

FAU boosts profile with business polls



Monica Escalera and Eric Levy of the FAU Business and Polling Initiative are seen with some of the students in the program. Joe Cavaretta / SunSentinel (Joe Cavaretta / Sun Sentinel)

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Sun Sentinel

DECEMBER 15, 2014, 12:35 PM

These days, Florida Atlantic University is posing questions — throughout the nation.

The College of Business at Florida Atlantic University has started polling U.S. Hispanics monthly about the economy and their spending plans. By summer, the business school expects to start releasing a survey on real estate trends. Other polls will follow, FAU administrators promise.

The university's new Business and Economic Polling Initiative is an attempt to shine lights on new trends, teach students about polling — and raise the profile of the College of Business. Already, FAU's Hispanic Index of Consumer Sentiment, a national poll, has been picked up by Reuters and Bloomberg news services as well as local media.

"It raises the visibility of the business school," said Daniel M. Gropper, dean of FAU's College of Business.

The new surveys can help businesses spot trends and adapt to changing markets, he said. The polling also is a practical way for FAU professors to conduct research that will help the community, Gropper added.

Earlier in the fall semester, his school first started polling Hispanics about the economy and how they feel about

their own finances.

It's modeled after the consumer confidence indexes created by the University of Florida and the University of Michigan to track consumer sentiment monthly, said Monica Escaleras, director of FAU's Business and Economic Polling Initiative.

FAU decided to focus on Hispanics because "they're the fastest growing group in the nation" and a big presence in South Florida, she said. Their attitudes, whether pessimistic or optimistic, can shape local and national economies, Escaleras said.

In the latest Hispanic poll, which came out last week Escaleras said there was much to celebrate. The telephone and online survey of 500 randomly selected people found Hispanics more upbeat about the economy.

More were buying or planning to buy. Escaleras cited especially "large gains among younger and higher income Hispanics." Consumer sentiment among Hispanics was high in the West and Midwest, not so much so in the Northeast and South, she said.

The more pessimistic Hispanics tend to be lower income, the recent polls show. More than half of those polled last month who earn less than \$25,000 a year expect to spend less this holiday season.

"The growth of the economy is not reaching everyone," said Nicholas Terlonge, an FAU senior majoring in economics who is helping with the polling.

Still, businesses should follow closely the Hispanic market, said Thomas Dunn, another FAU business economics senior. "It's a way for companies to grow," he said.

Dunn said he's glad he was part of the polling because he learned about Hispanics as well as how to conduct surveys.

So is Samica Telhomme, an FAU international business and economics senior.

"Polling is a big tool these days," said Telhomme, who's hoping to impress prospective employers with survey-taking skills learned this year.

In the next six months or so, business dean Gropper said the university plans to add a real estate poll. It will be modeled after the Standard & Poor's/Case Schiller index, which tracks the same houses sold over time.

But the FAU's survey may look at real estate indicators to determine whether it's a better time to buy or rent a home, he said.

"We want it to come out on a regular basis," he said.

It will help both people and businesses on their economic decisions.

"We're committed," Gropper said. "A lot of good energy is going on."

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