Florida’s Senate and House committees began meeting in September in preparation for the January 10, 2012 start of the yearly legislative session. Next year’s session begins two months earlier than the regular March start date because every 10 years the Legislature must draw new districts for state and federal offices based on the latest U.S. Census results. The districts must be approved by the Legislature, and time for a court challenge by dissenting citizens must be factored in, so that candidates can file for office and ballots be prepared for the late summer primary election.

The Senate and House committees on Redistricting spent the summer traveling to all areas of the state and held joint hearings so that citizens could present ideas for new district lines. The process is also complicated this time by the voters’ approval last year of the “Fair Districts” guidelines, which spell out the kind of geography and demographics that can and can’t be used in drawing district boundaries.

Because of the focus on redistricting, many key legislators have said that they expect the Legislature to take up a very limited agenda during the Session.

Governor’s Letter to Universities
In mid-October, Governor Rick Scott sent a 3-page letter to the 11 presidents of Florida’s public universities. The Governor asked the universities to provide him with a detailed list of information on how the institution is educating students to meet the needs of the state’s employers. The universities’ responses are due to the Governor this week. It is expected that he will use this information to develop the higher education reform package that he has spoken of for the past several months.

The Council of Presidents of the Florida College System and the college lobbyists are meeting with legislative leaders to ensure that any reform package acknowledges the differences between the University and College systems, and that proposals reflect those differences. Two examples of differences include institutional governance and faculty tenure or continuing contracts.

New Chancellor of the Florida College System
Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson recently announced the retirement of College System Chancellor Will Holcombe and the appointment of Tallahassee attorney Randy Hanna as Holcombe’s replacement. This is Chancellor Hanna’s first week, but he has been attending most higher education meetings for the past several weeks.

State Funding for Higher Education
The Florida Board of Education (BOE) has submitted a request to Gov. Scott for $1.097 billion in program funds for the Florida College System for the upcoming fiscal year, a 7% increase over the $1.023 billion appropriated for the current year. The request reflects both enrollment growth and increases in the cost of doing business. The BOE has also requested that the state fund $176 million of the outstanding balance in the Philip Benjamin Matching Grant program.

The Governor’s budget message to the Legislature is due in early December, and will be based on revenues estimated by the state’s economists later this month.

Both the Senate and House have held hearings on the BOE’s budget request but caution that revenues are not expected to rise to the level
that would enable full funding of the DOE request.

Legislative budget committees are not expected to delve into the meat of the budget process until after the Session formally convenes in January. There is also speculation that the Senate and House may wait for a later Revenue Estimating Conference in the spring before crafting their budgets, in hopes that the revenue picture will brighten.

Public Education Capital Outlay (PECO)
The Public Education Capital Outlay (PECO) outlook for the coming budget year is particularly dismal. PECO derives revenue from the Gross Receipts Tax on electricity and telecommunications. Gains in energy efficiency and the declining use of landline telephones have drastically reduced what was planned as a stable source of revenue.

Many legislators are voicing concern about the state’s ability to fund higher education construction projects, and discussions about other sources of funding are beginning. However, 2012 is an election year, and it is highly unlikely that any substantial change to current taxes will occur in the upcoming legislative session.

Senate Budget Chairman JD Alexander, R-Lake Wales, has said that "at some point we will need to look at how we fund construction of public education capital buildings in the future" to address the technological changes that have undermined PECO’s funding structure.

Alexander said finding money for building maintenance should be a top priority, but suggested that could be accomplished by shifting funds from general revenue, an approach he has favored in the past.

Current projections for the Public Education Capital Outlay (PECO) lower forecasts of funds available for the 2012-13 fiscal year from $380.8 million to $113.2 million.

Also on the PECO front, the Council of Presidents (COP) of the Florida College System has expressed concern for several years about how the PECO dollars are allocated among the 28 colleges. The 2011 Florida Legislature directed the COP to devise a consensus formula for the allocation, and Dr. Bill Law, president of St. Petersburg College has chaired a committee to develop a new model. That report is due to the Legislature by the end of December.

USF Polytechnic
The Florida University System Board of Governors has approved a list of requirements the University of South Florida's Lakeland Polytechnic campus must meet before becoming the 12th member of the state university system.

The Lakeland campus must achieve separate SACS accreditation, build residence halls, and draw the equivalent of 1,244 full-time students, half of which must be in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math) before returning to the board with a request for independence. It is expected that meeting these conditions will take a minimum of three or four years.

Cost of Higher Education in Florida
Lobbytools, the legislative tracking and information service in Tallahassee, recently published the following chart showing the cost of college in Florida compared with other Southern and all other states.

According to Lobbytools’ research: “Tuition at Florida's public colleges and universities has risen in recent years, pushing up the cost of a higher education especially at two-year colleges.”

Still, recent figures from The College Board show Florida has the seventh-lowest average in-state tuition rate in the country of public four-year universities. Florida students paid an average of $5,626 in 2011, compared with the U.S. average of $8,244.

“The College Board survey notes that other states face funding issues similar to Florida’s. In-state tuition grew by 11.8 percent last year, versus a national average of 8.3 percent.”
Florida's Tuition Pricing Trend
Florida's Average Published Tuition and Fees in Current Dollars, by State and Sector, 2004-05 to 2011-12 (Enrollment-Weighted)

**Public Two-Year In-State**

- **US Average**
- **Florida Average**

**Public Four-Year In-State**

- **US Average**
- **Florida Average**

**Private Nonprofit Four-Year**

- **US Average**
- **Florida Average**

**Southern States: Average Tuition and Fees of Public Four-Year In-State Universities (2011)**

- #1 $10,300
- #2 $9,618
- #3 $7,993
- #4 $7,963
- #5 $7,209
- #6 $6,803
- #7 $5,685
- #8 $5,668
- #9 $5,626
- #10 $5,123

**Seven Lowest Average Tuition and Fees of Public Four-Year In-State Universities (2011)**

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<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you have questions about these or other legislative issues, please call or email Sally Everett, Director of Community and Government Relations, at 813-253-7560 or severett8@hccfl.edu.