Address at the Netter Center Conference – Panel on Higher Education: Presidential Perspectives on Higher Education, Community Partnerships for Democracy and Social Change

Given by Mark B. Rosenberg on November 16, 2017.
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Thank you! I am honored to be here today.

Our FIU is a place that’s focused on impact…That understands that we’re deeply connected to all that’s around us – our neighboring communities, our state, our entire world. We know the ties that bind us to this community also give us a very special and important responsibility… Now more than ever, we must do right and what’s good for the future of our community – and our world.

As you know, these are difficult and sometimes challenging times. For many, it seems the days of economic stability and security have been replaced by a constantly changing world of work. This growing uncertainty has many desperately searching for sources of hope and opportunity.

Higher educational institutions have long been these places for students, serving as anchors for society. Now, some are wondering whether they still play this role – and whether they are relevant for our times.

As president of Florida International University – one of the largest public research universities in the country – I know firsthand how uplifting higher education can be. I know this for certain… because our libraries and classrooms are filled with many brilliant minds who will one day become the next generation of leaders, change makers and innovators…

Students like Carlos Tamayo… If you’re ever visiting Miami Beach, you might spot him with a hardhat in hand, standing on a street overlooking the ocean. As a civil engineer for the city, he’s leading a project that’s focused on finding solutions to problems – like flooding, sea level rise and disaster resilience – that impact Florida and many other places around the world.
Our FIU helped Carlos get this internship with the public works department – that’s because we have a strong partnership with the City of Miami Beach. And here is some good news: In four months, Carlos went from intern to fulltime employee! Like him, more than 40 FIU students have gotten the opportunity to intern with the City of Miami Beach. And 7 have been hired to work for different departments at the City!

This story shows that we are a stepping-stone on our students’ path toward greatness.

While much has changed, what’s certain is that higher education remains a powerful force for good. I’m not alone in this belief…

According to a recent New America poll, 72 percent of Americans believe higher education is primarily a social good or both a social good and a private benefit. Our responsibility is still great. That is why relevance is key. We can’t afford universities that are ivory towers – disconnected from the problems of society. Relevance must become more than a word or an idea, but a continued practice and a driving force.

Research must be relevant. Solutions must be relevant. Student success strategies must be relevant. Partnerships must be relevant.

Carlos’ journey is a perfect example. It touches on the critical importance of a university engaging with its community and forging partnerships. And using the blessings of our talents to help solve society’s most pressing concerns.

We must envision our cities as live learning labs – beneficial to the student and beneficial to our partners! We can no longer offer education in a vacuum. We need the type of education that’s transformed by deepened collaboration – and what we call win-win-win or triple win partnerships.

These win-win partnerships bridge the gap between industry and academia – and are changing the way higher education institutions connect students with jobs and internship opportunities.
This is what our world demands. This is what this our communities need. This is what our future depends on.

FIU has been leading the way in this area for many years. We have a shared sense of urgency and motivation to act. Our partnership with the City of Miami Beach is only the beginning of our commitment to collaboration…

First, we are using win-win-win partnerships to improve our local educational ecosystem. This is important, because the students in our public schools are the future of our community!

That’s why we launched Achieving Community Collaboration in Education and Student Success – also known as ACCESS. Today, this has become a nationally recognized partnership between FIU and our Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

ACCESS has enabled us to align our combined instructional, research and creative talents to M-DCPS. Chaired by both me and the superintendent of M-DCPS, Alberto Carvalho, ACCESS is designed to improve something we both care deeply about: student success.

This means increasing the high school graduation rate and promoting the transition into higher education. Over 150 leaders from across both institutions are working in issue-specific groups to address the diverse educational needs and opportunities in our region.

In February, leaders from our institutions met and identified new priorities, including: Expansion of dual enrollment, the creation of a more robust teacher, counselor pipeline as well as the building of career pathways.

We also focused on MAST@FIU – this is an award winning public high school that is located on FIU’s Biscayne Bay Campus! It allows students to complete up to 60 college credits at FIU and also access our state-of-the-art labs, while still attending high school!
It’s hard to believe it’s been four years since MAST @ FIU first opened its doors. It was gratifying to be able to celebrate those very same students’ graduation day earlier this year. And here is some good news: Of the 54 graduates, 22 of them are attending our FIU! We’re lucky to have these talented students as a part of our Class of 2021! Talk about impact… talk about access!

Imagine riding your bike home from school – and a single gunshot changing everything. This is an unfortunate reality for too many children in Miami-Dade – and an issue that has crippled this community.

For Aaron Willis… this was his reality. He was riding his bike home from school and was shot. Thankfully, he survived. And thanks to the Education Effect – he graduated from Booker T. Washington High School and has started the next chapter of his life at our FIU.

What is the Education Effect? It’s a groundbreaking partnership between private donors, FIU and Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Sparked by a three-year seed investment from the JPMorgan Chase Foundation, the partnership connects our community, schools, students and parents with university expertise, resources and research-based intervention programs to address the pressing educational and social needs of students. Education Effect has since expanded into Booker T. Washington High School in Overtown and most recently into Jesse J. McCrary Jr. Elementary in Little Haiti.

This partnership has had a positive impact at Miami Northwestern and Booker T. Washington – supporting both high schools in achieving a “B” grade and also raising graduation rates. And in our first year at Jesse J. McCrary, Jr. Elementary they went from a “C” to “B” school!

The overarching goal of The Education Effect is academic achievement and postsecondary transition. As you can see from Aaron’s story and our university assisted community school model… This is truly a life changing partnership that is making an impact in our community!

Our commitment to collaboration doesn’t end there… For the past several years, we have had a great partnership with Florida Power & Light – one of the biggest
utility companies in the country. It includes the FPL-FIU Student Partnership Program that gives our students the opportunity to work at an on-campus, FPL Customer Care Center.

In 2010, we opened the 19-agent seat, on-campus Customer Care center on our campus. In 2014, the facility expanded to accommodate 33 students at a time. FPL has provided extensive career and professional development opportunities to our students. The student employees are part of FPL’s team of FPL Customer Care Representatives.

Our students currently serve in several roles that include Customer Service Representatives, Account Supervisors, Information Systems, Quality Analysts, Customer Care Technicians, Instructors, Engineers and more. This is a win-win-win! Our students get to work on campus.

We’re also helping to provide them with an incredible opportunity with a Fortune 200 company where they can gain skills they need for today’s world of work. And we are building a talent pipeline for FPL for future management positions.

Last year, our partnership continued with the unveiling of a new solar research facility at the College of Engineering and Computing. Made up of 4,400 solar panels, it will provide clean electricity and shade to about 400 parking spaces.

This opportunity also opens up countless research possibilities. Engineering faculty and students from the Energy, Power & Sustainability program use the installation to conduct important research that will help advance solar energy in the state!

From advancing solar energy in our state, to helping create a healthier community… Let me give you an example of how we’re combining teaching, community engagement and positively impacting this community.

As a part of our Green Family Foundation NeighborhoodHELP program, our medical students visit underserved neighborhoods in Miami-Dade County, where surveys have shown a high occurrence of infant mortality, cardiovascular problems, cancer, and more – and help those who need it most.
Here is how they are changing lives: Henry Larkin, a heart attack survivor could not stand for more than 20 minutes before going numb and falling down. He wanted to go to a doctor, but he didn’t have insurance, so that meant his only option was a costly trip to the ER. The NeighborhoodHELP program literally saved his life. Here is what he said: “Without their help, I probably wouldn’t be here right now.”

Since its inception, our students have conducted more than 9,000 visits to more than 900 households, impacting more than 2,500 people!

Even before they graduate, our students are changing lives… Imagine what they will do once they graduate!

Education is changing – learning as we know it is becoming lifelong… And uncertainty may be the new norm, but our higher educational institutions can reimagine new possibilities.

To create a new generation of learners – and students that are prepared for this 21st century world of work – is going to require the help of our business community.

It’s our shared opportunity to work together with our business partners to close these gaps and mismatches, and raise up the next generation of the workforce – to build a better world for all of us.

Thank you!