

Digital Debrief: David Klock getting down to Business

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C.W. Griffin / Miami Herald Staff

David R. Klock is dean of Florida International University's College of Business.

David R. Klock took the helm of Florida International University's College of Business as dean, on Oct. 1, after serving in a similar role at the University of Alabama-Birmingham's School of Business.

A milkman's son who earned a doctorate in finance, Klock's career has spanned leadership positions in both academia and business.

Soon after he arrived at FIU, Klock began holding open forums for students, where he has laid out his priorities, including hiring more faculty members.

Eager to learn more about Klock, we sent him these questions, and he emailed his responses:

Q.You have an interesting background for an academician, in that you were chief executive and chairman of CompBenefits Corp. Please tell me about that entrepreneurial experience.

In 1980, while at the University of Central Florida, a former student asked my wife Phyllis and me to get involved in CompBenefits, a dental benefits company. It was barely a year old, with no full-time employees. We started as unpaid consultants. Our friends at the university thought we were crazy, but

we saw potential.

By 1986, the company had grown substantially. My involvement as a consultant steadily increased, and in 1991, I resigned my position at UCF and went to work full-time as president of CompBenefits.

Just after I arrived in Atlanta, the chairman of the company told me he was selling the company. I said, "I just gave up my tenured position, and now you're selling?" His response: "Oh, don't worry, you and Phyllis will buy it. It's \$25 to \$30 million, and you'll find the money." I thought he was joking, but sure enough, we did. When the deal was done, Phyllis and I were the only original shareholders left.

From there, the company took off. After several acquisitions, we went public in 1995. In 1998, with the company still thriving, the stock valuation hit a snag. Our original investment bankers came back to us and suggested we take the company private, which we did in 1999. We operated the company for six more years, growing with acquisitions, including Oral Health Services out of Miami and Vision Care Plan in Tampa, a new line of business for us. After five years as a private company, it was time to sell, and Humana emerged as the buyer in 2005. When the deal closed in 2006, we were providing benefits to just under 5 million members in 23 states, with over \$350 million in revenue.

Q. You also have experience in the corporate world, serving as a director. Please tell me about that.

In addition to serving on the board of CompBenefits when I was chairman and CEO, I have served on several corporate boards. The first was Province Healthcare, a chain of rural hospitals based in Nashville. While I was dean of the business school at Cal Poly in Pomona, I was invited to be on the board of directors and chair the Special Litigation Committee of Cheesecake Factory. I'm now on the board of Mayer Electric, a \$600+ million private company in electrical equipment distribution, based in Birmingham.

Q. Now that you are here, what are your academic goals at FIU's College of Business?

Before I arrived at FIU, the college went through an intensive strategic planning process, and made a decision to focus on three thematic areas: healthcare, entrepreneurship and international business. Our primary mission is developing, nurturing and supporting world-class faculty dedicated to leading the institution in those themes.

The key to moving forward is to do two things simultaneously – to lift existing faculty to new levels, and to bring in additional faculty who are experts in these areas. Another goal is to make sure we have the people and processes to keep our programs as innovative and dynamic as possible. If we rest on our laurels, our programs will be obsolete.

We're talking about the central role of a dynamic curriculum, which is a faculty-driven phenomenon. I can motivate and provide resources, but at the end of the day, it takes creative, innovative faculty to assure that our college's programs are state-of-the-art.

Q. What other goals do you have for the College of Business, outside of the classroom?

Research universities like FIU are collections of exceptional investigators. These universities are generating intellectual property (IP) that can change people's lives. One of the roles of a college of business in today's economy is taking a lead role in the translational process of converting great IP into real companies that produce life-changing products and services. This is something I did with success as dean of the business school at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

As a dynamic, contemporary business college, we will play a role in that translational process at FIU. That will mean a lot of cross disciplinary activities, heavily focused on the relationship between medicine, engineering, the sciences and the College of Business.

Q. It seems that you have a particular interest in healthcare. Please tell me about that, and will that field be a priority at FIU?

Innovation and entrepreneurship will have a significant impact on our ability to manage healthcare successfully. The College of Business has a significant commitment to the study of healthcare management, and to the next big development: managing big data.

We have a new program in health informatics, managing the massive amount of healthcare data. Managing the data pieces that come out of one human being will be a huge challenge. How do we manage that data to improve health?

Q. Research has also been important to you in the past. Please tell me about that and how you plan to bring that to FIU?

FIU is a research-based university. It is a university that understands that we have multiple charges. We have to be disseminating information to students, to help them learn, and grow, and have the opportunity for a great future. We have an equally important responsibility to support the creation of new knowledge and disseminate that new intellectual property. This is what comes from the faculty, and this is what changes lives.

Now, I can't guarantee that every piece of research will change lives — but some will. If a reasonable percentage turns out to be outstanding, then the process of investment in research is well worth it. That's what universities do. We educate and create knowledge. We can't do one without the other.

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