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FGCU Gets National Attention During March Madness

Lori Johnston | April 2, 2013

Even if you're not a college basketball fan, it's easy to love the story about [Florida Gulf Coast University](#), or FGCU, a four-year public university in Fort Myers, Fla. This Cinderella team during March Madness has received national attention – fans even include Justin Timberlake – for its amazing dunks, teamwork, and well, just coming out of what seems to be nowhere.



The school was so unrecognized that even sports anchors have called Florida Gulf Coast the wrong name during the NCAA Tournament. Now, people are jumping on the FGCU bandwagon, clamoring for T-shirts in an area of Florida more known for hosting spring training and as a vacation spot for wealthy retirees and senior citizens trying to escape northern winters.

I've known about FGCU since its beginnings, when I was a magazine editor in Southwest Florida. I have watched the school grow from a couple of buildings to a much larger campus and even dorms (yes, some residence halls are on a beach — on a man-made lake). I'm happy to see FGCU and its men's basketball team (on Twitter as [@FGCUMensBBall](#)) getting attention during March Madness, and being thrust into the national spotlight actually has some lessons for students applying to college.

FGCU (on Twitter as [@FGCU](#)) was a little-known school nationally, but students have been graduating with degrees in everything from business to communications to engineering, and landing jobs in the workplace. Even without being as prominent as the University of Florida (which FGCU will play Friday night in the Sweet Sixteen), FGCU has been educating thousands of students annually since it opened in 1997. Currently, FGCU has about 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

Samantha Geis, who plans to graduate in May with a bachelor's degree in communications, tells us that although FGCU is not a huge

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university, she's noticed major changes in her four years with more amenities, buildings, and residence halls. "I know our school has grown so much since our freshman year," she says.

Geis was born in Florida, but grew up in Indianapolis and came back to FGCU for college. She's also been able to work as an intern at a botanical garden, putting her classroom knowledge to use and gaining much-needed experience. Another plus for FGCU: She's noticed that sorority dues are much cheaper than what her friends at larger, more established, and more well-known schools are paying.

But although students at FGCU are on a high right now, rooting on their team to beat Florida this week, [the school is facing challenges](#) that can't be overcome with dunks on a basketball court.

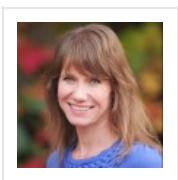
Tuition at FGCU (\$6,068 for 2012-2013 for in-state students) is much lower than other schools, but it's starting to rise. The amount of money that FGCU gets from the state has been cut, and a result, the school has had to lay off staff, and faculty have been concerned about losing their jobs.

Class sizes are increasing, to an average of 34 students, and the appeal for some students had been attending a public university with small classes. The school also has had to cut course offerings, frustrating students who are faced with pushing back their graduation date.

I've seen some students on Twitter talk about applying to FGCU (one appeal is that it's just 15 miles from beautiful beaches on the Gulf of Mexico). It will be interesting to see if applications increase at FGCU, but the story of FGCU shows a few things when you're looking at colleges.

March Madness or other events in the news or sports competitions can be a great way to learn about schools that could fit what you're seeking in terms of academics, sports, and even a social life, in college.

But choosing a college is not just about being a fan of a school. You'll want to dig into its programs, tuition costs, and look for all the news about a school before you decide to apply. FGCU — or another little-known school — could be on your personal college-bound bracket. But which school ultimately wins you as a student depends on more factors than being the school that everyone is talking about.



[Lori Johnston](#)

Lori Johnston is a freelance writer based in Athens, Ga. She is a former Associated Press reporter and has contributed to many publications, including The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Atlanta Business Chronicle, and People magazine. A 1995 graduate of the University of Georgia, Johnston also serves as an adjunct professor in the school's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communications.

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