



Legislative session begins

The opening week of the **2008 Legislative Session** was more eventful than in many years. While committee meetings have been going on for several months, **the first week of session gave the community colleges an indication that this session will be a “wild ride” for all in the education sectors.** As the session began, FACC and the Colleges came to understand that budget cuts would not only impact the 2007-08 budgets, a *second* time, but that additional cuts will be likely for the 2008-09 budget (see 2007 08 Budget cuts at www.facc.org/cuts.) In addition to understanding that fighting to minimize cuts would be a major concern, issues of governance, Bright Futures, financial aid, textbook affordability, and the environment all loomed as significant topics for this year’s Florida Legislature.

On opening day, legislators in the House and Senate heard remarks from **Speaker Marco Rubio and President Ken Pruitt.** In an unusual format, the Governor called the Legislature into session early in the evening for his “State of the State” message, hoping that it would be broadcast throughout Florida. Those who listened heard very different mindsets from all three. House Speaker Rubio focused his speech on the challenges that Florida faces. President Pruitt talked about the successes of the past and the need to invest appropriately to move the State forward. The Governor also acknowledged the challenges ahead, but also voiced optimism for the future.

More specifically, **Speaker Marco Rubio** stated, “Unless we act boldly, our economy will continue to be worse than the national economy. And because of our reliance on real estate and growth, our recovery will lag behind the national recovery as well.” To address the needs of the State, the Speaker outlined three priority areas:

1. Limiting government, which included continued work on property tax relief, meaningful revenue caps, and transparency in government spending.
2. Bringing relief to “our unaffordable and unsustainable insurance system.”
3. **Bringing our public education standards into the 21st Century**, which included supporting the university system’s role in making us globally competitive, and addressing the crisis of African American males headed into incarceration at a higher rate than towards graduation.

Senate President Ken Pruitt focused his remarks on building on prior success. He reported that the top priority for the 2007 Session was the “Building Florida’s Future” plan, which resulted in \$5 billion invested in the economy. He noted that



Newly-elected members of the Florida House of Representatives take their oath of office from Supreme Court Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis.



Speaker pro tempore Rep. Marsha Bowen, R-Winter Haven, right, addresses the House Republican caucus on the House floor as 2008 planning began.

the growth of research-based companies, including Scripps and others, is evidence of early positive results. While clearly addressing revenue shortfalls, Pruitt said that investing in Florida’s infrastructure and economic innovations must continue, using non-recurring funds to create one-time initiatives. The President went on to identify priorities of continued property tax reform, energy independence, and saving environmentally sensitive lands. **Finally, as it relates to education, Pruitt announced his intention to put forward a constitutional amendment to re-create the position of an elected Commissioner of Education, again elevating “education back into a cabinet level position.” His proposal will also put the responsibility for setting university tuition with the Legislature and not with the Board of Governors.**

Finally, **Governor Charlie Crist** provided four priorities to keep Florida strong:

- Healthy Families—specifically addressing the lack of health insurance by 3.8 million Floridians with a proposal for a \$64 million “Florida Health Access System.”
- World Class Schools—reporting that Florida has had significant gains in student achievement in reading and math. **Governor Crist is requesting an increase in funds for Florida’s universities and community colleges, who are producing the future leaders of our state.**
- Safe Neighborhoods
- A Vibrant Economy
- Sustainable Natural Resources—building on the success of “Florida Forever” (also mentioned by Senator Pruitt) to preserve Lake Okeechobee and coastal estuaries, and to conserve energy. On the energy front, the Governor is recommending a \$200 million economic development package for renewable energies, biofuel, and alternative fuels.

[Hear Governor Crist’s State of the State Address at Capitol Reports](#)

Budget Issues

While several issues took center stage in the first week of session, none is more important to FACC members and their community colleges than the budget. Unfortunately, week one focused on budget meetings to reduce the current year budget before work on the 08-09 budget even begins. The House and the Senate came into the budget meetings already agreeing on the details of the cuts to higher education although there is always concern that agreements can unravel. From what was presented in Week One, **the Community College system will lose \$20 million, with \$4.7 million coming from lottery funds, \$300,000 from Performance Based Budgeting, and \$14.5 million from the Community College Program Fund (CCPF). Colleges continue to wait, however, for the college-by-college ‘cut allocations’ in order to determine local impact of the cuts. HB 7009 and SB 2500** are the budget cut bills for each side. Early in **Week One**, the bills were passed by each house, conference committees established, and meetings were well underway. If all goes as planned, the chairs of the conferences will report in on Monday, March 10, and voting is expected on the floor of each house on Wednesday.



Gov. Charlie Crist

Once the budget cut bills are finished, the Legislature starts working on the 08-09 budget. The Community College **Chancellor Will Holcombe, starts Week Two with a presentation to a House funding committee** on community college budget issues. Dr. Holcombe, in his first session as Chancellor, is expected to focus on the nearly 8% growth in enrollment during the current academic year.

Bills to Watch

As mentioned before, this session may be the ‘wildest ride’ community colleges (and others in education) have experienced in many years. As the first week of session concluded, several significant issues have come to light. Most already have bills filed, as follows:

Governance

CS SJR 2308 is the Senate’s version of a governance bill. This is a Joint Resolution, which is the framework for putting a constitutional amendment on the November ballot for approval by the citizens of Florida. SJR 2308 includes the changes outlined by **Senator Pruitt** in his opening remarks— **an elected Commissioner with a cabinet level State Board of Education (instead of the current Board appointed by the Governor), and university trustees all appointed by the Governor (instead of half appointed by the State Board.)** **SJR 2308** was approved by the Senate Education Pre-K-12 Committee on March 5 and is now to be heard in the Senate Higher Education Appropriations Committee.



Sen. Pruitt

On March 7, the **House Schools and Learning Council**, chaired by **Representative Joe Pickens**, approved their proposed committee bill; which will also be a Joint Resolution. **PCB SLC 08-02** will now be given a bill number and move forward. This bill has similar language to the Senate Bill, including the **elected commissioner, the Cabinet as the State Board of Education, the university board of trustees appointed by the Governor, and limitations to the Board of Governors.** It differs from the Senate Bill by the **creation of a new State College System and a “Board of Colleges” for the 2 and 4 year colleges that have no graduate degrees.** While the PCB does not lay out the details of the new Board, it appears to re-create the old State Coordinating Board of Community Colleges, stating that the Board will “oversee and coordinate” the system. The Board would be made up of six members, appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate, and the Commissioner of Education. The SBCC was eliminated under Governor Bush, in lieu of the State Board of Education— a board with broad authority over all education. Community College Presidents discussed the pros and cons of a State Board of Colleges at the February 28, Council of Presidents meeting.

Bright Futures

While FACC and college lobbyists do not anticipate significant changes to the Bright Futures program this year due in large part to the commitment of **Senate President Pruitt** to keep the program in its current format, there is consensus

that change is on the horizon. As such, college representatives are looking carefully at bills filed this year, as they may be a sign of the changes to come. As of March 10, 9 bills have been filed that would amend the Bright Futures statutes. **SB 1320 (Ring)** and its companion bill, **HB 813 (Atkisson)** would provide the biggest changes by limiting the amounts of the standard awards while allowing higher awards for students majoring in high demand areas. The Board of Governors had recommended similar restructuring of the program, but decided to hold off on proposing changes for another year. The cost of the Bright Futures program has increased significantly over the years, and many feel the program is restricting tuition increases too much since, for the cost of the Bright Futures Program increases with every tuition increase.

Financial Aid

Bills that amend the current tuition assistance programs for private and proprietary postsecondary schools may well be addressed this session. **SB 2210**, is a **Senate Higher Education Committee** Bill. Committee Bills are usually considered to be priorities of the leadership. This bill would amend the Florida Resident Access Grant Program (FRAG) and the Access to Better Learning and Education Grant Program (ABLE) to make these programs *financial aid* programs rather than tuition assistance. The bill would require the institutions involved to meet a retention rate, to require student recipients to maintain a certain GPA and number of hours and to complete financial aid applications. Reports would be required to indicate the number of recipients who received the award without demonstrating financial need. While no House Companion is noted yet, FACC representatives think this bill may be a priority bill to pass.

Other Issues of interest to FACC

Look for more information on the following bills in Week Two's Perception, along with other bills among the hundreds that FACC is following:

Bond Finance

Representative Heller has filed **HB 235** and **Senator Oelrich** has filed **SB 696**, both of which will provide clarity to the Bond Finance laws for community colleges.

Green Construction and energy

Many bills have been filed to address construction issues—especially focusing on ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ construction.

Textbook Affordability

HB 603, (Flores) and **SB 2350, (Atwater)** are identical bills seeking to find methods to contain the high cost of textbooks.

Cosmetology

HB 415 (Carroll) and **SB 996 (Wise)** amend the licensure requirements related to cosmetology. Colleges with cosmetology programs have supported this legislation which will allow students to be trained in specific, shorter programs and enter the workforce quickly.



Sen. Oelrich

Excess Hours

The Excess Hours bill has resurfaced as anticipated. **Senator Constantine's bill, [SB 2614](#)**, was filed. Senator Constantine has worked with the Community Colleges to develop a plan that is less punitive, while still addressing his concerns.

Retirement

Many bills have been filed that deal with retirement issues. FACC and college lobbyists are watching these closely and will offer amendments that address college staff interests whenever the opportunity arises.

Articulation

Articulation between sectors, from high school to college and among postsecondary sectors, appears to be of interest and several bills offer suggestions to enhance the process.