HARD AT WORK: Joyce Elam, named dean of FIU's College of Business Administration two years ago, has set her sights on more technology and a host of new programs, and is determined to lift the school's profile.

BY DALE K. DUPONT

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Joyce Elam spent her summer vacation sea kayaking in Alaska, just the kind of adventure she relishes.

However exciting the trip, it likely pales beside the frenetic time Elam has had in the two years since being named dean of Florida International University's College of Business Administration.

The former math major with gilt-edged academic credentials inherited a school in danger of losing accreditation because it had no focus. Elam wasted no time getting it in focus with a host of new programs, a technological overhaul and a determination to raise its profile. She's also not shy about putting the touch on alumni and others to boost contributions.

"You get a feeling she doesn't rest much," said Francis Aguilar, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, who works with Elam on a minority business school initiative.

Elam comes from a technology background, so she has a sense of urgency about her work — and a mind of her own, say those who know her.

"You just can't sit around and think about a program for two years," Elam said. "The way you keep up is with a very dedicated and committed faculty that is willing to change all the time."

For starters, the college, the second-largest of FIU's 15 schools, invested in its technology infrastructure and courses. The Ryder Business Building is now wireless. All master's of business administration students must have laptops.

The school began an international MBA program, expanded its master's of international business program to Germany and its executive MBA program to Jamaica. It's also taking its master's programs to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Chile — all part of a Web-based-learning push.

Elam's five-year plan includes bringing in endowed professorships — she's already gotten five — and building a substantial graduate school that would double current enrollment. "Great business schools have great grad-
FIU’s Elam revamps business school

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uate schools,” she said.

FIU president Modesto “Mitch” Maidique said Elam is “well on her way” to raising the standards in teaching, research and hiring.

“We were looking for someone who was willing to look at things in a different way, someone who would not be inclined to follow the orthodoxy of business schools,” he said.

All those changes, of course, cost money.

Business professors, for example, have a lot more options in the corporate world than, say, anthropologists. While regular faculty members average $55,000, Maidique said, business school professors could command well over $100,000.

“The highest-paid person at FIU is the dean of business,” he said. Elam makes $208,428. Maidique makes $197,000.

Maidique figures the school needs to raise $50 million and to have a plan that’s salable to the local business community as well as to graduates who’ve gone on to national and international corporations. Elam must come up with the plan. With the resources in place, the college can aspire to national recognition, such as Business Week magazine’s top 25 ranked business schools.

While not in the top 25, six Florida schools rated regional mention, including the University of Florida and the University of Miami.

“It will take a new building and a significant endowment to achieve one of those lists,” Maidique said.

Elam already has started a business partners program, designed to increase donations from the corporate world while strengthening ties through research projects or internships. Among the 23 partners so far are Burdines, Visa International and First Union National Bank of Florida.

“She’s exactly what the school needed,” said Carlos Migoya, the bank’s president for Miami-Dade and Monroe counties, who also headed the search committee for a new dean.

She’s raised the school’s profile in part by being a very visible mass of energy whose ideas come faster than she can speak and who can laugh at herself as well.

“It’s probably the best move Mitch has made at the school,” said Tony Argiz, managing shareholder of Morrison Brown Argiz & Co., and, like Migoya, an FIU graduate.

Argiz’s Miami accounting firm was asked for $100,000 for a chair at the school. They’d never been asked for anything like that before. “We’re still discussing it,” he said. “We’ll eventually do something.”

While fund raising is important, Elam also has been wrestling with an accreditation issue. In a report released while Elam was interim dean in the spring of 1998, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business said the school had to better define its goals within three years or risk losing accreditation.

The report said the faculty was doing a good job and praised the revitalized doctoral program and redesigned master’s in administration program. But the college had not met standards added in 1992 that require schools to be rigorous in setting priorities and measuring performance.

FIU’s business school, founded along with the university in 1972, is one of only 371 out of 1,300 colleges nationwide accredited by the Assembly.

“Their criticism was valid,” Elam said. “We hadn’t sat down as a college and said what market are we going to serve. If there’s anything that characterizes the college today — we’re very innovative, very market-driven.”

She expects the reaccreditation to go smoothly next spring, the third anniversary of her being named to a job she did not seek. Elam, 50, joined the faculty in 1990 as a James L. Knight Eminent Scholar in Management and Information Systems, the school’s first eminent scholar. She was named interim dean in mid-1997 while the school was doing an extensive search to replace Harold Wyman, who was retiring from the job but remaining a professor. After two years of looking, the search committee turned to Elam, who had attractive credentials, but was not applying for the job and was relatively new to FIU.

“I really do believe if you’re a serious professor, you have a real obligation to your college,” Elam said.

While many praise her emphasis on technology, there is some grumbling that it has come at the expense of other areas.

Faculties, in general, are “a very unruly group to work with,” said Aguilar, of Harvard.

“So when you’ve got a dean who comes in and says maybe it’s time we started teaching what’s happening in the 20th Century — let alone the 21st — you’ve got a bunch of disgruntled people.”

From John Nicholls’ perspective, “She’s doing things like we have never done before,” such as emphasizing e-commerce and adding new graduate programs.

“We were very much of a quiet place before,” said Nicholls, chairman of the marketing department. “We are no longer quiet.”