

Poor economy fuels FIU's need to expand downtown space

BY YUDISLAIDY FERNANDEZ

Florida International University's business school hub in downtown Miami keeps growing, with more area residents and workers returning to school for a master's degree in business administration.

To meet the growing demand, the university is under negotiations with department store Macy's to expand its classroom space on the sixth floor of the retailer's building at 22 E Flagler St., school officials say.

The university started voicing interest in taking over added space in the building after its enrollment began to rise last year.

FIU now occupies about one-third of the sixth floor, said Diana Medina, as-

sistant director at the downtown center, but plans are to expand within that same floor.

"I know it's going to happen, but it hasn't been finalized," she said.

The national retailer announced in February a reorganization that called for reducing personnel in its downtown headquarters by cutting 600 locally-based jobs.

For FIU, the economic downturn is driving up enrollment at the downtown campus, increasing its need for space.

Enrollment has soared, Ms. Medina said, increasing by 120% from 2007 to 2008, and remaining at that level since.

In the last academic year, the center had 120 professionals enrolled in classes, she said.

Sarah Perez, FIU's director of executive and professional MBAs, said the school is starting two new cohorts, or groups of students pursuing the master's, this month.

"During an economic recession more students are interested in getting their master's degree," she said, adding that the convenience and location of the university's downtown MBA programs are additional factors.

Most of the enrolled business executives are based in downtown and Brickell, Ms. Medina said, and others are from Kendall, Pembroke Pines and Broward County.

The downtown center currently offers a master's in science in finance and in international real estate. The down-

town center MBA is for working professionals with at least four years of work experience, Ms. Perez said.

FIU opened the center in 2005 to meet the needs of downtown's business community because the location is more accessible for urban professionals with busy lifestyles.

Last year, the university extended its lease with Macy's for two more years on the sixth floor of the retail and office building.

If expansion plans move forward, Ms. Perez said, the center could gain enough space to set up about two additional classrooms to run its programs.

"We are expanding the classroom and office space to continue to grow and meet the needs of the community."