

From the *Tallahassee Democrat*

Editorial: Neglect for higher ed defies good sense

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And so it begins.

The State University System of Florida, long accustomed to doing more with less, is now faced with doing less with less. A lot less.

Monday, just three days after the 2008 Legislature went home, University of Florida President Bernie Machen outlined what a \$47 million budget cut, on top of the \$22 million cut to UF last October, will look like on his campus. It isn't pretty.

Besides 138 layoffs of faculty and staff members and 4,000 fewer undergraduates, the effect on UF's standing in academia may be even longer lasting. Though every single university is a take-it-to-the-bank economic engine in its region and for the entire state, adverse economic implications are virtually certain as a result of these cuts. In a state facing the prolonged effects of a steep downturn in the housing industry, that's very bad news.

Florida State University hasn't yet detailed how it will deal with projected cuts totaling \$17.5 million. But FSU President T.K. Wetherell, just a day before lawmakers passed a disinvestment budget of \$66.2 billion, admitted he was deeply demoralized.

"I'm just trying to keep my finger in the dike," he said. In these times, he said, FSU officials will be thinking less about doing new things and more about just getting by.

The really unfortunate aspect of this marked decline in funding for public higher education is that it is neither sudden nor inevitable. Regardless of what some lawmakers might say, neglect of Florida universities by the Legislature has been a trend.

Yes, state universities will continue to hold classes, pay faculty and staff members still on the payroll, and, in more than a handful of instances, produce high-quality research and teaching. But the reality is that years of neglect are now coming home to roost in this current financial disaster, as a recent report by the LeRoy Collins Institute noted.

"To characterize Florida's recent treatment of its higher education system, we borrow from the harsh old grading scale at Princeton. Six was a garden-variety F, but there was an even worse mark: a 7, for 'flagrant neglect,'" said the report.

"Florida universities are in their current fix of turning away students, losing professors and facing more rounds of cuts because, even during the boom times early in the decade, the state neglected to increase funding by much or allow meaningful tuition increases."

The report is a 2008 update of the Collins Institute's prescient 2005 examination of Florida's tax and revenue system titled "Tough Choices: Shaping Florida's Future," which policymakers largely ignored. It now appears they've stayed that shortsighted course, leaving the quality of higher education and regional and state economies even more vulnerable as a result.

The irony is that a Legislature dominated by representatives and senators who claim to be conservative have pursued a strategy that isn't.

High-profile business groups in the state have argued, rightfully, that our universities are key players in the game of economic growth. Hobble them and it's as if you inflict an intentional injury on one of your stars. Imagine a coach telling a lineman to take out his own running back with a cheap shot. Preposterous. Yet that's essentially what Florida is doing to its universities.

"For now," the Collins Institute update says, "Florida's higher education policy amounts to wing it and wither."

That's a very dark cloud hovering over the Sunshine State.