivity of doctoral degree programs, and on the number of post-doctoral fellows attracted by the institution. It is expected that an AAU university will have considerable breadth in its teaching and in its research and scholarship. Overall "volume" in regard to the "indicators" is considered as well as "volume" in relation to the size of the faculty. Both are viewed against the relative performance of the university in relation to other AAU members. A candidate institution should typically perform in the third quartile on most indicators.

AAU has specifically chosen the term "indicators" in formulating its membership policy. While high performance on the stated "indicators" is essential to eligibility for membership, it is in the end an overall assessment that an institution is of high quality, and that its current trajectory is towards even greater quality, that count.

In my view, FSU is an institution that can appropriately adopt the profile of an AAU university as a target. Its current trajectory seems to me to point clearly in the direction of quality improvement.

What Is Needed to Move towards Meeting the Expectations for AAU Membership?

In order to be competitive for membership, FSU will need to

- preserve, and as feasible further improve, the quality of programs that are already of very high quality,
- improve the quality of a number of programs that are currently not competitive with the corresponding programs in AAU institutions and
- add – selectively – new programs that can be of very high quality.

While the improvements cannot be limited to the sciences, there is a special need to continue to build strength in such fields. The two newer areas of engineering and medicine are among those that need strengthening, and that also seem to hold promise as means of improving performance vis-à-vis the AAU "indicators." Systematic plans must be developed to enhance the

contributions of engineering and medicine in the overall research and graduate education enterprise.

The College of Engineering has achieved a commendable record in the recruitment and graduation of African-American students and in the percentage of the student body that consists of female students. In the former regard, the administrative link with Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) seems to have been highly beneficial. However, the administrative set up seems to be quite cumbersome, involving, as it seems to do, the possibility of conflicting priorities. It could become an obstacle to achieving the goals set by FSU in its efforts to further strengthen research in the college. It would seem desirable to seek a form of collaboration that would recognize the possible differences in research goals between the two institutions while maintaining a mutually supportive relationship in regard to the enrollment and graduation of African-American students.

The Medical School is very new. This represents a very important opportunity to shape its programs in such a way that it becomes a major asset in achieving the overall target of moving FSU to the front ranks as a research university (and AAU membership). Its current heavy dependence on local and regional medical practitioners seems to recall “pre-Flexner” days. It seems to me that, given FSU’s aspirations, it is an urgent matter to recruit a strong research-oriented faculty to the Medical School, including research-oriented clinical faculty. The school seems to have begun to develop an innovative curriculum and innovative pedagogy. Such efforts should be possible to combine with the development of a strong research program.

I wish to make it clear that in my judgment a number of programs at FSU are already of very high quality. These programs span areas from the arts and humanities to the physical and biological sciences and include areas in professional schools.

One primary example is the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory, a most impressive facility that has placed FSU in a leading position in several important fields of science and engineering. It has spawned some important ancillary developments and there would seem to be excellent opportunities to continue such developments as a means of moving towards the overall institutional goals.

The Pathways of Excellence Initiative

I find the “Report of the AAU Task Group” a very impressive document. It addresses goals, investments, and accountability as the three undeniable key ingredients in moving towards positioning FSU as a major research university (and for AAU membership). Similarly, the “Pathways” program is, in my view, an excellent means for strengthening the university in terms of AAU’s “indicators” and thus implementing the aspirations of the report.

The program recognizes a number of essential factors:

- It is necessary to enlist faculty leadership in identifying frontiers of research and scholarship that are important and where FSU has the potential to be a national and international leader,
- It is necessary to identify areas where new graduate programs can, and should, be introduced (although all clusters may not lend themselves to such development),
- Given the current configuration of broader areas of research, scholarship, and teaching, it is very likely that the addition of new fields as well as quality improvements in existing fields – and potentially the elimination of fields – will involve specialties, subspecialties, and/or specific problems or problem clusters – somewhat narrowly defined – rather than broader areas as a whole,
- A significant number of additional faculty appointments will be necessary in order to meet the stated target and that such appointments must be placed in a strategic way,
- Fostering interdisciplinarity is very important, even essential, in addressing many of the questions at the frontiers of science and scholarship. I should note that FSU already has a number of excellent interdisciplinary programs, both at the institutional level and within colleges and schools and that it is important that such existing programs be supported as part of the “Pathways” effort. To promote such developments, FSU should review management, accountability, and credit allocation policies related to interdisciplinary programs and consider whether all current interdisciplinary programs, at least at the graduate level, and the many more to come, should be housed in Graduate Studies. In recognition of the importance of graduate education to the AAU effort, FSU should consider creating a true Graduate School with budget authority and autonomy.
- The work of existing faculty can be positively influenced by collaboration with new colleagues as well as with colleagues already at the university but not yet engaged in collaborative research and teaching.

I sensed very strongly that the “Pathways” project is a very important factor in the energy, engagement, and “happiness” that I found among administrators and faculty. It is a useful internal “poster child” for the bootstrapping effort being undertaken by FSU. I believe that it can also – as part of the university’s “branding effort” – serve in that capacity in communication with important external constituencies, including not least the leadership of the state.

The faculty development that is necessary to meet the target of AAU membership involves not only the addition of new faculty who are heavily engaged in research and scholarship but also the engagement, or re-engagement, of existing faculty in active research and scholarship. Realizing this change will be difficult. However, there are examples of how it might be done. For example, the provost in concert with a committee of the faculty might distribute national grant and publication benchmarks developed using comparative information on AAU and similar institutions. They might encourage the development of faculty seminars by explicitly setting aside some time slots across campus for such activities and by publicizing them on a

common activity calendar. Through such seminars, and in other ways, the provost might initiate a discussion on the creation of strong teaching and research faculties as a means of emphasizing the need for scholarly productivity.

Measuring Progress

It is essential that effective metrics be developed, and maintained, to assess progress. The “accountability contracts” that have been developed for the half dozen “cluster hiring initiatives” that have been authorized so far are exemplary. They identify – with consideration being given to the specific circumstances and opportunities of each initiative – the key parties who have to sign off on the contracts, precise annual schedules for reviews and for meeting stated expectations, specific goals in terms of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary research and teaching, targets for external research funding, the rate of recruitment of faculty, graduate students, and post-doctoral fellows, targets for publication and citation etc.

Some concern was expressed in the conversations I had about ensuring that the metrics used for STEM disciplines would not be inappropriately applied in areas where they are not suitable. The contracts that have been developed, and that I have seen, do not support any such worries in my view. Nevertheless, it will, of course, be important to continue to inform the faculty in general about the care with which the contracts are developed, and the extent to which the specifics are shaped to fit the cluster.

Since AAU membership is a stated target, it will, of course, be important to assess progress also in terms of the AAU “indicators.” The contracts developed so far seem to me to meet the highest expectations in that regard.

Continuity of Effort

FSU has formulated some excellent goals and established some excellent mechanisms for moving forward, including not least the accountability contracts. The effort seems already to have gathered considerable momentum. I believe that continuity of effort has been ensured by processes and procedures, including continuous measurement that will survive the inevitable turn over of key administrative and faculty leaders.

Some Potential Pitfalls and Problems in Moving towards the Target

The pitfalls and problems that I identify are, I think, mostly generic to situations of change rather than specific to FSU and its planning and action agenda. They are, nevertheless, important.

The necessary changes could affect the status of faculty members by introducing, or sharpening,

- the potential division of the faculty into a “research faculty” and a “teaching faculty,” with lower status for the latter (including the possibility of increased use of non-tenure track status),
- great differences in teaching loads for the different categories of faculty, and
- assignment of the “teaching faculty” to the exclusion of the “research faculty” to undergraduate teaching.

The elimination of entire programs may become necessary in order to secure sufficient resources for (re)investment. How can such action be taken in such a way that the negative effects on those affected will be minimized?

The current practice whereby most of the state funding is allocated to the university on the basis of enrollment poses the problem for the university of, so to speak, “producing” funding by enrollment but allocating the funds according to programmatic priorities that are not necessarily, or very likely, related to enrollment. This allocation principle works against quality and, in the long run, can actually diminish the education for those given access. How can the university avoid, or at least minimize, the potential negative effects of this situation?

Given the fact that enrollments are apparently currently not funded at the full rate of the formula, further enrollment increases would seem to threaten further over extension, which would then in turn undermine the ability to make necessary programmatic investments. Can the state be persuaded to allocate funds for programmatic initiatives such as those represented by the “clusters” (perhaps presented in the form of “decision packages” to achieve stated educational or other objectives, including economic development)? This is the approach taken for some of the best public universities by their state legislatures. In the long run, such initiatives both strengthen the education offered by universities and enhance the research they conduct. They are key to improving the comparative competitive advantage of a state and its regions.

I wish to conclude by expressing my admiration for the fine efforts at improvement that are being undertaken by FSU and wish the FSU academic community all the best!

Notes

* Report based on a visit to the university November 6-9, 2006

I spent two and a half days at the university. Before the visit, I reviewed materials, including data about the university, provided to me by my host, Provost Lawrence Abele. During the visit, I was provided with additional materials by a number of the administrators and deans with whom I met, which I have also reviewed.

I had an opportunity to meet and interview a number of administrators (including the president, the provost, and several vice presidents and deans), a number of faculty leaders (including the steering committee of the university senate and representatives of several of the hiring clusters established under the Pathways program), and some graduate students (recipients of university fellowships). I had an opportunity to visit many parts of the campus.

At the end of my visit I made a presentation to the Council of Deans. This written report is a summary of my impressions from the visit, prepared for my host, Provost Lawrence Abele.

Biography

Nils Hasselmo

Nils Hasselmo, former president of the University of Minnesota, became president of the Association of American Universities on July 1, 1998 and served in that capacity until his retirement in 2006. Founded in 1900, the AAU comprises sixty U.S. and two Canadian public and private universities with strong programs of research and graduate and professional education.

A native of Sweden, Hasselmo completed undergraduate and graduate degrees in Scandinavian languages and literature at Uppsala University. He received a B.A. at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois and a Ph.D. in linguistics from Harvard University. After teaching at Augustana College and the University of Wisconsin, Hasselmo joined the faculty of the University of Minnesota in 1965. During the next 18 years at Minnesota, he served as chair of the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature and director of the Center for Northwest European Language and Area Studies, associate dean and executive officer of the College of Liberal Arts, and vice president for administration and planning. In 1983, he left Minnesota to serve for five and a half years as senior vice president and provost at the University of Arizona. He returned to the University of Minnesota as its 13th president in December 1988.

Hasselmo's scholarly work has focused on the study of bilingualism and language contact, including books and articles on the Swedish language in America.

Hasselmo has served as chair of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, the Big Ten Council of Presidents, and the Minnesota Higher Education Advisory Council. He has served, or serves, on the board of the National Merit Scholarship Corporation, the Universities' Research Association, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the Council on Library and Information Resources, the American Scandinavian Foundation, and a number of other scholarly, educational, civic, and cultural organizations.

Hasselmo has been the recipient of honors such as the Royal Order of the North Star by the King of Sweden, 1973; King Carl XVI Gustaf's Bicentennial Medal in Gold, 1976; and the Sandburg Medal, 1989; he was selected as Swedish-American of the Year by the Swedish government and the Vasa Order in 1991. He has been elected to membership in several Swedish scholarly societies, and holds honorary doctorates from Uppsala University, Augustana College, and North Park University.