

Dr. T. Dwayne McCay guides Florida Tech; surge in on-campus enrollment

By Ken Datzman

In 2020, with the coronavirus pandemic roaring across the nation, college presidents scrambled to try to adapt their business models to the unpredictable financial environment they faced.

By one estimate, the pandemic has cost colleges at least \$120 billion. And it's not over yet, though the climate has improved from the dark months in early 2020, a time of great uncertainty.

"Any college president in the nation who has been in his or her position for more than handful of years will tell you the last 18 months have no resemblance to what they had been doing as president of their institution before the pandemic," said T. Dwayne McCay, president and CEO of Florida Institute of Technology, a private, not-for-profit research university.

"Providing leadership in this kind of environment is a little more difficult than it might have been if things were all rosy," he added.

The pandemic has tested leaders like never before, be it college presidents or CEOs in business and industry.

A former rocket-propulsion scientist who worked at NASA and has held top positions at other universities, Dr. McCay closed out his fifth year as president of Florida Tech in 2020 making some tough, unpopular financial decisions in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

His decisions were based on an all-out effort to preserve the 63-year-old institution that he has been a part of for nearly two decades, as provost and now as CEO. Behind the scenes, Florida Tech was making plans to expand with new programs, and even grow enrollment.

Nationwide, the small-college business model has worked for more than a century, but the pandemic created financial strain that forced some schools to close permanently. A string of private colleges has shut down in the last 12 months, many of them with long histories in their communities.

MacMurray College, a liberal-arts school with more than 500 students in central Illinois, survived the Civil War, the Great Depression and two world wars. But it could not survive the pandemic.

The latest casualty is Becker College, a private school in Worcester, Mass. After 237 years of operation, Becker announced in March 2021 it would close permanently before the fall semester because of enrollment declines and the unforgiving pandemic.

"We made some tough decisions early and then stuck with them," said Dr. McCay, who is starting his sixth year as the school's top executive.

"We sold the Foosaner Art Museum — very unpopular. We closed the Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts — fairly unpopular. And we eliminated the football program — quite unpopular. That made it somewhat easier because we had capital that we could deploy, invest in one thing or another."

Plans are underway by Northboro Builders and others to redevelop the Foosaner property and bring a new hotel and additional business opportunities to the Eau Gallie area, which will benefit the entire community.

The decisions that Dr. McCay and the Florida Tech Board of Trustees made during this unprecedented time



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Florida Tech in Melbourne has seen a surge in its freshman enrollment for the new school year. Last year, it experienced a 5 percent uptick in first-year enrollment and was one of only two schools that posted enrollment growth among any of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. Dr. T. Dwayne McCay is president and CEO of the private institution. He made some tough financial decisions early in the pandemic that have helped the school thrive in a challenging environment.

have helped ensure the school's future and fuel its growth plans.

In fact, Florida Tech has gone on to thrive and is now seeing record enrollment.

"Last year a lot of experts in higher education predicted

that it was going to be a disaster for private schools, so we prepared for that," he said. "And as it turned out, we probably did the best of any school in the National

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Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. We had a 5 percent growth in our freshman enrollment. There were only two schools that showed growth.”

And this school year, Florida Tech is projecting 7 percent enrollment growth. “You never know until they sit in the classroom. But right now, it appears we are going to bring in 980 new students on campus this school year. That’s 40 to 50 more students than we have ever had before in our freshman class. So we are on track to have the best semester in school history,” said Dr. McCay. The official enrollment tally has not yet been released.

He said there was a report by Harvard University that listed a group of colleges that could potentially close because of lost revenue caused by the pandemic.

“We were included on that list. It was quite an insult. But we proved them wrong,” he said in an interview conducted at his office.

With its enrollment up impressively, Florida Tech is bucking a national trend. College enrollment fell 3.5 percent in the spring term compared to the prior year, representing about 603,000 fewer students and marking the steepest annual drop in a decade, according to the final figures from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

A 4.9 percent drop in undergraduates, or roughly 727,000 students, fueled the decline.

Eighty-percent of Florida Tech’s revenue comes from student tuition and fees, so enrollment is the lifeblood of the institution.

“We do not have a large endowment. Our endowment is now \$110 million. So we have to depend on student recruitment.”

He added, “We were spending tuition money on some things that students really didn’t support. To me, it is not appropriate to spend tuition dollars on something unless students support it.”

This fall, Florida Tech will debut Esports (electronic sports in the form of competitive video gaming), he said. “We are currently preparing the arena for our varsity Esports team. That is tuition money and the students support it. They love the idea. They are behind it. Esports has become super-popular on campuses.”

The former Ruth Funk Center is being converted to accommodate the new Esports program.

According to the National Association of Collegiate Esports, more than 170 U.S. colleges have varsity Esports programs and are offering roughly \$16 million per year in scholarships and aid.

Private colleges like Florida Tech have advantages in their markets. For example, smaller classrooms and smaller professor-to-student ratios mean much more opportunity for engaged student participation.

Dr. McCay said Florida Tech’s job is to build “such a good reputation for high-quality education that families will want to pay for their sons and daughters to come here. And we have been able to do that.”

“The people in Florida know we are a good academic school. When students graduate from Florida Tech, they can get a good job and have a career that they can enjoy for a lifetime,” Dr. McCay added.

For years, Florida Tech has spent a lot of time recruiting students overseas and in the northeastern United States, especially New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

“Two years ago, we refocused on the state of Florida for student recruitment. We are now recruiting much more aggressively in Brevard and in the surrounding counties. And we are doing very well. Our Florida population of new students went from perhaps 20 percent a handful of years ago to 35 percent today. That’s a big boost.”

Dr. McCay emphasized that Florida Tech students can qualify for the Florida Bright Futures scholarship program and the Florida Effective Access to Student Education grant, or EASE.

“There are a variety of state funds that students can obtain to study at a private university like Florida Tech. We continue to work to get this message out to high school counselors in the region.”

Bright Futures, funded by the state, provides scholarships based on high school academic achievement. The program has different levels, each with its own eligibility criteria and award amounts. EASE is a “no-need grant” for Florida residents attending a private college or university full time in the Sunshine State.

Fall classes are underway at Florida Tech. The school is requiring everybody indoors on campus to wear facemasks. “But we know we have to be flexible,” he said.

Florida Tech was put on an upward trajectory a few years ago when the school broke from tradition and began an academic tenure system for faculty. Tenure is an indefinite appointment that can be eliminated only for “cause or under extraordinary circumstances,” such as financial woes or program discontinuation.

“The key to our success is the quality of our faculty,” said Dr. McCay. “And we have been intent on improving it even more. We introduced tenure four years ago at Florida Tech. Now, the faculty applications we receive for any particular job posting are incredible. We’ve always had one or two really good applicants, but now we are getting eight or nine really good ones for each opening. So there is a big difference in the quality of faculty applicants we’re seeing. Quality faculty produce quality graduates.”

College tenure promotes stability. Faculty members who are committed to the institution can develop ties with the local community, pursue ongoing research projects, and mentor students and beginning scholars over the long term.

With enrollment up, Florida Tech is positioning itself for the future with investments in new buildings. An example is the \$18 million Health Sciences Research Center, a structure to be filled with cutting-edge equipment, laboratories, and learning spaces centered on biomedical engineering and sciences that will help Florida Tech meet the expected surge in those fields in the coming years.

The three-story building, under construction on the university’s south campus Olin Quad, will contain more than 61,000 square feet of space, with more than one-third of that — 22,300 square feet — dedicated to laboratories, classrooms, and training areas.

The Health Sciences Research Center investment sets Florida Tech up, through a partnership, to potentially bring a medical school to the Melbourne campus.

In 2020, Florida Tech partnered with Steward Health Care and Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine as that school expanded its clinical education reach to this market. Burrell College is a private, investor-owned medical school affiliated with New Mexico State University. Burrell College grants the doctor of osteopathic medicine degree. A doctor of osteopathic medicine is a physician who emphasizes a whole-person approach to treatment.

“The agreements have been signed, but I can’t say much about it because they are going through the accreditation process right now,” said Dr. McCay. “But if things go ‘according to Hoyle’ (an old saying meaning according to the prescribed rules and regulations), it would open in July 2024. So we have big plans for a medical school. Like Daniel Burnham once said, ‘Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir man’s blood.’ That was one of Dr. (Anthony) Catanese’s favorite quotations.”

Burnham (1846–1912) was a successful architect and urban planner in Chicago. He designed several famous buildings, including a number of notable skyscrapers. Dr. Catanese was once an urban planner himself before becoming a college president.

Dr. McCay succeeded Dr. Catanese as Florida Tech’s president. Dr. McCay was the school’s provost for 13 years. “I realize now how much he knew about being a college president. He made some decisions and did some things I didn’t agree with at the time. I now understand much better why he made those decisions, and experience does that.”

As the provost, Dr. McCay saw himself as the “enforcer.” He oversaw the school’s academic programs, athletics, and just about everything else, except fundraising and the finance office.

“So it seemed it would be a small step to be president of Florida Tech. I felt like how much more difficult could it be? I usually provided them with all the input they used to make key decisions. Well, it was a big step up to president. And I have enjoyed it.”

In addition to the Health Sciences Research Center, Dr. McCay said one of his “pipe dreams is to build a new academic center that will house both classrooms and facilities for programs like music. We have a good music program. We offer a minor in music.”

He would also like to see a conference center built. “We could host probably 30 to 40 national and international conferences a year, but we do not have the facilities in the county. I’ve been preaching about this for years, but no progress has been made.”

Private, nonprofit colleges and universities play significant roles in the everyday lives of those living and working in college communities, and are important contributors to the nation as a whole.

In fact, they are a vital economic engine, generating an impact of \$591.5 billion in 2018–19, according to the findings of a new report released by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

The report, “Private, Nonprofit Higher Education: Shaping Lives and Anchoring Communities” tells the story of the economic, social and cultural vitality that private, nonprofit colleges and universities add to communities, regions, and the nation.

The study found that private, nonprofit colleges and universities:

- Directly employ more than 11 million people as part of day-to-day operations.
- Generate a total of \$77.6 billion in local, state, and federal tax revenue annually as a result of operations, student spending, and visitor spending.
- Account for \$2.8 billion in combined charitable giving and volunteerism. It is estimated that staff, faculty, and students of private, nonprofit colleges and universities give more than \$747.5 million annually in charitable donations and volunteer 86.8 million hours, valued at another \$2 billion.

Dr. McCay said he is planning for and is excited about the future of Florida Tech. “Crystal balls are foggy most of the time. But you have to be able to access the market. We talk about how we are small and can move quickly. I wouldn’t call us a PT boat (short for patrol torpedo boat). We’re more of a frigate (a small, fast-sailing ship).”

He said Florida Tech is “not like the battleships and aircraft carriers that the big universities are. We can add a program quickly. To add a program at the University of Tennessee, where I worked before coming to Florida Tech, it would take two years. Having this speed of response and adaptability is something we’re proud of in a changing world of higher education.”