Expanding FAMU research pays off in prestige and dollars

Byron Dobson, Democrat senior writer

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Research ranges from local health concerns to national water quality

Timothy Moore was lured away from Auburn University in January 2015 after he attracted a new medical college to East Alabama.

As Florida A&M University’s vice president for research, his role is to assess the faculty’s research possibilities, expand and promote them. So far, Moore likes what he sees.

Take the country’s concerns with water quality, highlighted nationally by the lead problems plaguing Flint, Michigan.

FAMU has the resources through its College of Law’s environmental law component, the Institute of Public Health within its College of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, and professors within its School of Agriculture and Food Sciences and the School of the Environment to address this major environmental challenge through research.

With uncertain state funding and uneven enrollment, attracting research dollars is critical to FAMU prestige, financial stability and the recruitment of top professors and students. As one of the state’s two Land-Grant Universities, the other being the University of Florida, FAMU is required to conduct research as part of its overall mission.

“FAMU is well positioned to help address and solve these vexing national problems,” Moore said of exploring water quality studies. “We are trying to marshal those faculty members around a common problem. This is not just a Flint, Michigan, problem, this is a national problem.”

Another area is the emerging concern over the mosquito-borne Zika virus. Moore points to the study of entomology offered through FAMU’s School of Agriculture and Food Sciences. Each year, FAMU hosts scientists, researchers and pest-control/industry representatives.

“We have one of the top entomology programs in the nation right here,” Moore said. “In fact, we have the fourth largest insect collection in the United States, right here.”

How well FAMU performs in obtaining research money and its production of doctoral candidates also are among the metrics on which it is graded by the Florida Board of Governors.

“Research enriches the academic experience by providing opportunities and financial support for students at the undergraduate and graduate levels to obtain training in cutting-edge areas working alongside world-class researchers,” Maurice Edington, dean of the College of Science and Technology. “It enhances the university’s capacity and infrastructure and it benefits the local economy via job creation.”

Research progress is gaining national attention

Others are paying attention. Last month, FAMU’s designation within the Carnegie Classification improved to Research University/Higher (R-II University), from Research University with “moderate” activity or R-III. The new designation places FAMU in the same classification as universities like Auburn and Old Dominion.
The National Science Foundation ranks FAMU No. 1 among HBCUs in total research and development expenditures, ahead of Howard and Morehouse, both of which have medical schools. FAMU ranks 199th among the more than 600 universities conducting research.

As another indication of the university's growing stature, the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy named FAMU's College of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences the No. 1 recipient of research grants from the National Institutes of Health, among all pharmacy programs in Florida.
"We are the largest HBCU in terms of research in the nation," Moore said. "We are averaging approximately $50 million a year and last year, we submitted $109 million in research proposals. As a doctoral-degree granting institution with 14 schools, we are actively encouraging research across and between all those schools."

Moore noted that in fiscal year 2013-14, FAMU received $42 million in research awards. That figure increased to $47 million for 2014-15 and is now poised to reach $51 million in 2015-16, representing an increase of about 20 percent in research awards in the last 16 months.

But what’s important, he said, is the increase in faculty participation in obtaining research grants, primarily from the federal government, where overall competition is fierce and where research funding has been declining. One of his mandates is to fulfill President Elmira Mangum’s mission to increase research activity among faculty and boost the university’s financial rewards.
With four months left in the fiscal year, the faculty has submitted $106 million in new proposals compared to $109 million during the entire previous fiscal year.

"So we believe that we’re likely to end up with around $120 million to $125 million in new submissions," Moore said. "An increase in our proposal activity means our research future looks bright."

More proposals usually mean more money from grants.

"Our future proposal indicators are going up and with it, our rewards should also increase," Moore said. "Why? Because our faculty are innovative and they are doing a great job trying to solve tough scientific and societal problems."

To bolster its research productivity and provide more training opportunities for students, the College of Science and Technology has hired 11 tenure-track faculty over the past 2 ½ years, Edington said.

“We are planning to make several additional faculty hires in key research areas in the coming year to continue this effort," he added.

**Competition brings awareness of collaboration**

A critical part of Moore’s job is getting off campus and telling FAMU’s story. His first days on the job were spent meeting Mayor Andrew Gillum and other local and state elected officials. He also introduced himself to his counterparts within the State University System.

His role? Show how FAMU’s resources could benefit the region.

One of his first meetings was with Gary Ostrander, vice president for research at Florida State University, which brings in over $200 million annually in research awards. Moore's message?

"I’m open for business and I will work with him any way I can."

Professors from both universities have shared research projects. Moore wants increased collaboration between the two campuses.
Last year, the National Science Foundation’s Plant Genome Research Program awarded Hank Bass, FSU associate professor of biological science, and Oghenekome Onokpise, FAMU professor of agronomy, a $2.1 million grant. The award will allow them to better understand methods of producing corn in harsh conditions, ultimately leading to increasing the production of the staple.

“With FSU’s medical school and our pharmacy school, we are poised to do big things,” Moore said. “Together we can form a highly competitive team to tackle a number of human health problems affecting our state.”

That kind of collaboration is not only good for the universities, it bodes well for Tallahassee and most importantly, students and professors.

“We are a small school yet we are punching well above our weight as far as research goes,” he said.

Contact senior writer Byron Dobson at bdobson@tallahassee.com or on Twitter @byrondobson.

**FAMU’s top research divisions**

The following schools are the top producers of research funding, Moore said, giving approximate estimates of annual research awards:

College of Agriculture and Food Sciences: $12 million.

College of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences: $11 million.

College of Science and Technology: $9.5 million to $10 million

College of Education: $4.5 million to $5 million

**Current research highlights:**

Michael Abazinge, NOAA Environmental Cooperative Science Center: This is the largest competitively awarded program in NOAA. The intent is to train the next generation of basic and environmental scientists in order to help NOAA maintain its scientific excellence while ensuring the development of a diverse workforce. $15 Million over five years.

Carl Goodman, Bridges to Baccalaureate Program: FAMU is one of only approximately 40 such programs in the U.S. awarded by NIH to provide community and state college students the opportunity to gain undergraduate research experience in a variety of research areas including cancer research, environmental sciences, etc.

Rene Reams: NIH / P -20 award for Minority Cancer Research and Training Program in collaboration with the University of Florida. An area of specific focus is prostate cancer in African-Americans.

Kome Onokpise: NSF award for $2 million over five years in partnership with Florida State University to examine the genome of Maize (corn) to search for genetic pathways to strengthen this critical plant to grow and thrive in different climates around the world.

Source: Timothy Moore, vice president/Research

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