A School for the Americas

The Chapman Graduate School of Business at FIU is transforming itself. At the helm is José de la Torre, the recently appointed dean.

By Valeria Escobari, Miami

José de la Torre, dean of the Chapman Graduate School of Business at Florida International University (FIU) is not wasting any time. Since he assumed the post less than a year ago, he's restructured the institution and is eagerly raising money for a new career service program and the construction of a $40 million building.

De la Torre—a prolific author of more than 40 books on international corporate strategy, trade and investment, and a former faculty member at UCLA, Georgia State University, the Harvard Business School and INSEAD, the European Institute of Business Administration in France—could hardly be more qualified academically.

Yet, he's also got the instincts of a successful retailer. He wants FIU to fully leverage its geographic location in Miami, the hub of Latin American and U.S. trade and commerce to make the Chapman School as “the business school of the Americas.”

What was the Chapman School like when you took over?
I found a dozen programs that had grown in a stais generis sort of way. The structure encouraged the growth of these programs but did not allow for synergies.

The vertical structure of the school was such that each program protected its territory and its autonomy, but there was no collaboration between them. My first task was to reorganize the school. I created five work groups—a mixture of professors, alumni, staff, and board members—to work on integration. The groups worked from October to December 2002 and I took all of their work during my vacation and created an organizational structure that I announced on January 17, 2003.

I reduced the autonomy of the programs and I integrated the admissions, accounting, budgeting, student services, marketing, and placement functions.

Were there many layoffs?
I repositioned many people. I had to change the culture in the program and many people were not willing to change or collaborate with me and I preferred that they left. Many others accepted the changes with great enthusiasm. I am hiring new people and we’re hoping to have the new system working by July 1st.

How successful are your efforts to raise the GMAT scores at FIU?
Students need to take the GMAT to apply for business school and most Hispanics don’t do well on this test. Their scores are very low, between 500 and 550. When I compare FIU to other universities, their students’ average score is between 600 and 650. Ivy League schools score even higher, around 720.

If I want to compete with other universities, I need to raise the average GMAT score at FIU. What do I do if I am recruiting from a group that generally scores lower on these exams, and I know these students are much more capable than what their scores indicate? The problem is the language. So, I have two options: I either market my program to a different group of students, or I introduce a Spanish language version of the exam. We are considering this option.
My goal is to raise the average GMAT score to 600 within five years. I also reduced the size of certain programs that were struggling to attract top students. I would rather have fewer, more qualified students.

**How do you answer business school critics who say the best classroom is the workplace?**

Of course I disagree. Look, I think an MBA program gives you a set of tools that allow you to accelerate your development in the business world. But just like in any other educational process, you have to work with raw material, and the raw material is each student’s capabilities.

**So you believe discipline does not replace talent?**

It does not. No way. Many of the most successful people in the world never went to college. Take Bill Gates for example, who never finished school. We provide a student the tools, the concepts, the approach to advance their careers at a faster rhythm. That’s what we do.

**What role is the Miami business community playing in the development of the Chapman School?**

We have extraordinary support. Many local executives teach in our programs, especially people who, at the end of their careers, want to share their experiences. We also are launching a fundraising campaign for a new building that will cost $40 million. The state will provide approximately $15 million and we need to come up with the rest. We’ve launched a series of initiatives and have been able to raise $1.7 million so far. The great thing is the state will match what we raise.

Local companies are also very involved on our board, we have directors of multinationals such as General Foods, Hewlett Packard, Johnson & Johnson, Wachovia, and Florida Power and Light.

**What is their greatest contribution?**

We need that level of visibility. In addition to the main board, we are developing specialized counseling boards for each program. We have 32 students enrolled in our Human Resources Masters program for example, and we have a board of 35 members, who are HR directors in important Florida companies. They mentor our students and they revise the materials used in class. We’re doing the same thing for our IT program and the greatest part is that they are our liaison to the larger business community.

**How do you think technology is changing education?**

It’s had a profound impact in many ways. First of all, information is transferred differently. Also, it’s easier to update information, and the research a student can do on the Internet is extraordinary! Many of our courses have an interactive part, which allows us to have extra class hours without the roll call. The advantage is that students receive a hybrid education. I believe this is the future. Online courses are not enough, because part of what you gain from graduate school is a great network and for that, you need personal interaction with your fellow classmates.