

Q&A with Mangum: A legacy disrupted at FAMU

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(Photo: D.A. Robin/Democrat)

It has been more than a year and a half since Elmira Mangum took the helm of Florida A&M University – ample time to discover the school's unique strengths, identify areas for improvement and take ownership of the challenges that remain. Along the way, she has taken some heat over miscommunications and management differences with her bosses on the Board of Trustees and Board of Governors.

In the hour she spent with the Tallahassee Democrat editorial board, Mangum shared why – and how – she wants to be a change agent while maintaining a mission she says has been successful for the past 128 years.

In her own words, here's what Mangum had to say.

One of the compelling reasons for my joining Florida A&M University is because I believe that it is a treasure. It has come through some difficult times, and I believe that my particular focus and set of experiences is what FAMU needs at this particular point in time.



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[Q&A with FAMU President Elmira Mangum](#)

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Planning, institutional administrative streamlining, budgetary and resource management are some of the skills that I bring. And the experiences I have had over a number of years. In particular, some of the changes in higher education as it relates to performance, accountability and all the types of metrics that we use to measure success and how we organize or renew ourselves and strategize to meet those metrics and also provide a quality education for our students, at the same time as respecting our legacy...

I think it is essential that we maintain our focus on why we exist because that is the reason why we are so treasured as a university around the country, because we provided those opportunities for especially low-wealth students and African-American students over the years.

We have some very successful graduates. We are noted for our ability to move students from one income level to another. In fact, we're No. 3 in the Social Mobility Index of all institutions of higher education in the country. That is significant because that speaks to our brand. It speaks to the reason why we exist. That speaks to what we have done well for 128 years. We are a game changer for many people, for many students.

It's proven over and over again with the contributions that we have made and that we continue to make. We want to continue to provide that quality of education, being the No. 1 producer of pharmacists in the country, but also quality programs in the allied health areas, in the law school, in journalism, in music.



FAMU President Elmira Mangum Discusses Admitting Students Who Are Unprepared

FAMU cuts across all general education, science technology education, and engineering education as far as African-American students and low-wealth students are concerned. We produced two Ph.D.s in physics last year. I dare say I don't think anybody has done that in recent memory. Two African-American females in physics is an extremely important accomplishment in the world of science, technology, engineering and math.

We also continue to provide opportunities for students who are not quite ready for college through our remediation programs. We call it our Student Success Initiatives. We are providing opportunities for students who come from environments where their K-12 education didn't quite prepare them for college readiness.

We have closer relationships with our faculty. Our students are instructed by faculty more so than teaching assistants and other types of people who come in and provide instructional support. We have the opportunity to open doors in the community. To have them do the community service work that's important for their understanding their roles in society; the need to introduce them to professions and areas that they might not have thought about before coming to college because of the environment they grow up in.

They might not know physicians. Many of our students may have never touched a physicist before or known a Ph.D. person directly. We can introduce them to these environments. Many of them, even in the community, might not know or ever touched a politician or a governor or a legislator before.

These opportunities that we provide for them to take our students to places like Carnegie Hall, a place where a serious musician will spend a lifetime trying to get on that stage.

We attract students to our institution by giving them exposure. At the New York event, we had high-school students who are interested in music come to the concert for the express purpose of saying, "We want to come to FAMU," because if you can get your students on stage at Carnegie Hall ...

Even our baseball team going to play at Fenway Park — a first for historically black colleges — and it happened to be against my alma mater. Families traveled from Florida to Fenway Park to see their kids play in that game. The owner of the Red Sox and their foundation boards, and all those people, came out to meet our students.

More importantly, they had a recruitment fair before the game and we had students from all over Massachusetts and in that area coming to talk to our recruiters about opportunities that their students could have to come to an HBCU to study — many of them not even knowing what an HBCU was until we came there that day. Our reach through our programs is extremely important to our students.

Our students going to Washington, D.C. — many of them had not been to Washington, D.C., before. Many of them, when we went to Boston, had never been on a plane before. It's about the exposure. It's about living and learning and meeting other people. That's important and it's part of our educational process.

My study abroad initiative, or having an international presence, is something that Florida A&M has always had. Renewing that is important to me because I believe it's important to the world economy. The global presence of our students and the fact that business people all over the world want to interact with students of color, with low-wealth students, in order to provide the diversity of the education and interaction and commerce, in fact, for the people around the world. Opening up new markets; they need to know the people that they are trying to sell their products to and we need our students to know the people that they can also reach and have an impact on with their education.

That goes beyond the state of Florida. It's national and it's international. That's part of the Passport Program that we have. We just had an open call for students that were interested in passports that we sponsored. It was overwhelming. We had 400 people show up in three days to get passports, which was very, very encouraging for us. With these students we will seek and they will seek international opportunities to study when they might not have thought about it before.

The School of Business and Industry students typically travel because of commerce and they get that type of exposure, but many of the other students hadn't thought about it. Now they think about it and they're looking for study abroad opportunities. Our International Office is developing opportunities for them to go and engage people across the world. We're also inviting people across the world to come study with us at Florida A&M University.

When I walked around campus on the first day, for breakfast, in fact, I went into the dining hall and I met four students from Brazil who came to study at Florida A&M, which was exciting for me. They were looking for Brazilian restaurants and things like that in Tallahassee's community and places to go. I think it's exciting that they have that opportunity and our students also have the opportunity.

We are looking at every opportunity that we can to provide as many options for our students to be able to study and to grow in their educational experiences. That's what we're doing. We're focusing on the exposure, the experiences.



FAMU President Elmira Mangum Promises Better Communication With BOT

What we're doing also is looking at the campus. Seeing what the experiences are that the students have in terms of how the campus is laid out. We're trying to renew our facilities, update them, provide them with state-of-the-art classrooms. That means we are having to do a lot of rehabilitation. We had several of our facilities programmed to close and be boarded up. We decided — at least I kind of decided with the help of a few other people — that's not what we want. We want to maintain the historic look of our campus because it is a beautiful campus by any standard.

We want to make sure that we renew those facilities and that we can maintain the historical character and provide the modern-ness inside the facility that the students need to grow and to study. We have people knocking down doors, so they tell me now, trying to do partnerships with us to renew our facilities and give our students the opportunity to live on campus. We know that students that live on campus persist at higher rates than students who live off campus as well. What we're doing is looking under every rock and turning over every rock and also looking at every opportunity to make sure that we give our students every opportunity to get the competitive experience on our campus and pursue their dreams.

School of Engineering

Democrat: How's the Engineering School partnership going? Are you satisfied with where that is?

Mangum: I think it's going well. We meet with the joint council. We have a great relationship. (FSU President) John (Thrasher) and I talk, we do breakfast occasionally. Our teams meet – the provosts – meet probably more regularly than John and I. As well as the people researching finance. I think we're OK in those areas.

It has been a little bit disconcerting for some of the people who have been part of this process in the past just because they weren't in on the details of what we're doing as a joint management council. I think that's important that we keep them informed, now that we know they want to be informed. We'll keep them informed about our conversations and what's happening at our council meetings and in between.

Democrat: Where is FAMU as far as the search for the new Dean?

Mangum: Oh, it started in earnest. We're at a point of using an external search firm. We've got the RFP out. We're about ready to kick that off. If we were lucky, we'd get a Dean in January...

Democrat: What other partnerships are out there between Florida A&M, FSU or TCC?

Mangum: TCC to FAMU is an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) that we have. We've got an innovation show in December where all of our patents and the innovations that we share will be on display in the Turnbull Center come December so we can share with people the opportunities and some of the research that we have.

Our faculty have always been in joint research projects. I think the relationship with our faculties find students in Engineering and half the students that take classes don't know one faculty from another. They socialize all the time.

Strategy and vision

Democrat: If you're a change agent and you've got all these areas that have to be addressed, you've got culture, you've got finance, and these things are linked together so you can't expand the programs you want without money and you can't get the money you want without increasing admissions and fundraising. Where do you start?

Mangum: That's beautiful. Everything has to rise. We start with building a team that's committed to the vision. I've spent the last year building a team of people who are capable – more than capable – qualified, and experienced at changing and being in transformative types of roles and understand what the industry of higher education is. That have exposure and understanding about our students and how we need to reach them.

You will probably talk to many of the team members who came because of the vision. They understand what it is I'm trying to achieve and they understand the challenges associated with the culture of change and the culture of transformation.

In fact, we have books now that we read in senior leadership. Getting everybody ready saying "Look, this is what you can expect as a team," and we talk about it. We talk about what our approach is going to be so they understand some of the complexities associated with what I call disruptive change. We have a lot of it and in order for all of my vice presidents and all of our teams to rise, we have to rise together. They have to understand the challenges and how they intersect with each other in making the changes across the institution.

Once we get the team in place, then we start with our strategic planning. That's the reason for the strategic planning task force. It's to get the information about who we are, what our numbers look like across a variety of the metrics and the accountability measures, so we can get our administrative systems in place, become more efficient, and maximize the use of the resources that we have.

One of my first actions was to create a focus on efficiency and effectiveness so we could do that assessment. Each one of the vice presidents is looking across their organization to see what it is they're doing and how they can be more effective at what they're doing. How they can tease out the resources from within the resource base that they have and put them towards the institutional priorities. While they're doing that, we're talking about the academic side. What is attracting students? What does the market say? What are the students interested in and are we able to deliver that educational quality that we want to deliver? That's what the provost, in six months, has taken on – to talk with the deans about what they're providing.

We evaluate our programs. We reorganize our structure to be able to effectively deliver on the mission and on our goals. Part of getting the team in place is understanding the skills that they have, evaluating our staff and where their contributions can be most effectively used throughout the organization. We came up with another organizational structure. We moved things around to become more efficient and also give us a much better chance of being able to implement our strategic plans.

The existing strategic plan, which I believe overall globally, from a large view, is the right plan: Creating a 21st century living-learning community, having an international presence, and providing degrees that are marketable and getting our students to a place where they are successful in the classroom and also can transition into work.

That's what we're doing now. We're moving into the strategic planning process where we can inform with information and with data, and we can plan our strategies for implementation across the institution. The strategic plans task force brings in the faculty. It brings in the administrative deans as well as our stakeholders, the alumni, and other supports of the institution to be able to come together in focus groups and have a shared vision for implementation so we can achieve the objectives we want to achieve for our students and include our students in those conversations as well, as part of that planning process.

A culture of change

Democrat: If disruptive change were put on a scale, are we at low level disruption and the real disruption is still to come?

Mangum: We're probably at step two.

Democrat: Out of?

Mangum: Ten. First what we do is introduce the idea. We talk about it and then we start the planning of the idea. But the implementation of the changes that we need to make will occur over time. We are higher education, our cycle – first of all – business cycle, is annual. Our missions are annual. Basically, we have an annual business cycle. As we move through that cycle, when we admit and our graduates move out of that cycle, and how we bring them back to support us and how we go through a shared governance cycle with our faculty is how we move our institution forward. We're at the beginning stages. Understanding the facts and acceptance of the facts is kind of the first stage.

Cost cutting, budgeting and priorities

Democrat: While sharing your vision, you used the term “administrative streamlining.” That sounds like cost cutting to me. What is that?

Mangum: It is reallocation of resources to different priorities. Administrative streamlining requires that we review all of our operations and make sure that we don't have more people working towards a particular item or in a particular area than needs to be there. I call it reallocation because we're moving resources from one area to another.

One of the things we did this year as part of our budget planning process – I call it my budget planning process because I'm just planning by nature – as we pull 2 to 2.5 percent back from all the units across the campus we said, “Of the institutional priorities that we have, my goals and objectives, what are you going to do to enhance my goal and objectives?” Depending on what they said, people got some of their 2 percent back. Some of them got more than their 2 percent back, so that we could move our agenda forward. Some of them might have called it a cut, I call it a reallocation of resources to institutional priorities so that we could advance the agenda.

Democrat: OK. The budget dropped and then that money went into an academic program or somewhere?

Mangum: Some went to academic programs and some went to restructured administrative programs. We'd have to do the summary to see how much money shifted from administration to academics or how much resources shifted to student success initiatives, which is what my goal is.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Part II of a two-part Q&A with FAMU's President Elmira Mangum. [Check out Part I \(/story/news/education/2015/09/12/qa-famu-president-elmira-mangum/72189854/\)](http://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/education/2015/09/12/qa-famu-president-elmira-mangum/72189854/) in Sunday's Democrat or online at tallahassee.com.

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