In with the new

With president Lars Hafner at the helm, State College of Florida is phasing out its former name and expanding its mission.

Page 6
Starting on July 1, the first day of the new budget year, the name on signs, letterheads, applications and degrees from Manatee Community College will change to State College of Florida. Meanwhile, the first group of student nurses who provided the rationale for the name change will not be able to call themselves juniors until January 2010. But now, long before those nursing school juniors are backpacking their way between the campus buildings with their brightly colored metal roofs, college president Lars Hafner already is considering more ways to expand the school’s mission.

Hafner, who came on board last summer, talks about other four-year degrees that are likely to be offered by the state’s newest four-year college. He also tipped his hand about the possibility of a fourth campus, or at least a branch with classes — in downtown Sarasota.

Besides operating campuses in Bradenton, Venice and Lakewood Ranch, the college leases space in the Hollywood 20 Office building on Sarasota’s Main Street. That space is now used only for traffic safety classes, the kind you have to take after you get a speeding ticket.

But Hafner sees the lease as an opportunity for expansion. “I know we are looking at potential early-bird type courses, where somebody could come in at 6:30 in the morning and from 6:30 to 7:30 take their class and then go to work,” he said.

He sees the possible downtown Sarasota branch as another opportunity to serve the community, and not incidentally as “an opportunity for our businesses to rally around those points of education.”

That is important because the school relies on grants to fund its foundation from major employers such as the area hospitals to augment its state budget.

Within two weeks of coming into office last summer, Hafner faced a budget that had been trimmed by 6 percent, or $2.4 million. At the same time, demand for the school’s courses, many of which deal in practical job skills, has been growing at double-digit annual rates.

The current student population at all three campuses — Bradenton, Lakewood Ranch and Venice — is 11,000.

“In the next three to five years, we will be at 15,000,” Hafner said. “In seven to 10 years we could be at 20,000 to 22,000 students.”

Those estimates do not take into account the baccalaureate programs, just the school’s largely practical curriculum.

For Sarasota, with an academic presence that includes the Ringling College of Art and Design and the University of South Florida, State College of Florida is a force to be reckoned with. Its 11,000 students compared with USF’s 4,200 locally.

Understanding budgets
Hafner had exactly the right stuff to land his $210,000 job as president of a community college with a state-mandated budget that was making a transition to a four-year school.

The 48-year-old came to MCC from St. Petersburg College. Formerly known as St. Petersburg Junior College, the school started adding four-year degrees in 2000, with Hafner as part of the leadership team.

Before that he was a Florida state legislator. As a freshman lawmaker, he was lucky enough to get involved and stay involved in the appropriations process for his entire legislative career.

Hafner is brisk and businesslike, and already has gotten a reputation for popping up all over campus.

“President Hafner is at the events, he talks with everyone like they are normal people, and he explains things,” said Yolanda Basulto, who graduates from the school with her two-year degree in business this month.

Hafner will not know what budget the Legislature is handing him until the session breaks up, and that does not give him and his staff very long to implement it before the beginning of the new monetary year in July.

He is a frequent visitor to Tallahassee, where community college presidents hold their meetings, and where he and his colleagues from around the state can interact with legislators.

The school’s operating budget from the state during the current year is $39.1 million, down from $41.5 million in the prior fiscal year.

“We are taking increased enrollment with less money and still producing quality,” Hafner said. “So our job when we are in Tallahassee is to continue to remind the legislators that this is who we are, this is what we do, and this is why we need their support in keeping us, as a system, moving forward instead of taking a step back.”

Four-year plan
Sarasota Memorial Hospital played a major role in pushing the four-year nursing program into fruition.

The hospital is one of only 11 hospitals in Florida designated as a “magnet facility” in a prestigious list published each year by the American Nurses Association.

To keep that status, Sarasota Memorial must adhere to changing guidelines set by the association. By 2011, 75 percent of the nurses must have a bachelor’s degree in their field. By 2013, 100 percent must have the designation.

That became a powerful lever for Hafner and his board of directors last fall, when they made their pitch to the state board of education. A 134-page “needs assessment report” showed there was a need for 500 to 600 registered nurses in the area, and that most of the 140 nursing students already enrolled at MCC would stick around for a bachelor’s, were it available.

Hafner says he has several letters from fire chiefs in the region on his desk right now, pushing him in the direction of a four-year degree in public safety as a high second priority.

The legislation that allows the school to offer a four-year nursing degree leaves the door open for additional four-year degrees in applied sciences like public safety, health care administration, early childhood education and even energy technology. Those are all strong contenders for future baccalaureates, Hafner said.

He has taken some heat about the name change, which came up rather suddenly during the current legislative session.

“The community college that was here for 51 years will continue to be the same community college that is here for the next 51 years,” Hafner said. “Nothing changes in terms of the two-year degrees.”

Nevertheless, the name change was important to make in order for the school to move forward.

“You couldn’t keep the name and say, ‘OK, here are my new nurses,’ ” Hafner said. “You’ve got a lot of explaining to do to your employer, how you got a bachelor’s degree from a community college. So the name had to evolve both to recruit in new
students at the junior-senior level, and also to graduate them at that level."

But even as State College of Florida layers on the four-year degrees, there is no sign that it will end its highly successful two-plus-two program with the University of South Florida, something that has thousands of students move seamlessly from the two-year school to the four-year school.

Until now, MCC and the USF Sarasota campus have complemented each other extremely well.

USF Sarasota Manatee classes are not aimed at freshmen and sophomores, but at juniors, seniors and graduate-level students.

Like many of the school’s students, Ibasailean will move straight to her junior and senior years at the USF Sarasota Manatee campus, with plans to graduate in 2011 with a bachelor’s in accounting or finance.

Using the two-plus-two plan, she was counseled to get exactly the right prerequisite courses at MCC.

A third-generation resident of Cortez whose father and grandfather have made their livings as commercial fishermen, she has no plans to leave the area, so the two-plus-two program was perfect for her.

“Over 70 percent of our students transfer from MCC,” said Toni Ripo, career coordinator at USF Sarasota Manatee.

Productivity

To keep a cap on class sizes while coping with a $2.4 million budget cut, Hafner made “productivity” the new buzzword at MCC.

“What we did was apply the concept of productivity to the classroom,” he said.

“If we are going to be true to these caps, that is all well and good, but how do we get more bodies into the seats, underneath those caps? So I challenged my deans and provosts to be sure that we are putting a 95 percent productivity level on all our classes.”

It is the same principle that an airline uses when it keeps its flight schedule tight enough that all the planes are leaving nearly full, Hafner said.

If a 100-seat aircraft takes off from Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport to Los Angeles and only 50 seats are occupied, the airline loses money on the flight. If 90 of the seats are filled, the airline makes money on the flight.

Using his classroom productivity standard, he says, has already saved the college $200,000.

He sees potential for productivity games in online learning, too, where he is pushing the technology along to enable students to “attend” and even interact with teachers using cell phones equipped with screens.

This is called “M-learning,” with the “M” standing for mobile.

To make it possible, the school has become only the fifth community college in the state to obtain access to a high-speed Internet network intended primarily for the state’s research universities, Hafner said.

“Now we can do video streaming. We can do the things we are talking about, because we now have the speed.”