

THE CEO ERA

OF COLLEGE
ATHLETICS



HOW ONE AAU UNIVERSITY
IS REDEFINING LEADERSHIP
IN A MULTI-BILLION-DOLLAR
INDUSTRY

HIGHER ED PERSPECTIVES FROM



UNIVERSITY of
SOUTH FLORIDA

IN THIS CASE STUDY

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“WE ARE COMMITTED TO POSITIONING USF AS A NATIONAL LEADER IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS THAT COMPETES AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS AND WINS CHAMPIONSHIPS. IN ADDITION TO PROVIDING A GREAT EXPERIENCE FOR OUR STUDENT-ATHLETES, USF ATHLETICS ENHANCES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, ACTIVATES OUR ALUMNI, INCREASES OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE TAMPA BAY COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT OUR UNIVERSITY AND PROVIDES MANY OTHER BENEFITS.”

– President Moez Limayem

INTRODUCTION

In the past three years, intercollegiate athletics has undergone a structural shift unlike anything in its modern history. Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) compensation has evolved from endorsement deals to revenue sharing. Media-rights contracts in the Power conferences stretch into the billions. Conference realignment reshapes competitive and financial landscapes almost annually. And athletic departments at major public universities now manage nine-figure budgets, complex capital projects and enterprise-level risk.

Yet at most institutions, the title at the top has remained the same.

When the University of South Florida launched its most recent athletics leadership search, the conversation did not begin with branding. It began with governance.

“As we embarked on this search, it became clear that this moment was different,” said Will Weatherford, chair of the USF Board of Trustees. “Our next leader couldn’t just be an athletics director — we needed a CEO of USF Athletics.”

The distinction, Weatherford said, is substantive.

“The CEO title is a recognition that we are stewarding not just an athletic program, but something that increasingly resembles a professional sports franchise,” he said. “We have student-athletes being compensated not just through NIL but through revenue share. That sounds a lot more like a business than just a not-for-profit organization. So, we should run it like a business.”

Across Division I, many athletics directors already operate as chief executives – overseeing media contracts, donor portfolios, sponsorship strategy, facilities financing, compliance risk and direct athlete compensation models. USF chose to make that evolution explicit and structure for it, adding a chief operating officer and chief business officer alongside its new athletics leader.

That leader is Rob Higgins, a USF alumnus and the longtime executive director of the Tampa Bay Sports Commission, where he helped position the region to host two Super Bowls, a College Football Playoff National Championship and multiple NCAA championships. Higgins has managed global-scale events with sprawling economic impact and complex public-private partnerships.

He now becomes the first USF alumnus to lead the department. Weatherford has described Higgins as “a fighter pilot,” noting his ability to spot patterns, recognize things before they happen and to communicate, motivate and lead precisely and effectively.

“The college athletics landscape has been ultra dynamic in the last three years specifically,” Higgins said. “The days of just managing sports programs and coaches and overseeing student-athletes are over. Those traditional responsibilities remain. But now you layer in the overarching duty to help manage a major business enterprise — revenue generation, marketing, capital projects. The job has elevated organically. This is more appropriately naming it what it has become.”

USF’s athletics leadership team also includes Chief Operating Officer Derrick Brooks and Chief Business Officer Jason Layton.

Brooks is a former Tampa Bay Buccaneers star and Pro Football Hall of Famer whose daughter is a student-athlete at USF. His deep connections to the region make him what Weatherford calls “a universal brand, someone who is beyond reproach as a leader and a person.”

CEO of USF Athletics Rob Higgins is a USF alumnus and was previously the executive director of the Tampa Bay Sports Commission.



Chief Operating Officer Derrick Brooks speaks with student-athlete Sofia Chepenik.



Chief Business Officer for USF Athletics Jason Layton completes the new leadership team.

Layton’s career includes roles with the Bucs and at the University of Miami, a fellow Association of American Universities member and this year’s College Football Playoff national runner-up.

From her vantage point as USF’s inaugural women’s lacrosse coach, Mindy McCord says the approach the university has taken with athletics “was long overdue at the top level of Division I.”

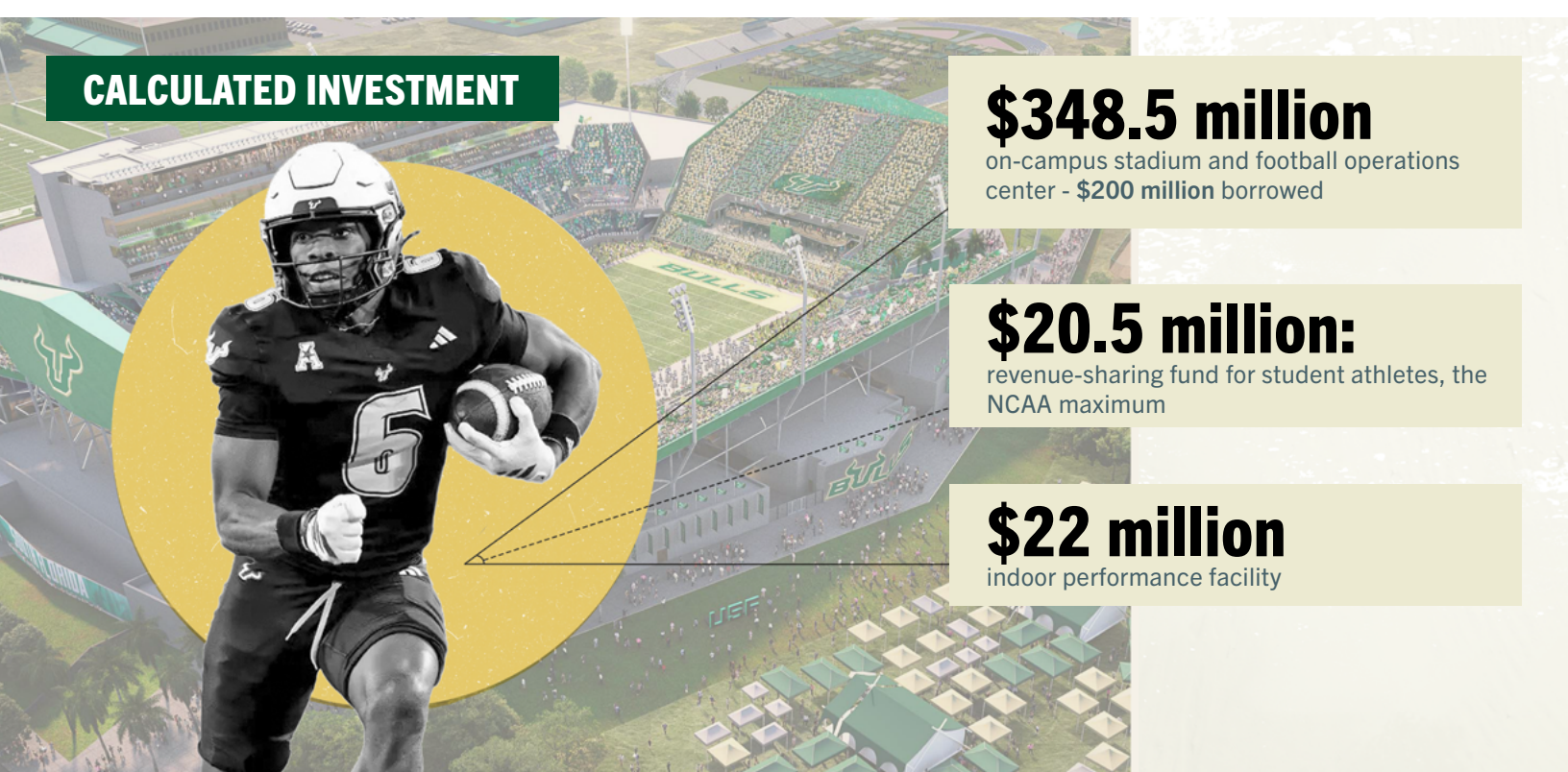
“The title of ‘director of athletics’ doesn’t display any regard for financial acumen or building a growing business like CEO does,” McCord said, adding that, similarly, “a chief executive officer title reflects what college athletics at the highest level is.”

The shift fits USF’s broader institutional pattern: Acknowledge structural change early and design for it directly. In the past year, the university launched the Bellini College of Artificial Intelligence,

Cybersecurity and Computing — the first named college in the country dedicated to those integrated fields — and advanced construction of a \$348.5 million on-campus stadium and football operations center scheduled to open in 2027.

USF’s leaders, including Weatherford, have acknowledged that borrowing \$200 million to make the stadium a reality is a calculated risk with potentially enormous benefits.

Along with a \$22 million indoor performance facility completed in 2023, a nine-win football season in 2025, three consecutive bowl appearances, AAU membership and the USF Morsani College of Medicine’s current designation as the top-ranked medical school in Florida by U.S. News & World Report, the moves collectively position USF athletically and academically for inclusion in a Power 4 – or even Power 2 – conference.



CALCULATED INVESTMENT

\$348.5 million
on-campus stadium and football operations center - \$200 million borrowed

\$20.5 million:
revenue-sharing fund for student athletes, the NCAA maximum

\$22 million
indoor performance facility

“I think what makes USF special is the ability to diagnose exactly what’s happening and get out in front of where the rest of the country currently is,” Higgins said. “The mission and vision for what athletics can do for a university is really well-understood by our leadership.”

The new athletics leadership team continued the momentum in December by hiring Ohio State offensive coordinator Brian Hartline as USF’s next football coach, a move broadly hailed in college athletics circles.

On the heels of that announcement, USF’s Board of Trustees approved an annual \$20.5 million revenue-sharing fund — the maximum allowed — to be distributed to student-athletes for the 2026-27 fiscal year.

Weatherford sees the series of moves as connected.

“What worked in 1996 is not going to work in 2026,” he said. “We can either complain about what college sports is today, or we can be part of the solution. Athletics is still a very important part of the student experience. We have a responsibility to get this right.”

The scale of that responsibility reinforces the point. USF enrolls nearly 50,000 students, counts more than 400,000 living alumni and reached \$750 million in research funding last year. In that context, athletics is neither peripheral nor purely promotional. It is one of the university’s most visible, outward-facing enterprises.

“Athletics is often the front doorstep for external stakeholders,” Higgins said. “Our goal is a modernized, professionalized approach — data, analytics, return on investment — and to be very clear about

how athletics delivers value back to the university, financially, reputationally and through student experience.”

That emphasis on transparency is intentional.

“I think the general public deserves to know exactly where we’re headed and what our thought process is,” Higgins said. “A lot of times universities have tried to hide how the sausage is being made when it comes to complicated issues. Our goal is to be a trusted, transparent partner — on campus and in the community.”

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While many observers describe college sports as “broken,” USF’s posture is that athletics, like research or health care or technology transfer, requires executive clarity, operational depth and measurable accountability.

01

RUNNING ATHLETICS LIKE AN ENTERPRISE

If the transformation was only about compensation models or conference alignment, a traditional structure might suffice. But the cumulative effect of NIL, the transfer portal, expanding media contracts and escalating coaching contracts has altered how athletics functions inside a university.

“At this point, it’s not just athletics,” said Delaney Ryan, USF’s vice president of student-athlete development and senior woman administrator. “It encompasses education, business, branding, compliance and professional development. The evolution of the title really matches the evolution of college athletics itself.”

Michelle Harrolle, who leads USF’s Vinik Sport & Entertainment Management graduate program, describes college athletic departments as “transforming slowly into mini corporations.”



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“It was changing monthly,” Harrolle said of NIL’s early implementation. “Athletes were saying, ‘We want more voice. We want more stake in this multi-billion-dollar business.’ Departments that want to stay at the forefront need people who are really good at strategy and really good at relationships.”

“AN ATHLETIC DIRECTOR DIRECTS. A CEO STRATEGICALLY MANAGES THE ENTIRE ENTERPRISE. NAMES ARE PERCEPTION. LANGUAGE MATTERS.”

For Harrolle, the shift to something more closely resembling corporate structure is meaningful.

“An athletic director directs. A CEO strategically manages the entire enterprise. Names are perception. Language matters.”

Layton, USF’s athletics CBO, frames the shift in operational terms, noting an increasing convergence between college and professional sports on the business side.

“As the business of college athletics continues to change and expand, the need

to find additional revenue streams and support continues to grow,” Layton said. “That drives the need to structure the business differently than it has been in the past.”



Athletics is being organized with the same functional rigor applied elsewhere on campus — finance, operations, compliance and strategy — rather than relying on legacy hierarchies.

A modernized approach also helps recruit talent across sectors.

“If you’re coming from outside athletics, you may not know what an assistant athletic director of marketing does,” Layton said. “But people understand

what a chief marketing officer does. There’s value in leveling titles to what the broader industry looks like.”

In Higgins’ case, it better reflects the complexity of his responsibilities than a more conventional athletic director title can. Weatherford points to his work as chairman of the committee that brought the Super Bowl to Tampa in 2021 alongside Higgins, who served as the committee’s CEO.

“We had to throw a party – a Super Bowl – in the midst of a global pandemic,” Weatherford said. “It was hard and complex, and watching the way Rob handled that with grace and elegance and intensity – all at the same time – it was really impressive to see.”

The experience inspired Weatherford to tell Higgins at the time that if he ever was so inclined, he could lead any of the companies he’s invested in.

Higgins didn’t forget.

“When we interviewed him for this role,” Weatherford recalled, “he said, ‘I hope you also meant CEO of USF’s Athletic Department.’”

For institutions seeking to recruit experienced talent from both collegiate and professional environments, the signal is clear. Athletics is being organized with the same functional rigor applied elsewhere on campus — finance, operations, compliance and strategy — rather than relying on legacy hierarchies.

02

STUDENT AND FACULTY ALIGNMENT

Still, structural modernization alone does not resolve faculty concerns about mission alignment.

Jenifer Jasinski Schneider – interim dean of USF’s College of Education and former USF Faculty Senate president – acknowledges concerns from faculty over the stadium cost, citing academic infrastructure needs. But she recognizes the strategic logic behind investment in athletics and the broader governance shift.

“The board understands the way money moves, and they understand the landscape,” she said. “NIL and the transfer portal changed the environment. It’s not just about bringing in a player and keeping them for four years anymore. It’s

an evolving system that needs a broader perspective over it.”

For Schneider, the CEO model must coexist with strong internal layers focused on student development and organizational health.

“You can’t just put up a stadium,” she said. “You have to invest in the people who make it successful. The health of the organization — the infrastructure — is what elevates it.”

The stadium, scheduled to open in 2027, is framed internally as more than a facilities upgrade. Beyond game-day revenue, university leaders see it as a connective asset that embeds athletics into the daily academic footprint of campus.

“Athletics is part of the overall experience that students take part in while they’re here — and what brings them back,” Layton

said. “When you’re walking past classrooms you’ve been in and heading into the stadium, it ties you back to campus.”

Ryan sees similar potential.

“It’s hard to get student engagement when the stadium is across the city,” she said, referring to Raymond James Stadium on Tampa’s west side. “Having something on campus that’s ours — that we build from the ground up — helps build culture and community.”

National research on student engagement consistently links campus belonging to higher retention and persistence rates.

USF President Moez Limayem references findings showing that students who attend games and participate in campus traditions often report stronger attachment to their universities.



“IT’S HARD TO GET STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WHEN THE STADIUM IS ACROSS THE CITY. HAVING SOMETHING ON CAMPUS THAT’S OURS — THAT WE BUILD FROM THE GROUND UP — HELPS BUILD CULTURE AND COMMUNITY.”

USF’s stadium, with a planned opening in 2027, will seat 35,000 fans, including 8,000 seats reserved for USF students.

WEATHERFORD DESCRIBES LIVE SPORTS AS “ONE OF THE FEW PLACES WHERE FACULTY, STAFF, ALUMNI AND STUDENTS GATHER TOGETHER IN REAL TIME.” THAT CONVERGENCE, HE ARGUES, BUILDS AFFINITY THAT EXTENDS BEYOND GAME DAY.



“When students attend athletic events, we see greater retention rates,” Limayem said. “It brings connection. They meet other students, staff, faculty and alumni and find themselves cheering with someone they didn’t know, and that creates belonging.”

Harrolle cites research showing application spikes following national championships and describes an investment cycle: recruitment initiates the relationship; engagement sustains it; retention realizes it.

“Sports provide community,” she said. “That sense of belonging translates.” In the transfer-portal era, that sense of belonging must happen quickly. Ryan, who previously led academic support services at Mercer University, notes that student-athletes may now be on campus for shorter periods than in the past.

“You might only have a student-athlete for a year,” she said. “So, the goal is still the same — make an impact as much as we

can and figure out what they need outside of athletics, and help them get there.”

That includes ensuring academic credits transfer appropriately, helping students clarify career goals early, and preparing them for potential transitions. In a fluid marketplace, development cannot wait.

For USF’s sport management students, the moment is instructive. Harrolle’s

graduate students analyze leadership styles, adaptability analytics fluency and relationship-building — the same balance she sees in effective executives.

The broader institutional question remains: Will governance structures evolve as quickly as the landscape?

USF’s answer is clear in its org chart.

03

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AS AN ACADEMIC STRATEGY

For institutions focused on long-term academic reputation and measurable student outcomes, the question isn’t just whether athletics generate excitement — it’s whether they also contribute to student success.

A growing body of research suggests they can.

Studies across multiple institutional types have found that students who participate in campus traditions — including attending athletic events — report higher levels of belonging, stronger peer networks and greater institutional attachment. Those factors are consistently associated with improved first-year persistence and higher graduation rates.

In national surveys such as NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement), “sense of belonging” and “campus engagement” strongly correlate with academic performance and retention. A 2024

Student Voice survey of former students with no degree found that 60% of those who stopped out didn’t participate in any activities during their time on campus.

USF’s leadership sees athletics not as an extracurricular add-on, but as a structured engagement platform.

Limayem views the upcoming move to an on-campus stadium — bringing football home for the first time in university history — as infrastructure for community formation, not just a revenue asset.

Weatherford describes live sports as “one of the few places where faculty, staff, alumni and students gather together in real time.” That convergence, he argues, builds affinity that extends beyond game day.



USF’s leadership sees athletics not as an extracurricular add-on, but as a structured engagement platform.

The benefits are far-reaching. They include increased exposure and revenue from attendees at games and events for USF and businesses in the surrounding community. And with those campus visits comes the opportunity for deeper emotional attachment to the university, which can support brand initiatives and donor activity.

McCord, the women’s lacrosse coach, agrees that athletics can be a university’s front door, and argues that it goes even beyond that.

“In many ways, it’s also the hyperlink to the university,” McCord said, adding that in today’s environment, many athletes “are small businesses in their own right, all actively co-branding and marketing.”

In that sense, McCord said, “Athletics connects the university in critical ways through these very dynamic student-athletes, their fields of study, their community involvement and their sports. When you go to one of their bios online,

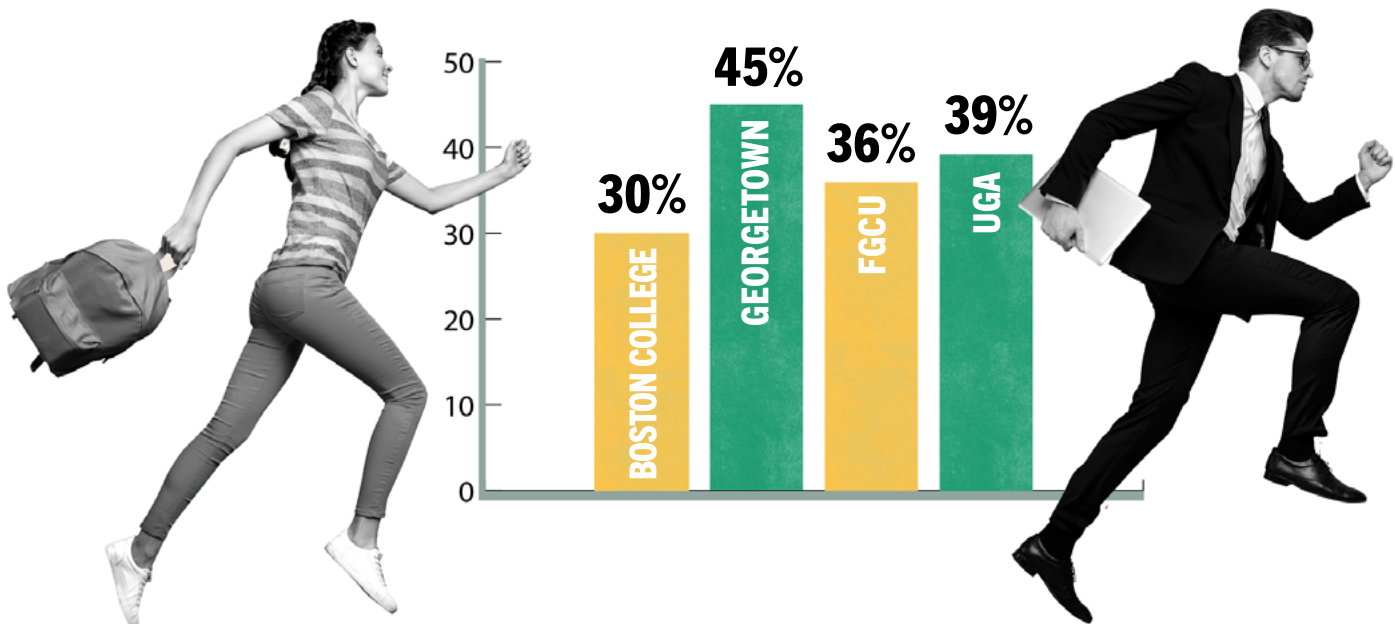
you’re bound to be connected to so many facets of university life.”

On-field success and postseason visibility have also been linked at some institutions to application increases and expanded geographical reach – sometimes labeled the “Flutie Effect” after Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie’s 1984 Hail Mary win that resulted in a nearly 30% increase in applications over the next two years.

Other examples include:

- Georgetown University, which saw applications surge by 45 percent in the mid-1980s behind the success of its men’s basketball program and star Patrick Ewing.
- The University of Georgia, where applications jumped from 28,000 in 2020 to 39,000 in 2021 on the heels of a college football national championship.
- Florida Gulf Coast University, which experienced a more than 20-fold increase in sales of men’s basketball-related

APPLICATIONS INCREASED AFTER ON-FIELD SUCCESS



merchandise and a 36% jump in overall applications after its men's basketball team's 2013 NCAA Sweet Sixteen run.

Beyond enrollment impact, athletic success has in at least one prominent study by University of California-Berkeley researcher Michael Anderson been tied to increased giving and improved applicant academic profiles. Anderson found that schools improving their football season wins total by five games average \$682,000 more in alumni donations and a nine-point increase in 25th percentile SAT scores.

USF's leadership acknowledges these potential benefits but is careful not to overstate the case. Higgins emphasizes that "the one thing that hasn't changed is our priority on the student-athlete experience." The parallel goal is enhancing the student experience in ways that strengthen institutional attachment for all 50,000 students — not just the 500 student-athletes.

The governance principle is straightforward: belonging drives persistence; persistence drives completion; completion strengthens institutional outcomes.

In that sense, athletics are not the strategy. They are a lever within a larger institutional framework that includes academic advising, predictive analytics, student support systems and campus life programming.

USF's wager is that engagement, when intentionally designed and rigorously measured, supports academic excellence.

04

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND LESSONS LEARNED

USF's CEO model is less about titles than alignment. Several lessons may resonate with peer institutions:



ALIGN STRUCTURES WITH SCALE: As athletics grows in financial scale and regulatory complexity, the scope of responsibility changes. Governance structures should reflect that change. Titles matter insofar as they frame accountability, authority and expectations — internally and externally.



CLARIFY ROLES: USF's defined executive lanes — strategy, operations, revenue — reinforce a broader principle by sharpening performance and transparency.



EMBED MISSION ALIGNMENT: The model only works if student-athlete development, academic support and faculty governance remain embedded in the design. Professionalization should strengthen, not dilute, the academic experience. Student development remains central.



TREAT ATHLETICS AS A STRATEGIC ASSET: Live sports remain one of the few shared civic experiences that bring students, alumni, faculty and community partners together. Managed responsibly, it can amplify brand, convene the community and support recruitment and retention.

5

LEAD TRANSPARENTLY: Rather than resisting or lamenting shifts in the college sports landscape, USF's leadership chose to publicly acknowledge them. Structural change invites scrutiny. Candor builds trust.

6

DESIGN FOR WHAT'S NEXT: Conference realignment is not settled. Media rights will continue to escalate. NIL frameworks will evolve. College leaders must decide whether their institutions will react to these forces or anticipate them. Governance agility is emerging as a competitive advantage.

7

FOCUS ON PROVIDING STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH A QUALITY EXPERIENCE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM – NO MATTER HOW LONG THEY STAY: In the current landscape, student-athletes may enroll at an institution for six months, one year or the more traditional four or more years. Regardless, Higgins said, "Our job isn't to lament the time we don't have with them. It's curating the absolute best student-athlete experience that can happen.

We've got to meet and exceed those dreams in the most profound way possible."

8

LEVERAGE THE VISIBILITY ATHLETICS PROVIDES FOR OTHER INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES: Athletics generates visible momentum. When people see a university winning — on the field and in research — they want to invest in it, join it and be associated with it.



"The stadium represents more than a facility investment. It is part of a broader strategy to strengthen campus life, deepen community engagement and position USF for continued growth and national prominence."

– President Moez Limayem

USF CEO of Athletics Rob Higgins, left, and USF President Moez Limayem assessing the stadium construction.

05

A GOVERNANCE QUESTION FRAMED AROUND AN ATHLETICS STORY

It would be easy to frame USF's move as simply an athletics story — a new title, a high-profile hire, a stadium rising on campus for the first time in the university's 70-year history. But the deeper narrative is about institutional leadership during transformation.

Across higher education, presidents are confronting structural shifts: demographic cliffs, research competition, evolving workforce demands, technological disruption and financial pressures. Intercollegiate athletics is experiencing its own version of that upheaval. The common thread is not sport. It is governance.

Institutions can defend legacy models or redesign them. Complain about market forces or engage them. Preserve titles rooted in history or clarify roles rooted in present reality. They can treat change as a communications problem or a leadership challenge.

Regional stakeholders like Ken Hagan, chairman of the Hillsborough County Board of Commissioners and a University of Florida alumnus, appear to recognize the shift.

"USF is a sleeping giant," Hagan said. "For years, it may have been viewed as a commuter school. That stigma doesn't exist anymore. You can't ignore what's happening — academically, athletically and on the research front."

The CEO model is consistent with USF's recent pattern of structural boldness. For university leaders, the question is less about whether to replicate it and more about whether their own governance structures match the complexity of the moment. Athletics may be the most visible arena where this tension is playing out, but it's not the only one.

In the end, titles alone don't transform institutions. Alignment does. Clarity does. The willingness to adjust does.

College sports will continue to evolve. So will higher education more broadly. Institutions that treat these shifts as leadership challenges — rather than public relations challenges — may be best positioned not simply to compete, but to endure.



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NO

