

From abandoned airport to a major university, FIU remembers its first-generation mission

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FIU President Mark Rosenberg: 'This University is destined to be a top public university'

As it enters its 50th anniversary, FIU continues to improve in national rankings and worldwide reputation, and servicing a minority and less fortunate population. FIU President

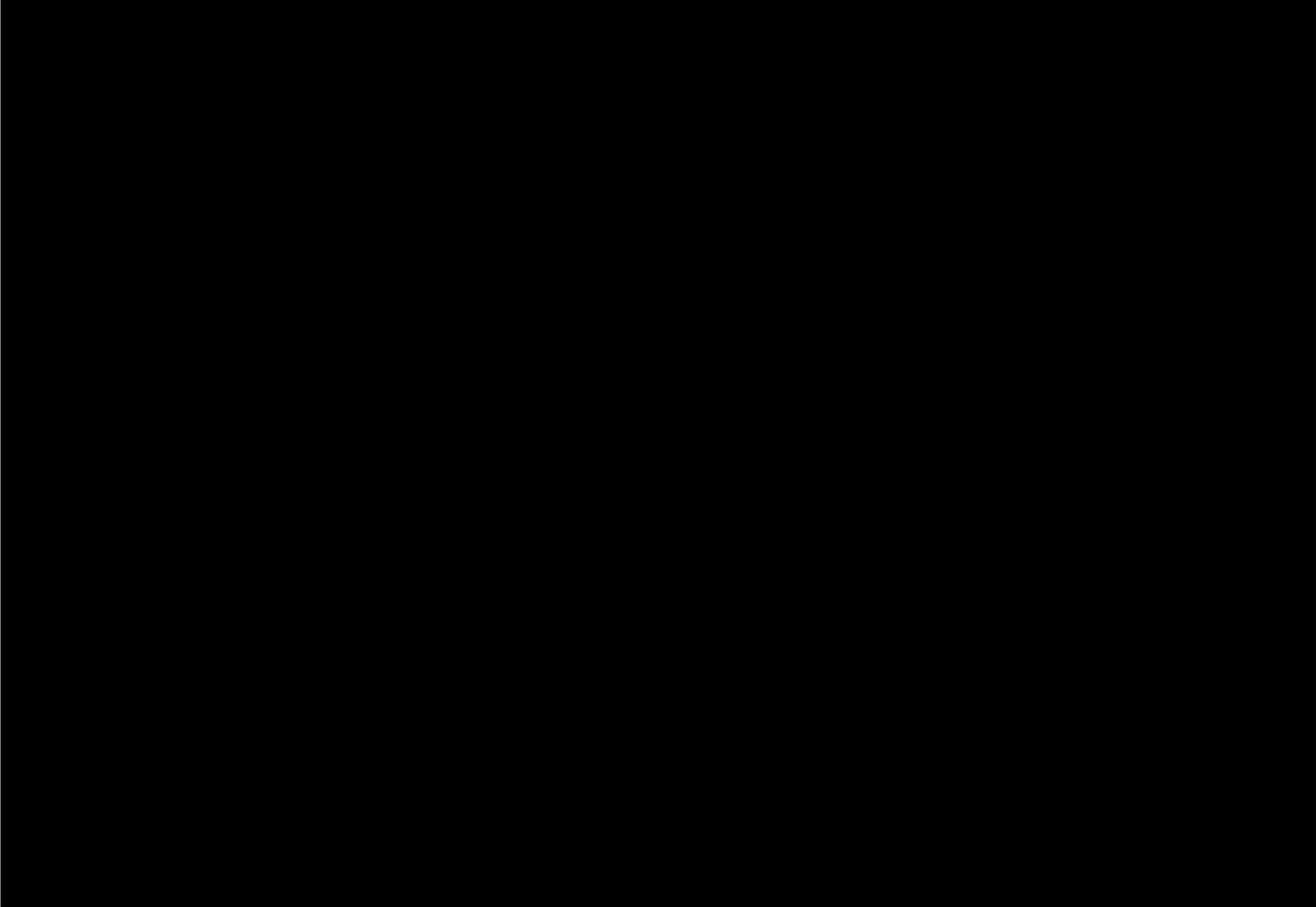
In the early 1970s, the abandoned airfield where Florida International University would grow its roots looked like a movie set for a dystopian horror film: The 344 acres had overgrown sawgrass, a rusted airplane or two and a control tower that stood sentry over the site in the far corners of Dade County.

The university pioneers cleaned up the ruins of the old Tamiami Airport, improvised a parking area by painting white lines over the rutted runways and designated the desolate airplane hangars as makeshift classrooms for about 5,000 students.

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'I keep her in my heart,' says father of FIU bridge collapse victim

The first day of class for the juniors, seniors and grad students, the only students the state allowed to attend FIU at that time: Sept. 19, 1972. There were no dorms, no sports teams, no sororities or frats. A commuter school.



FIU's main campus at Southwest Eighth Street and 107th Avenue when it was under construction before it opened in 1972. The university was built on the site of the old Tamiami Airport - the control tower is to the right. The tower still stands on the campus, 50 years later. Bob East *Miami Herald*

Fifty years later, FIU's main campus runs along Southwest Eighth Street, from 107th to 117th avenues, and south to Tamiami Park, about four blocks north of Coral Way. A second campus in the north part of the county is home to several schools, including its famed hospitality school, whose [students work side by side with top chefs during the South Beach Wine and Food Festival](#). And its 10-year-old law school, FIU College of Law at the main campus, bested the

state's 10 other law schools with the [highest Florida Bar passage rate among its graduates](#) in the most recent results.



Oscar Martorell and Meena Ponnappalli, students at FIU's hospitality management program, slice carrots for the South Beach Wine & Food Festival. *MIAMI HERALD STAFF*

Its 56,592 students make FIU the second-largest state university in Florida after the University of Central Florida (70,406 students) and the fourth-largest state university in the country. There are dorms, frats, sororities and sports teams — its men's soccer team won a national championship in 1982, the school's first national championship.



View of the Florida International University Student Academic Success Center, at the Modesto A. Maidique Campus in Miami. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

The original control tower remains (in its early days, it housed the administrative offices) and more than 80 buildings surround it, including a [Wall of Wind facility to test hurricane mitigation](#) efforts and a [lab for personal cancer treatment research](#).

"We always dreamed about getting to the top," says FIU President Mark Rosenberg, who began his FIU career as an assistant professor in political science in 1976, four years after the school opened. "That's what we wanted for this university and this community."



Steven Diaz, Ph.D., program director (left) and Richard Olson, Ph.D., director, at the Wall of Wind at the International Hurricane Research Center in the FIU' College of Engineering & Computing in Miami. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com



View of the Wall of Wind building at the International Hurricane Research Center in the

Mackenzie Scott gives record donation

While FIU has expanded over the past five decades — opening law and medical schools since 2000, among other programs — it has risen based on its academic heft and its track record of educating first-generation college students. That record led to its No. 6 ranking in social mobility among all U.S. universities, No. 5 if you include only public schools, according to U.S. News & World Report's latest rankings of colleges and universities. And it [led FIU to leap 17 spots](#) in the overall 2022 rankings for public universities, landing at No. 78, up from 95 in 2021.



MacKenzie Scott donated \$40 million to FIU, its single largest unrestricted gift in its history.
Evan Agostini *Evan Agostini/Invision/AP*

It's that emphasis on educating first-generation college students that led billionaire philanthropist [MacKenzie Scott to donate \\$40 million last year to the university,](#) the single-largest unrestricted gift in FIU's history. Rosenberg learned about the donation on a cellphone call while he was driving, forcing him to pull off the road in a rush to take notes.



On June 16, 1973, FIU held its first commencement, with 191 students. The ceremony was held in the library of Primera Casa, the first building on the campus and the only space at that time large enough to accommodate the graduates and their family and friends.

“I listened and had to pinch myself,” he told the Herald at the time.

‘We mourn those lives’

FIU’s climb up the academic ladder hasn’t been easy. The school had to fight Florida legislators more than a decade to open its law school, facing a fierce backlash from law-school alums at the University of Florida and the University of Miami. And there have been contentious battles with the [Youth Fair over expansion in Tamiami Park, the Youth Fair’s](#)

[home.](#)

But its biggest setback came on March 15, 2018, when the footbridge it fought for years to build across Southwest Eighth Street and 109th Avenue — to carry its students from Sweetwater across the busy Tamiami Trail — came crashing down while it was being constructed. [Six people were killed in the catastrophe](#), including an 18-year-old FIU college freshman named [Alexa Duran](#).

A [National Transportation Safety Board investigation](#) concluded that FIU, the Florida Department of Transportation, bridge builder FIGG Bridge Engineers and others failed to properly react to cracks that had formed on the bridge and erred when keeping Southwest Eighth Street open while a crew performed emergency repairs.



An aerial view of the collapsed FIU pedestrian bridge across Southwest Eighth Street that left six people dead on March 15, 2018. The bridge was under construction when it collapsed. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

"It's a tragedy. We lost lives, and we mourn those lives," Rosenberg said in a recent interview. "You can see the data. The data will show you that since the bridge collapsed, we've been more focused and determined to get better and to show the world we can do things correctly. Even though building the bridge wasn't our responsibility, we understand that we're associated with it.

"We're going to honor Alexa Duran, the student who lost her life. We're going to honor her and her family with a fitting memorial to her and the other five victims. And we're going

to rebuild the bridge. Because the bridge was about extending ourselves, not turning into ourselves.



Mark Rosenberg, president of Florida International University, in his office at the FIU Modesto Maidique Campus in Miami, on Dec. 14, 2021. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

"It's going to take a couple more years, but it's going to happen."

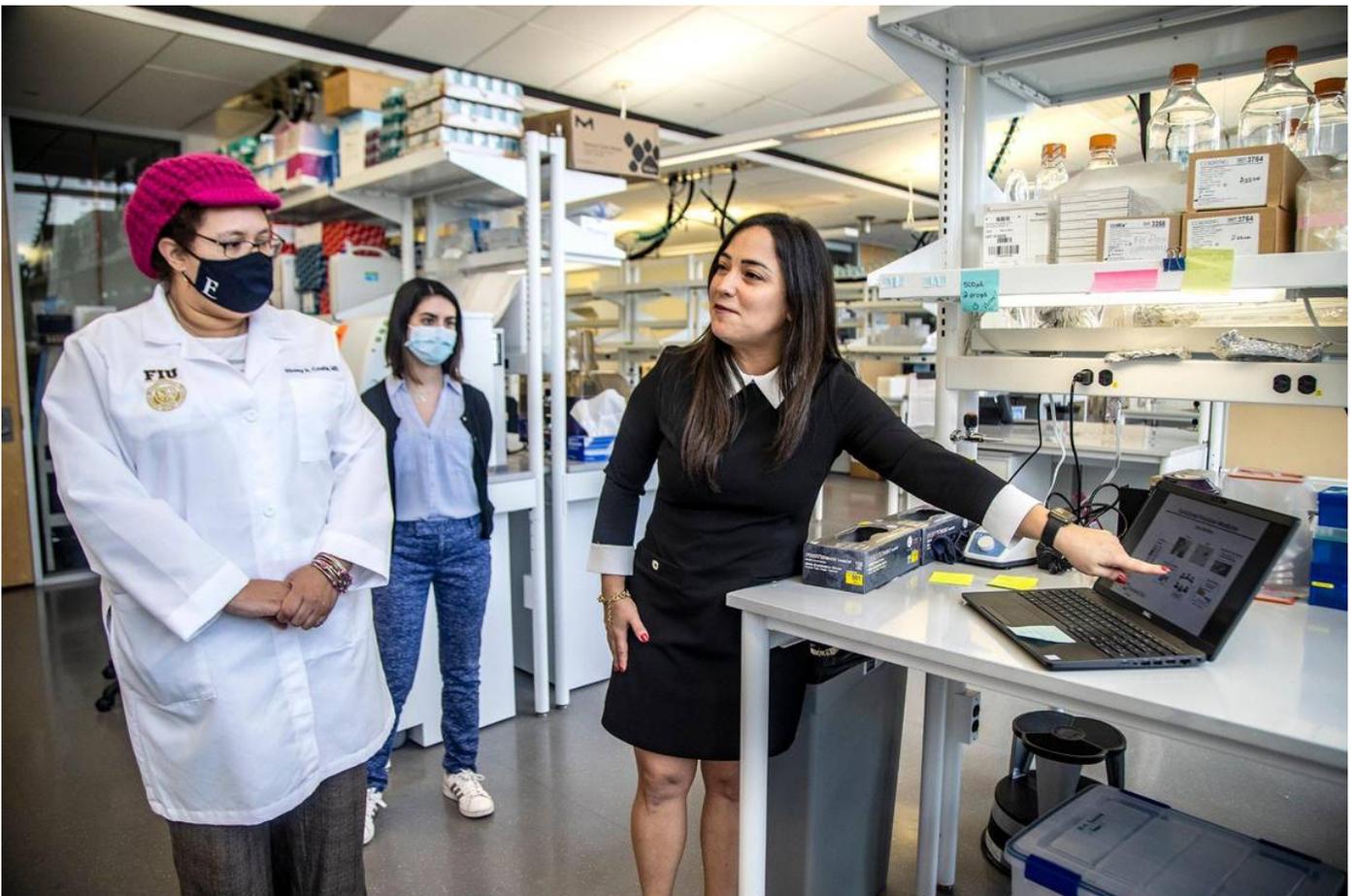
Helping students find their way

One of FIU's successes is in educating students who don't have the financial means to attend college. Nearly 50 percent of FIU undergrads received a Pell Grant in the 2019-20 school year. Pell Grants are federal funds given to

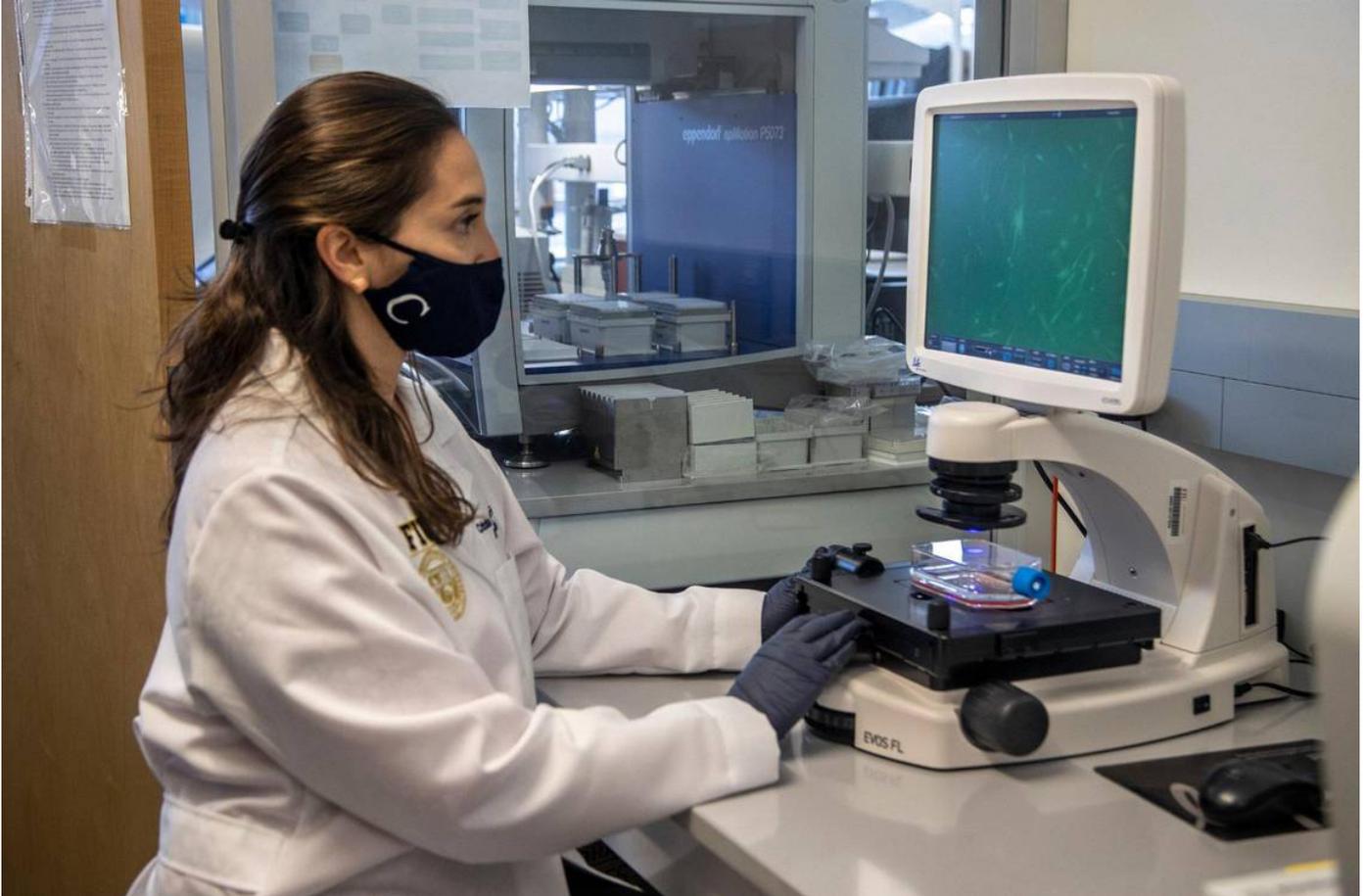
students who demonstrate financial needs and, unlike loans, they do not need to be repaid.

Consider Tiffany Sanchez.

As she headed into her junior year at the main campus, she struggled with balancing her commitments to her classwork, to campus organizations, to her sorority Phi Mu and commuting from her Miami Lakes home. A sorority sister mentioned she could seek an emergency grant from FIU.



From left: Ebony Coats, lab manager, and Grad Vanessa Berrios listen as Diana Azzam, Ph.D., an FIU assistant professor (far right), explains cancer-related studies conducted in her lab at the FIU Modesto Maidique Campus. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com



Cristina Andrade Feraud, a Ph.D. student, looks at cell samples on a microscope at Diana Azzam's lab at the FIU Modesto Maidique Campus. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

"It came to a point where I was like, 'I really need this,' " said Sanchez, 21. "I didn't want to take it away from anyone but I was like, 'I don't know how I'm going to do what I need to do.' "

After a 15-minute application process, Sanchez received \$1,200 for the fall 2021 semester and about \$4,000 for the spring 2022 semester. With the grants, she was able to move onto campus.

FIU's Financial Wellness Program then taught her how to budget her paychecks to pay for tuition, meal plans, housing and books, as well as how to lower her loans. She raves

about the program, which also teaches students how to master financial literacy through topics like car payments, credit scores and mortgages.

“It’s helped a lot, and I’m very happy,” she said. “I try to tell as many people about it as possible.”

In addition to financial literacy, FIU offers emergency and scholarship grants to students who lose their jobs, would have to work extra hours to pay for schooling or accrue medical bills.



Mark Rosenberg, president of Florida International University, stands in front of the Steven and Dorothea Green Library at the FIU Modesto Maidique Campus in Miami. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

The university also provides completion grants to those within 30 credits of graduation who need money urgently. The initiative launched in 2015, founded by the [Braman Family Foundation](#). In 2020, the program gained national recognition with a [three-year grant from the Helios Education Foundation](#).

FIU awarded more than \$2.3 million in completion grants to more than 2,100 students. Nearly 99% have graduated or were enrolled in fall semester.

Mentoring students

FIU, like other colleges and universities, mentors students but it goes one step further, actively working with students so they succeed.

It launched Fostering Panther Pride to support former foster youth and students experiencing homelessness. It created a character, "Ask Charlie," based on Assistant Vice President Charlie Andrews, which enabled students to get answers easily at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

Dr. Susan Himburg, who started as an instructor of dietetics and nutrition at FIU in 1973 — a year after the school opened — and now works as the associate vice president of academic planning and accountability, said she once met a student in the 1980s who worked full time as a food service

supervisor at a local hospital but wanted to become a dietitian.

Himburg pulled the student into her office and together they devised a plan that allowed her to attend classes in the morning and work at night, and graduate over three years instead of two. Then she helped the student get annual leave from work and condense her final practicum to graduate.

“The thing is, the student commitment and drive energized me as a faculty member, and I wondered, ‘Well why can’t we make this work?’ ”

Modesto Maidique, the university’s fourth president for more than 20 years and who championed the medical and law schools, chalked up the triumphs to the professors. He now teaches a leadership class and a master’s project in international business.

“I’m immensely proud of what FIU has been able to accomplish in its 50 years,” said Maidique, 81. “Most of the credit goes to the faculty, which is by far the best part of FIU.”

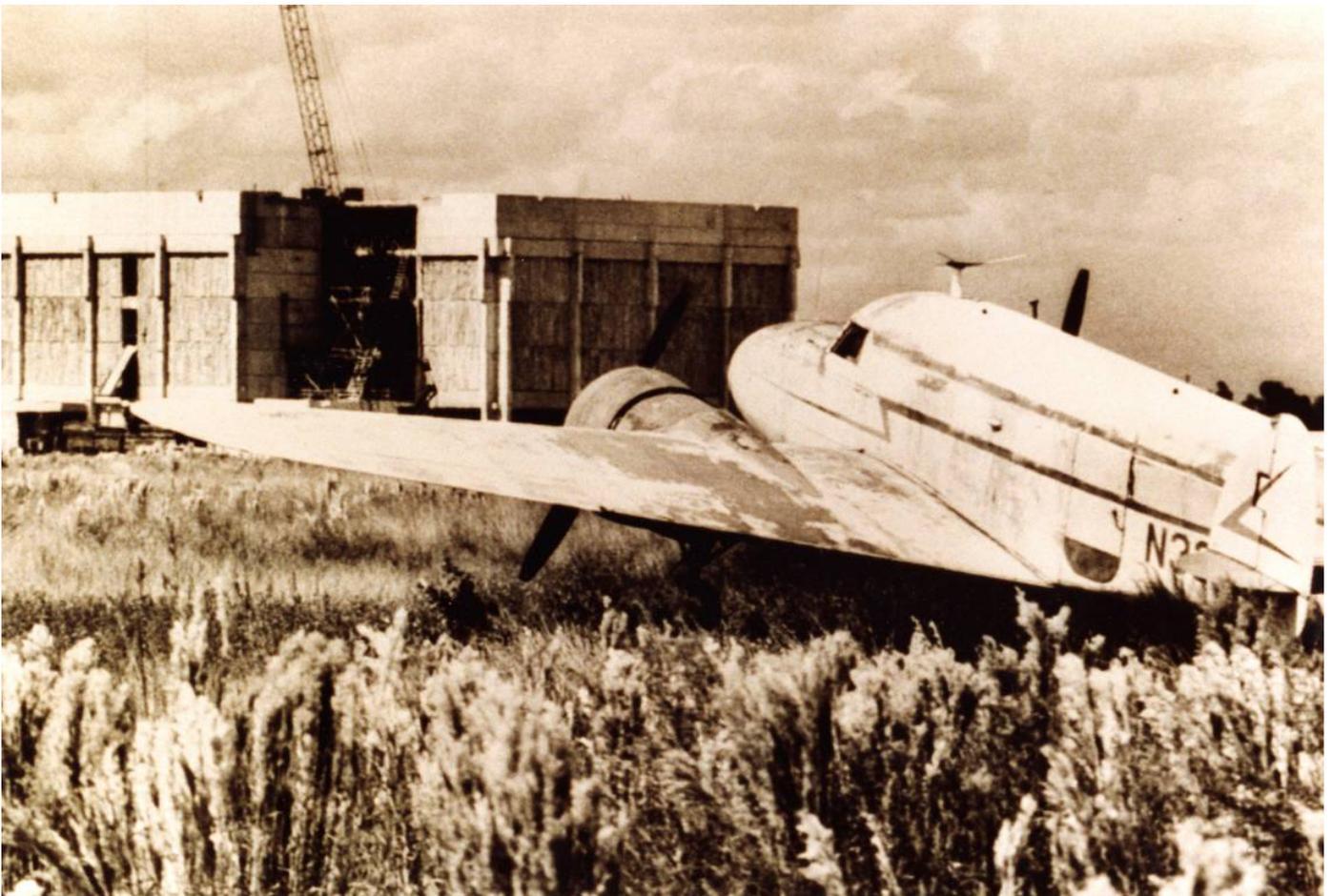
The early days

Rosenberg remembers the early days. When he first arrived at FIU in 1976 as a political science professor, the university

sported five or six buildings with a student body of roughly 7,000.

“It was very raw,” says Rosenberg, 72. “People didn’t know who we were, where we were or what we did.”

Rosenberg had grown up in Athens, Ohio, close to Ohio University — the oldest college in that state founded in 1804 — and he had graduated from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, also founded in the early 1800s. When he moved to South Florida, he found other college professors and administrators shaped by longstanding universities.



An abandoned aircraft sits by Primera Casa, FIU’s first building, when the school was being constructed. FIU opened in September 1972 on the site of the former Tamiami Airport at Southwest Eighth Street and 107th Avenue.

“Most of us had come from universities that were 100 or 150 years old, so here we are at a new university. And the new university is not even a four-year university,” he recalls. FIU did not admit its first freshman class until 1981, almost 10 years after its founding.

Rosenberg remembers his peers and FIU’s founders as a group of “big thinkers and dreamers.” FIU’s first president, Charles Perry, was 31 when he was appointed president, the youngest president of a state university in the country. He had come from Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

Perry and FIU’s early leaders believed Florida would grow demographically and knew Miami would lead that journey. They aspired to shepherd in new academic programs, including doctoral programs. They yearned for a medical school, a law school, perhaps even a veterinary school.

UCLA connection

When Rosenberg rose to provost in 1998, he met with his new team in the conference room in Primera Casa 521, the first structure on campus named in Spanish as a quirky way to honor the “International” in Florida International University. The building still houses the main administration.

Rosenberg quizzed the room about FIU’s future. A faculty member asked, “Well, who do we want to be like?”

A few names got tossed about. But as Rosenberg listened, he spotted one of his colleagues whose lips quivered; he seemed upset.

“It was Tony Mangó,” Rosenberg says, nearly 25 years later. “I said, ‘Tony, who do we want to be like?’ And he said, ‘We want to be like UCLA.’ ”

Some people gasped; others raised their brows. Setting the University of California, Los Angeles, a major research public urban university, as a goal seemed too ambitious.

Fast-forward to 2014, when the dean of the FIU medical school, which opened in 2009, told him that UCLA officials had visited to learn about their model.

“I think that’s pretty cool,” Rosenberg says, beaming. “We feel pretty good about that.”

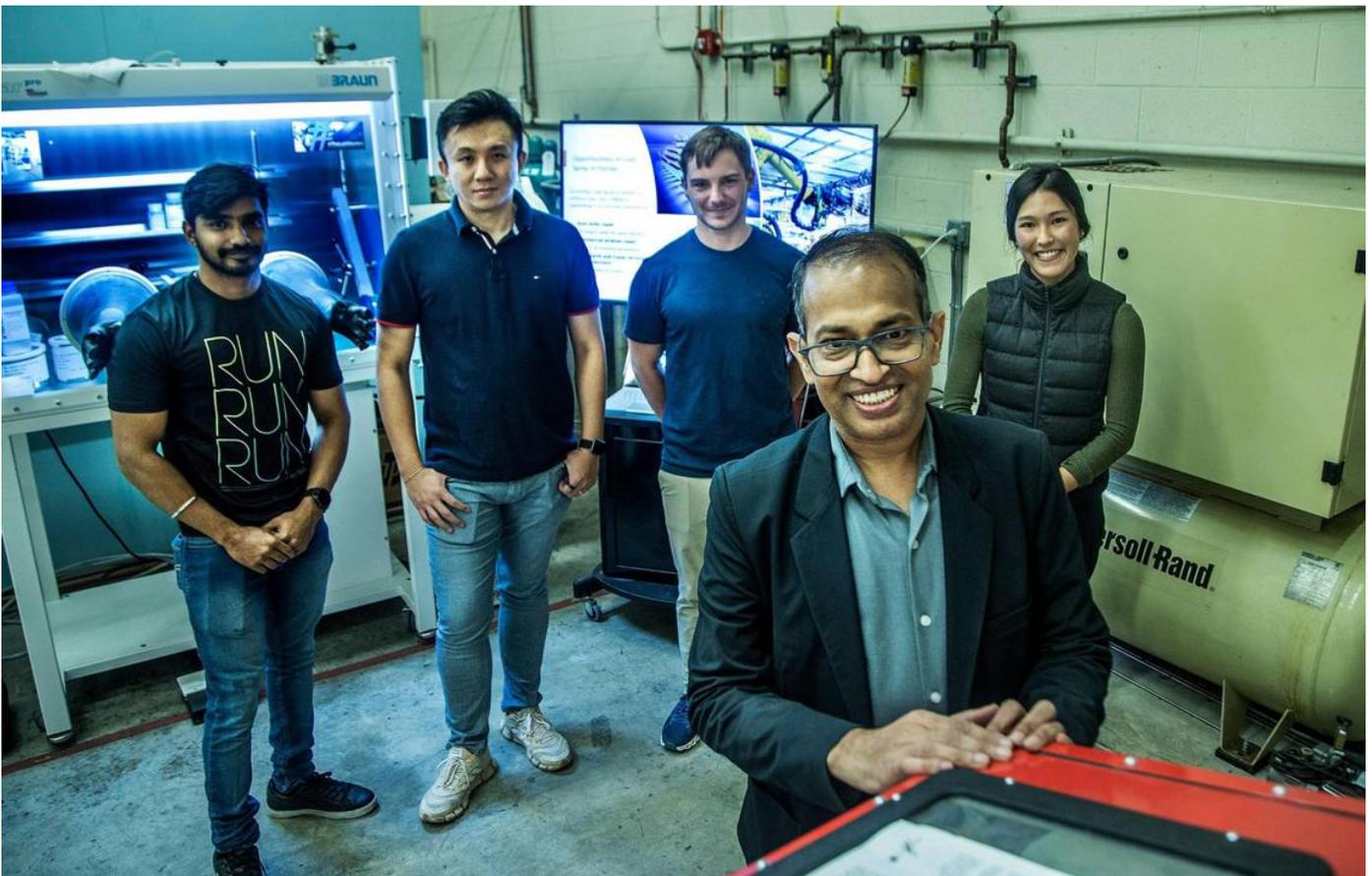
From lawnmower storage to a \$5 million lab

Rosenberg credits FIU’s success to what he describes as a naive optimism that distinguishes the university culture — that belief that they can achieve anything, either through their own actions or by empowering others.

That optimism is what empowered Arvind Agarwal, Ph.D., 51. FIU hired him in 2002 when it decided to expand its department of mechanical engineering to include materials

engineering. He became the first faculty member hired for that purpose.

He had never heard of FIU until he applied. When he got the offer, he left a private company in Huntsville, Alabama — population, about 250,000 — to teach in Miami-Dade, population at the time about 2.3 million. It took him a year to find an outdoor, ground-level warehouse that stored lawnmowers, and then advocate for that to become what it is today: a \$5 million [plasma-forming laboratory](#).



Dr. Arvind Agarwal, FIU chair and distinguished professor, mechanical and materials engineering, with his students at the College of Engineering & Computing. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

Today, his former students are trailblazers, including an FIU

alumna who came from Colombia in 2013 without speaking English and now works for NASA.

“The research culture takes time to develop,” he said. “When I got here, I wanted to cut a small piece of steel, so I went to Home Depot and bought a \$10 hacksaw,” he said, chuckling in disbelief. “Today, imagine, we are so sophisticated that we cut things at 1/10th of a hair’s thickness. In 19 years, we have made tremendous progress.”

Up next, FIU wants to scale the top 50 ranking among public universities. Its main challenge: Expansion. FIU has battled the Youth Fair over expanding into Tamiami Park, which its main campus borders. At its Biscayne Bay Campus, its sole entrance causes serious traffic and the campus borders Biscayne Bay.



FIU graduate student Kazue Orizaka works at a machine used for Cold Spray and Rapid Deposition (CoRAD) research done at FIU's College of Engineering & Computing. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com



Assistant Researcher Abhijith KS works at a machine used for Cold Spray and Rapid Deposition (CoRAD) research done at the FIU's College of Engineering & Computing in Miami. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

FIU has opened other locations, including a hospitality and tourism management program in Tianjin, China, and it runs a coral reef program 60 feet under the surface in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. But Rosenberg believes lack of space is a key issue.

Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava has recognized FIU as an academic-to-job pipeline in South Florida, and said she's trying to help with the constraints.

"We have to find mutually agreeable solutions," she said.

"We definitely recognize the university is growing, and we want to support that growth as much as we can."



Jimena Tavel covers higher education for the Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald. She's a bilingual reporter with triple nationality: Honduran, Cuban and Costa Rican. Born and raised in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, she moved to Florida at age 17. She earned her journalism degree from the University of Florida in 2018, and joined the Herald soon after.