Florida universities and college systems have grown many times in the last 60 years along with the state’s booming population. Individual institutions, atypically large 20 years ago, continue to expand, often with branch or joint use campuses. But this growth has been frequently ad hoc and buffeted by politics. Major decisions are often made in-the-moment, without benefit of careful, comprehensive, forward-thinking strategic plans.

In this report, we outline the history of Florida higher education planning and make the case for strengthening it. In doing so, we describe in some detail one exemplary planning effort that existed in the state for 21 years and an outside review of the state of the state’s higher education operation, governance and vision that was intended as a blueprint for long-term planning.
Florida currently has four separate strategic plans for education – developed by the State Board of Education, State University System (SUS), Florida College System (FCS), and Higher Education Coordinating Council (HECC). The plans are roughly aligned around related goals and many very specific performance measures. They vary in when they were approved – the HECC’s latest was published in December 2015.

Definitions of a good higher education strategic plan may vary. Efficiency and meeting workforce needs are part of the mix. One might expect a strategic plan to be forward thinking and comprehensive. Using these guidelines, what is in place in Florida may not be strategic at all.

None sets out an audacious goal or offers a vision for a bigger, more robust higher education enterprise. The role of independent colleges and universities is lightly considered. Ways in which the for-profit sector meets certain job training and mid-career certification needs are not mentioned at all. Ongoing changes in the ages at which Floridians (along with residents of other states) seek higher education and the trend to certifications for competency get some consideration but are secondary. The four plans define systems of performance objectives with monetary rewards and punishments for individual institutions—focusing more on the present than the future. And the plans are generally limited to certain components of higher education rather than the broader enterprise.

This siloing is understandable, given that authority is split by institutional groups. The HECC is tasked to bring these groups to the table and has the most potential for developing a comprehensive plan. However, its annual work plan is constrained by parameters set by the Legislature and Governor.

An independent higher education planning enterprise – with its own staff and board – existed in Florida from 1980 to 2001. The Postsecondary Education Planning Commission (PEPC) issued regular reports on a variety of issues. Some of their findings were implemented, but many were ignored by the Legislature or watered down by institutional opposition. PEPC was abolished in 2001 when a new Board of Education with a “K-20” scope of authority was established. A successor organization – the Council for Educational Policy Research and Improvement (CEPRI) – lasted only three years before losing its funding.

Florida has had no independent higher education planning agency since 2005.

One could characterize the last 35 years in Florida as producing lots of plans but only erratic implementation. It is also characterized by many abrupt changes in directions not included in these plans. For example, the launch of additional medical and law schools and the new Polytechnic University was initiated by schools, communities and legislative champions, not planning groups. Capacity is added, but often not in a systematic way.

The most recent HECC report (December 2015) summarizes the state’s ill-coordinated record of adding capacity as follows:

“As Florida’s population rapidly grew during past decades, Florida has tried many different on campus and on-site bachelor’s degree capacity creation strategies, including branch campuses, collaborative on-site partnerships, University Centers, on-site educational locations and state college bachelor’s degrees with various levels of success.

Unfortunately, some of these strategies have not increased total degree production. Some have simply shifted degree-seeking students from one supplier to another. Other strategies have produced duplicate degree programs in a region that splits the potential pool of students.”

Can Florida do better? Like the HECC, we think so. And as Florida resumes population and economic growth at pre-recession, pre-housing collapse levels, the need for forward-looking higher education planning becomes more urgent than ever.
» EARLY HISTORY

Starting in 1905 and continuing for 60 years, Florida’s three public colleges and universities (UF, FSU and FAMU) were governed by a Board of Control, housed within the Department of Education.

By the late 1950s, during the two terms of Governor LeRoy Collins, Florida began to address the need for adding universities closer to the state’s metropolitan centers – and building a system of community colleges. Forty years of rapid growth followed.

The Board of Regents at its creation in 1965 was charged with adopting system wide rules and policies; planning for the future needs of the State University System; planning the programmatic, financial and physical development of the system; reviewing and evaluating development among the universities; and monitoring the fiscal performance of the universities.

A 1969 Comprehensive Development plan addressed the potential for unnecessary duplication, especially of costly graduate degree programs. Individual universities developed distinctive mission statements. So-called “separately designated responsibilities” were later designated “centers of excellence” – so, for instance, not every school was striving to build a top-notch music or marine science program.

In 1965, accredited private colleges formed their own association – Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF). In 1979, the schools persuaded the Legislature to establish a tuition voucher known as the Florida Resident Access Grant. The subsidy in effect encourages part of the in-state degree-seeking population to be served by ICUF’s 30 schools, relieving capacity demands on the state systems.

In 1984, Florida’s 28 Community Colleges (now the Florida College System) set up their own governing board. Over time, most added four-year degrees, expanding on their original role of granting two-year degrees and feeding graduates, who wished to continue, into the State University System.

» QUALITY, ACCESS, AND SUS STRATEGIC PLANS

The State University System has issued strategic plans and their updates at roughly five-year intervals since 1978. A persistent theme has been improving access while also maintaining and enhancing quality.

When state funding plateaued after the recession of the early 1990s, it appeared that expansion of capacity might slow even as population growth continued. Chancellor Charles B. Reed noted that Florida was near the bottom among the states both in per capita state funding and tuition – and ranked 48th among the states in bachelor degrees per 100,000 population.¹

Growth in the state’s universities’ enrollment exceeded even the increase in population. Between 1992 and 2002, population grew by 24 percent but enrollment in state universities grew by a whopping 40 percent. The following decade showed some slowdown but the same trends. Population increased by 15.7 percent in the 2002-2012 period while university enrollment increased by 28 percent.²

While higher education opportunity always has a degree of political support, Florida has expanded with a piecemeal approach characterized by two programs that advantaged the state’s middle-class voters: the Prepaid Tuition Plan and Bright Futures.

The state devised the nation’s first Prepaid Tuition Plan. Launched in 1979, it has sold 1.6 million contracts. The plan encourages saving for college, which families might otherwise neglect, and lets grandparents with disposable income pay in advance for their grandchildren’s higher education. (Students who eventually enroll out of state or do not continue on to college get back money paid in, but without interest.)

The plan unquestionably has proven a device to stoke enrollment. But especially in its early years, when actuarial soundness was not yet assured, it acted as a powerful brake on raising tuition and fees.
Florida also established a lottery-funded Bright Futures Scholarship program in 1997 – with generous tuition grants to high-achieving high school graduates as measured by grades and test scores. Through 2014-15, 727,000 initial grants have been awarded and another 1,585,000 counting renewals.

Framed as an initiative to keep talented graduates in-state and give high school students an incentive to stay in school and work hard, the program quickly proved popular with recipients and their families.

Though the qualifying scores initially were fairly low, a tactic to make sure low-testing minority students were represented, the great majority of the aid went to upper middle-class families. Need-based aid, always comparatively weak in the state, took a back seat. Later changes to the program set higher qualifying scores—largely to save state revenues.

Prepaid and Bright Futures shaped the course of growth – though neither had strategic planning elements. The SUS’s own strategic plans, besides getting a mixed reception from the Legislature, were necessarily focused on the short-term issues and needs. So the planning did not necessarily address the broader picture of education resources in the state and how best to allocate them. In recent years, as the universities invested in professional schools and graduate research programs to boost their national recognition as research institutions, many business and political leaders favored workforce preparation programs to foster economic development and job creation.

Another group was to take on the more comprehensive task of higher education planning for the state, but with mixed results.

» PEPC AND 25 YEARS OF PLANNING

The Postsecondary Education Planning Commission (PEPC) was created by executive order in 1980 and later given statutory authority. The commission had its own citizens’ board and a small staff, directed through most of its two decade lifespan by Dr. William B. Proctor and his deputy, Dr. Pat Dallet.

PEPC and its short-lived successor, the Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement (CEPRI), were tasked to look broadly across universities and community colleges to make recommendations to the Department of Education and the Legislature. In 1991, PEPC recommended adoption of what are now called state attainment goals concerning the percentage of the population who receive baccalaureate degrees and of criteria for new universities and community colleges. Nearly a quarter of a century later, these issues are again on the agenda of some higher education activists.

PEPC’s charge included preparing, and updating every five years, a master plan reflecting the public and independent institutions’ abilities to fulfill all state needs. The plan covered issues including state contracts with private institutions, the need for new degree programs at universities and community colleges, and proposals for branch campuses and centers.

The first Master Plan for Postsecondary Education in Florida prepared by PEPC was submitted in 1982 and updated in 1988. In addition, PEPC produced other reports on higher education concerns.

Sometimes the process worked smoothly. For instance, Florida Gulf Coast University, the system’s twelfth, was launched with careful demographic and market research and given ample lead time of several years for a smooth opening.

But often as not, even modest proposals met opposition from established schools – such as an alternative teacher certification program to train adults changing careers or SUS contracts with private institutions to educate social workers or nurses.

From 1982 until 2001 when PEPC was abolished, more than 70 reports were completed by its staff. Here is a sample of six such reports:
Structure of Public Postsecondary Education in Florida – 1990

At the Legislature’s request, PEPC examined “… the overall structure for the delivery of public postsecondary education in Florida.” The review included changes to current institutions, new campuses, and consolidations. After extensive study, external consultant reports and public testimony, the Commission did not recommend major restructuring to postsecondary education. However, it recommended priority goals for the 1990s designed to improve long range statewide planning, undergraduate education, enrollment, and retention and graduation of minority students.

Criteria for the Establishment of New Public Postsecondary Education Institutions – 1991

“Logical and thoughtful planning for additional educational opportunity,” PEPC reported, should include 1) phasing in goals for the percentage of the population who should receive university degrees, 2) creating new institutions to achieve those goals, 3) establishing criteria for new universities or community colleges, and 4) a study and approval process. The report asserted that these steps would provide “… a sound and systematic basis for making decisions regarding expansion of public higher education opportunity.”

Challenges, Realities, Strategies: Master Plan – 1993

Demand for access to higher education continued, and PEPC recommended new strategies: improve retention while maintaining standards, explore new approaches to baccalaureate education, increase the role of independent institutions, and ensure adequate state and internal funding for increased upper division enrollment in the SUS. Meanwhile, in the SUS Master Plan for 1993-1998, the Board of Regents sought to meet the access challenge by allowing up to 20 percent of Florida high school graduates – rather than 15 percent – to enroll as first-time-in-college students. After extensive public debate, PEPC and an advisory council endorsed the plan to increase its admission of public high school graduates but also recommended limiting the increase to one percent for 1994 (16 not 20 percent as BOR proposed).

Access to Baccalaureate Degrees in Florida – 1995

PEPC broke with the Board of Regents’ expansion goals, concluding that, “the wisdom of a policy of a percentage of high school grads to each sector, that is to the SUS, the community colleges and the independent colleges, has not been substantiated.” Admission standards needed to be upheld and the community colleges should remain the primary entry point for postsecondary education in Florida. This report also focused on constraints and inefficiencies that limit the productivity of the postsecondary system, including articulation and transfer problems, and limited access degree programs. It also noted that too many students were taking more credit hours than required and spending more than four years to graduate. Finally, PEPC observed that our independent colleges and universities can play an important role with stable state financial support.

Challenges and Choices: Master Plan – 1998

Five years later the same challenges seemed even bigger. PEPC noted the startling number of a 400,000 statewide headcount enrollment increase from 1970 to 1995 in all colleges and universities, public and private. And the commission projected a headcount increase of 41 percent over 1995 levels by 2010. PEPC noted that one result of this rapid enrollment growth was that our public universities had grown much larger than the national average and that some studies suggested this might have negative consequences for student attainment.

The commission recommended increasing enrollment at each university and raising the state subsidy to in-state students enrolled at independent colleges and universities. It also concluded that the time had come to allow selected community colleges to offer certain four-year degrees. A state college system might be desirable – but did not appear practical in the near term.


The Legislature asked for development of a plan for “a middle tier” of colleges. With consultants, PEPC developed a plan and envisioned a role for itself in governance, program review and new program approval as a check on “mission creep.” An alternative, PEPC noted, would be for the State University System to follow
through on limiting the missions of some of the schools.

In short, PEPC was an active voice for comprehensive higher education planning and was not shy about putting forward bold recommendations—most of which were not accepted.

» GOVERNOR BUSH MAKES A SHARP TURN TO PRE-K-20 GOVERNANCE

Jeb Bush was elected governor in 1998 with education reform his signature issue. Unlike PEPC, the governor was quickly very successful in implementing his reforms. Implementation included the creation of a seven-member appointed Board of Education with responsibility for pre-kindergarten through graduate school and abolishing the Board of Regents in favor of boards for the individual universities.

As PEPC’s responsibilities wound down in 2001, its successor organization, CEPRI, was charged to produce a K-20 plan for the system. Due to early demands on CEPRI to focus first on teaching as a profession and early childhood education, very little of its plan dealt with higher education. CEPRI lost its funding in 2005.

In a 2002 constitutional referendum, backed by former Governor Bob Graham, a Board of Governors for SUS was re-established. But the individual university boards remain, so the Board’s authority and legislative influence are less than before. The Board has continued the previous practice of five-year strategic plans.

Given the scope of its responsibilities and perennial controversy about K-12 school grades, test scores, and charter schools, the Board of Education has had comparatively little time for comprehensive higher education planning.

» THE PAPPAS REPORT – A BOLD CRITIQUE IS BADLY RECEIVED

The Pappas Consulting Group was hired in 2007 to look out as far as 2030 and provide the Board of Governors a blueprint for long-term planning.

The group’s conclusion was stark: “the conditions for success do not yet exist for the implementation of a long-term master plan for higher education in Florida.” It found “A Very Unclean Slate” with too few universities for the state’s population compared to North Carolina, Georgia and California, for example. Also noted was “Mission Leap, not Creep” referring to three new medical schools since 2001 and the fast rise of baccalaureate programs at the community colleges that risked diluting the traditional community college mission of meeting the needs of the state’s undereducated adult population.

Resources for growth were lacking too. The Pappas Group anticipated a convergence of low tuition, enrollment-based funding, Bright Futures, and the Florida Prepaid Plan as eventually bankrupting our higher education system. And they viewed the Florida system as “Seamless in Name Only” because of unresolved governance issues and inattention to preparedness and performance problems across levels.

They also pointed to a history of planning without implementation when proposals from PEPC were ignored; and implementation without planning when the state has opportunistically recruited high cost research operations such as Scripps, Torrey Pines and SRI without a previous development plan, thereby pressuring the universities to develop new programs and faculty to support the initiatives. They argued for a development strategy building on existing research strengths as a better tack practiced in several other states.

The group recommended a total overhaul of the SUS. They proposed: an inventory of all existing sites/campuses; a mission review for each university and the BOG itself using an external, independent agency; resolution of
funding constraints, including tuition and financial aid issues; a Governor’s higher education summit to expand collaboration and eliminate turf battles; and a board review of its own effectiveness, governance role and relations with Boards of Trustees over the long term of a master plan for higher education.

There was more. The group wrote that a long-term vision for the future of higher education needed to involve all its sectors, with the pipeline from K-12 critically important as well. Recommendations included:

» Establish a new system within the SUS with the sole focus on bachelor degrees and with its own governance within the Board of Governors. Existing SUS campuses may opt to be in; financial incentives would be available; under certain conditions SUS branch campuses, community colleges and independent colleges could be included. All would be called state colleges; all would have local advisory boards. The new system would be overseen by the Board of Governors.

» Revise the funding approach for the SUS to encourage attention to state needs; include consideration of retention and graduation; invest in research and graduate programs tied to economic development plans.

» Expand distance education degrees through a Board of Governors Consortium, institutional collaboration, legislatively funded; promote faculty development in online teaching; establish an e-tuition rate.

» Include independent colleges/universities in initiatives to expand access through forgivable loan programs; participation in the distance education consortium; and addressing capital needs that would increase access for Florida residents.

The Pappas Group introduced the report by noting that they were instructed to be bold and candid in their work, and that it should not be shaped by political pressures or influential stakeholders. Thus readers might have been prepared for the absence of positives in their report, for it seems they found little to praise from their four months’ work. Although reading the Pappas report now suggests much of their analysis was right on target, their prescription for a new undergraduate system within the SUS received little serious attention.

» A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING COUNCIL IS FORMED WITH A LIMITED ROLE

While the Pappas recommendations came and went, Florida attempted to address some of its issues with formation by statute in 2010 of a Higher Education Coordinating Council (HECC). The name did not include planning nor did its charter. Its purpose was identifying unmet needs and facilitating solutions to disputes regarding the creation of new degree programs and the establishment of new institutes, campuses, or centers.

Members of the Council include the Commissioner of Education, the Chancellors of the SUS and the College System, the Executive Director of the Commission for Independent Colleges and Universities, and two representatives from the business community, one appointed by the Senate President and one by the Speaker of the House, “…who are committed to developing and enhancing world class infrastructure necessary for Florida’s citizens to compete and prosper in the ever-changing economy of the 21st century.” (2010 Florida Statutes)

The Council serves in an advisory role to the Legislature, the Board of Education and the BOG. The Council’s purview is specified in guiding principles summarized here:

» A seamless educational system kindergarten through graduate school within existing resources.

» Consistent, student-centered policies across all educational delivery systems.

» Improved articulation across all delivery systems.

» Maximize both access and high quality programs for all Floridians.

» Promote consistent data systems across all delivery systems for improved accountability.
The membership assures representation of key entities and the council now develops an annual work plan studying four or five topics for potential legislative action. The 2014 report, for example, included performance metrics to align policy and fiscal goals; incentivizing seamless articulation to ease student transfers; expanding incentives for collaboration between the business community and Florida’s higher education assets; and aligning, prioritizing and incentivizing education funding “to better meet Florida’s industry talent needs....” The 2015 report had some new recommendations but the same scope and goals.

The council has followed the lead of the Legislature and Governor Rick Scott in focusing on efficiency and meeting specific workforce needs and providing funding incentives and penalties tied to performance goals.

» THE FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM’S STRATEGIC PLAN

The 28 former community colleges that now comprise the Florida College System (FCS) produced a strategic plan of its own for 2012-2018. With the title “Stepping Up,” it describes the system as “the primary access point to undergraduate education for Floridians, including recent high school graduates and returning adult students.”

Four goals were specified. These were to expand and maintain access; to enhance learning; to increase college readiness and success; and to prepare for careers. The primary mission of the College System as established in Florida Statutes is to respond to community needs for postsecondary academic education and career degree education. In summary, this includes lower level undergraduate courses and awarding associate degrees; preparation for careers requiring less than baccalaureate degrees; providing a range of student development services to ensure success; promoting economic development; offering dual enrollment courses; and providing upper level instruction and baccalaureate degrees as specifically authorized by law.

Historically, as community colleges, they were also authorized to offer a variety of community services. Florida Statutes still require that any College System institution offering baccalaureate degrees must maintain as its primary mission the responsibility for the original community mission, its provision of associate degrees that transfer to a university, and maintain open door admissions policies for associate degree and workforce education programs. Finally, the FCS strategic plan proposed a list of projected outcomes or performance measures for 2018, the final year of the plan.

» CONCLUSION

In sum, this informal history of higher education strategic planning in Florida suggests that:

» Florida has a long history of higher education planning, but policymakers have frequently ignored the recommendations. Higher education boards are typically reacting to, rather than initiating, major policies and initiatives.

» Increasing the percentage of state residents with at least a bachelor’s degree was a frequent goal in early plans but not in recent ones which focus more on detailed performance measures.

» Performance measures are not the same as strategic plans and their primacy is potentially misleading and damaging to broader, long-term higher education goals.

» Current higher education planning efforts are piecemeal, limited to higher education sectors. The one board that would be comprehensive (HECC) does not have planning included in its charge.

» Bold and candid recommendations to achieve higher education excellence have not been well-received.

Clearly Florida enrollments, degree production and higher education institutions have grown. But coordination, ambitious multi-year goals and consistent strategy have proven elusive.
Something is missing and getting to better, more forward-looking, more independent higher education planning demands first steps – sooner rather than later.

While education plans can be over-stuffed with platitudinous generalities, they need not be. And while quantified goals and consequences have a place in such plans, Florida’s current generation are lopsided exercises in performance management.

Even a brief sampling of strategic plans in other states shows a different and better way for guiding growth and outcomes. Recent examples include plans from Pennsylvania, Virginia and Texas. The Lumina Foundation’s 10-year horizon on aiming for higher attainment also provides a model.

Texas provides an especially resonant comparison. Like Florida, the state’s governorship and legislature are firmly under Republican control, and a liberal agenda does not hold sway. Unlike Florida, Texas has had a stable, wide-ranging Higher Education Coordinating Board in place since the 1960s. Its members (appointed by the governor) include business people, educators and a student – not legislators or institutional representatives.

Its latest strategic plan spans the next 15 years. Titled “60 X 30” it defines a goal of at least 60 percent of young adults having a post-secondary degree (or appropriate certificates) by 2030. Texas is slightly less far down the path to this ambitious attainment goal than is Florida, but it has a plan to move forward to meet a specific goal.

It is time to lay the groundwork for considering consolidation and reorganization of higher education planning efforts in Florida. That becomes especially timely as explosive population growth in Florida resumes and higher education needs to adjust to disruptive digital technology and new educational demands from young adults.

Florida could benefit from comprehensive, nonpartisan and bold strategic planning that links to goals of attainment, academic excellence, differing missions of various educational entities, and future funding needs. The state recognized the importance of strategic planning early and has attempted it often. Now perhaps it needs strategic planning that is realistic and aimed at long-term economic issues of today and especially tomorrow.

Endnotes

1. Today, Florida continues near the bottom among states in funding but is ranked 34th in percentage of adults 25-64 with a bachelor’s degree or higher (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems). In part, this is actually due to the in-migration of highly educated retirees. Florida natives are much less likely to have some college education or higher than non-natives (Florida College Access Network).

2. SREB 2013 Fact Book and Florida Board of Education SUS data.
Beginning in 2005, the LeRoy Collins Institute has published a number of reports in a series called *Tough Choices: Shaping Florida’s Future*. Many of these publications provide an in-depth analysis of Florida tax and spending and local governments’ pension and other retirement benefits. With this report, we launch our first publication in another pivotal area—higher education. This report provides a highly informative analysis of the state’s efforts in higher education planning and sets the stage for future work to come.

The report was written by Rick Edmonds and James Mau. Edmonds is a faculty member and the media business analyst at The Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg. He is a member of the Collins Institute board and previously wrote a summary version of the original Tough Choices report and a commemorative piece on Governor Collins for the Institute’s 25th anniversary. In the mid-1990s, he was executive director of the Business-Higher Education Partnership, a research and advocacy group. Dr. Mau is a former Professor of Sociology, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Florida International University. He also served as Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs for the State University System of Florida. Prior to coming to FIU in 1978, he served in faculty and administrative positions for 14 years at Yale University. The authors were assisted by Dr. Carol Weissert, Collins Institute Director and Professor of Political Science at Florida State University. Stacie Linley, Cory Tilley and Jennifer Fennell contributed to the editing, proofing, and production of the report.

**About the LeRoy Collins Institute:** Established in 1988, the LeRoy Collins Institute is a nonpartisan, statewide policy organization which studies and promotes creative solutions to key private and public issues facing the people of Florida and the nation. The Institute, located in Tallahassee at Florida State University, is affiliated and works in collaboration with the State University System of Florida. Named in honor of former Florida Governor LeRoy Collins, the Institute is governed by a distinguished board of directors, chaired by Lester Abberger. Other board members include executives, local elected officials, and other professionals from throughout the state.

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