Miami 2011?
Geography Is Destiny!

by Mark B. Rosenberg

In Miami, there are constant reminders that our geography is our destiny. One of the major challenges we confront in South Florida involves turning the region's particularities into strategic advantages in educating our students and engaging our community.

There is little original about the notion that geography is destiny. The often-told joke about Miami being the Latin American city closest to the United States resonates. In the early 1990s, when I was director of the Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, I wrote about a promising future for Florida and Miami, if we dared to seize the opportunities that our location and demographics were presenting. Then, as now, it was necessary to embrace our identity — who we are, and our location — where we are.

In a world in which rapid change is a constant and economic well-being is up for grabs, there is even greater importance in understanding how geography as destiny can work for the university. FIU is in a strong position to help shape the destiny of its broader community.

No doubt we must find a way to wrap our research, creative talents and engagement initiatives around our identity and our location. The blessings of our geography give us an opportunity to distinguish ourselves, not just to do well, but to do good for our diverse and rapidly changing community. As a public institution with a community trust, dependent on taxpayer support, there is no greater urgency than to demonstrate our value in helping our community work through its uncertainty and challenges.

Who We Are
With a student body of nearly 44,000, FIU is one of the largest Hispanic-serving universities, with more than 24,000 undergraduate and close to 4,000 graduate Hispanic students. Our student body reflects the vibrant diversity of South Florida: more than 60 percent of FIU students are Hispanic; 14 percent are White Non-Hispanic; 13 percent are Black; 4 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander; 9 percent are members of other minority groups.

FIU draws strength from the diversity and global connections of the local population. We welcome the anchor role that our location and our identity have thrust upon us. To paraphrase New York Times columnist David Brooks, we understand that our institution gives meaning, identity and identification to tens of thousands of students, many of whom are the first in their families to receive a university degree.

Our students' desire to attend college, their efforts to attain their degrees despite difficulties and their drive to succeed in becoming professionals, creating businesses and contributing to our community intensify our resolve to provide access to a high-quality education. Nearly 50 percent of all undergraduate students at FIU receive financial aid, and nearly 60 percent of those recipients come from families with annual household incomes under $30,000. Still they persevere, and FIU has the distinction of having awarded more bachelor's degrees (27,336) and master's degrees (7,251) to Hispanic students over the last 10 years in critically needed areas of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) than any other U.S. university.

Like most institutions in the U.S., FIU is working to increase its graduation rate and to reduce the time to degree for all students. Faculty and staff are developing new ways to teach in the STEM areas in particular. FIU has been blessed with external funding to underwrite many of these pedagogical initiatives. While there is much to do and improve, FIU is pleased to have the highest six-year Hispanic graduation rate in the nation among large Hispanic-Serving Institutions. As the top U.S. grantor of degrees to Hispanic undergraduates in engineering, physical sciences, health professions, and similar high rankings in other fields, FIU embraces its leadership role among minority-serving institutions, proud to demonstrate the high return on investment in higher education and research funds at our university, seen in no small part by the more than 140,000 FIU alumni who live and work in South Florida.

Where We Are
Our location gives us distinct challenges. While Miami is one of the world's most dynamic and creative cities, poverty continues in neighborhoods throughout the Greater Miami Metropolitan area. If FIU is to exceed its own expectations, it must recognize the urgency and challenge of contrasts in its community.

To address challenges relating to health disparities, inadequate transportation and diminishing potable water in a context of globalization, we have developed curricula and programs that provide a high-quality practical education for the 21st century — what we have branded “Worlds Ahead.” As Miami's first and only four-year public research university, FIU positions itself for a globally oriented, purposeful education that offers practical experience through engagement in win-win initiatives with the community.

Our new College of Medicine pairs each medical student with a low-income family, from the first semester in medical school until graduation. This innovative approach to medical education places future doctors within a team of health and human services professionals with an emphasis on social determinants of health, on a household-by-household basis. The focus is on preventive care for individuals and families, to improve the health of the community, reduce health disparities and reduce the mount-
ing health care costs of the existing system.

Our decade-old College of Law explicitly takes a comparative and international approach to legal education, with a first-year curriculum that fosters understanding of legal issues locally and globally. Our College of Law capitalizes on its location by training lawyers in the fields of immigration and international law. Like our medical students, FIU law students engage in a curriculum that provides community service and hands-on experience addressing complex issues pertaining to immigration. After the catastrophic January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, when the U.S. announced that it would provide Temporary Protective Status (TPS) to Haitians living in the U.S., FIU College of Law faculty and students mobilized to provide Haitian residents in South Florida with legal services to complete documents and comply with immigration requirements. Training was also offered to law students and individuals from around the country to provide this service for Haitians living in their respective communities.

A newly designed set of courses that emphasize global perspectives, for both lower- and upper-division undergraduates, reinforces the “international” in FIU and its crossroads location. Our liberal arts and sciences have a nationally recognized Latin American and Caribbean studies center, international business is a core competency of the business school, and a new School of International and Public Affairs is now fostering a robust cross-disciplinary teaching and research agenda that spans continents and subject areas. Our new Master of Arts in Global Governance (magg@fiu.edu) will welcome its first cohort of students in fall 2011 (http://international.fiu.edu/). FIU has a tradition of welcoming presidents and world leaders to campus and provides students, faculty and the South Florida community an open environment for the exchange of ideas and divergent views in and outside the classroom.

Building Alliances and Partnerships

We have chosen to engage in the development of partnerships to provide solutions to continuing issues in our community. We recognize the Biblical precept: “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

Key partnerships have been built with the Miami Dade County Public Schools, Metropolitan Miami Dade County, Public Health Trust, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and the city of Sweetwater, where our Honors College students work in city hall and in community centers. We have also initiated a unique new partnership with Florida Power and Light (FPL), establishing a student-run call/care center on campus that provides FIU interns with fast-track management experience right into FPL. We are blessed to partner with numerous private-sector companies, such as U.S. Century Bank and JP Morgan. Both institutions see the value in a strategic alliance with our university, and we could not engage the community as deeply without their support.

Throughout my career, I have spoken frequently about the life of the mind and how fortunate we are at FIU to have the privilege of cultivating this gift. By designing innovative programs that embrace our location—the resources and the challenges that South Florida presents, embracing our identity and building alliances and partnerships, we are providing education for personal and social responsibility: applying the life of the mind to the work of the world.

Miami? Our geography is our destiny, and we eagerly embrace not just who we are but where we are.

About the Author

Dr. Mark B. Rosenberg is the fifth president of Florida International University. He brings 30 years of experience in higher education leadership to this position. The author of seven books and numerous scholarly articles on Latin America, Rosenberg was one of the principal architects of FIU's growth and expansion during the past decade and played a lead role in development of FIU’s new Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine. Most recently, he served as chancellor of the State University System of Florida and was instrumental in developing a new financial strategy to support the continuing development and expansion of the State University System. Rosenberg holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh and a B.A. from Miami University of Ohio, where he was Phi Beta Kappa. He is a Fullbright Research Scholar and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.