

THE INTERVIEW

HOW STETSON UNIVERSITY'S PRESIDENT WILL UNCOVER 'HIDDEN FLORIDA GEM'



Stetson University in DeLand

STETSON UNIVERSITY

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Stetson University in DeLand is pouring resources into retaining students after seeing a 5% drop in undergraduates during the pandemic.

Stetson's campus once again is bubbling with activity after being one of the first schools in Greater Orlando to require vaccinations but, like many U.S. private colleges, Stetson saw fewer students enrolling as first-time undergraduates in recent years.

University President Christopher Roellke is banking on a marketing campaign, and more investments in the first-year experience will help retain and attract more students from around the country. The college enrolled 3,928 students this spring and has so far raised \$43 million in fiscal 2022, up from a prior annual record of \$28 million.

Here's more from Roellke about improving the experience for new students and why he's teaching a first-year seminar course:

Talk about enrollment during the pandemic:

We think some families were ... choosing to go [to college] nearby to home or start completely remotely. We're down about 5% at the undergraduate level, but that thankfully was mitigated by robust numbers at the graduate school level. Don't get me wrong, this has been challenging. But we've been able to navigate the storm adequately.

What are your recruitment strategies to get those numbers back?

We have launched a significant marketing campaign focusing on the themes of kindness, empathy and shared ownership, championing the fact that Stetson really stood out in navigating Covid. We're also trying to reach out from our faculty because students really want to know what kind of intellectual collaboration they might be embarking upon. We also did what we call one-time commitments for our continuing students. This was a difficult time for families and students, and they had ancillary expenses they probably hadn't anticipated.

CHRISTOPHER ROELLKE

Title: President, Stetson University

Age: 57

Years in current role: 2

Location: DeLand

Education: Bachelor's in American government, Wesleyan University; master's/Ph.D. in the social and philosophical foundations of education, Cornell University

More: <https://bizj.us/1qehuy>

What are your biggest priorities for the 2022 calendar year? We want to emerge out of this pandemic as strong as we possibly can. We had the strongest fundraising year in Stetson's history by a long shot last year. That positions us well, including substantial support for the scholarship being in the fine arts. Despite the tremendous challenges, we're about to open up a new facility – which was being constructed right in the middle of the pandemic – for health and innovation. We couldn't have had better timing for such a facility focused on interdisciplinary science and trying to prepare students for health careers where there's a tremendous shortage.

What are your plans to improve retention and graduation rates? As I came in, one of the concerns I had was we were not teaching those first-year courses with full-time faculty members. We really market an authentic one-on-one, faculty-student relationship. So, we are prioritizing faculty resources be deployed in that first year. One of our indicators is going to be the number of courses taught by full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty, which is a significant investment.

What about creating career pathways for students? Not only do we want students to be tackling some of society's most pressing problems – homelessness, hunger, income inequality, etc. – we also want to make sure that they're equipped with the skills needed to compete in the marketplace. We've got about an 89% success rate upon graduation for students – two-thirds end up getting gainful employment right after college, and the other portion pursues additional higher education. Also, our faculty are much more intentional about educating and working with students on the possibilities of their careers. The future marketplace is going to not only expect expertise in a particular discipline or skill set, but they [want students to] also have softer skills across industries. The ability to collaborate, writing skills, dynamic skills – all these skills are necessary because this generation of young people is quite likely to change jobs many times. If we only prepare them specifically within one discipline, we're shortchanging them.

What will Stetson look like five years down the road? In many ways, Stetson is this hidden Florida gem, and our longer-term goal is to get much more national recognition. Five years down the road, I would anticipate that we have a bigger geographic footprint for the students that we attract. Right now, 70% of our students come from the state of Florida. There's nothing wrong with that, but given the demographic cliff everyone's talking about and to broaden our definitions of diversity, we want to draw students from around the globe.