The Opening of the University

After all the planning, conflicts, crises, and obstacles, the SFEC and the board of trustees finally achieved its long-sought goal when Nova University welcomed its first class on September 25, 1967. Although twenty-one students were accepted for the fall 1967 term, only seventeen enrolled. The first students had been selected from approximately 250 applicants and all were on full scholarship. Of the original students accepted, seventeen already held master’s degrees and would be working toward doctorates in science education, physical sciences, and oceanography.

Since the university was unknown, even in Broward County, press releases provided helpful information about the new campus, which was located in Davie, Florida, nine miles southwest of Fort Lauderdale. Temporary administrative offices and laboratories were housed in three buildings on East Las Olas Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale. One building had been completed on the Davie campus, the Rosenthal Student Center, which was being used temporarily for executive offices. Plans were for construction to begin in 1967 on the Hollywood Education Center and on a complex of ninety apartments for graduate students.¹

When the first class of seventeen graduate students arrived at Nova University on September 25, 1967, the campus looked nothing like that of a university that aspired to be “the MIT of the South.” It more closely resembled the abandoned airfield that it once was. Only one building had been erected, although the Parker Building was
under construction. The campus, with the exception of a few trees, consisted of barren acres of weeds and sand.

Opening day turned out to be unseasonably hot. Despite the undeveloped campus and the warm weather, the occasion was joyous. The *Miami Herald* noted that “the arrival of the first students seemed auspicious to anyone who had a hand in shaping the brand new university. Finally, finally—after years of planning, talking, hoping, cajoling, arm-twisting, fund-raising, promoting, and recruiting, Nova University had opened its door. Even though the day was hectic, faculty and staff smiled, breathed a sigh of relief, forgot about how much more had to be done, and celebrated the fact that the dream of creating a major university in Broward County seemed one major step closer to becoming a reality. The opening of the first privately endowed technological graduate university begins with a small note that will be heard around the world.” Certainly the members of the original Oatmeal Club and the early SFEC trustees had reason to be proud of what they had achieved. They had persevered when the outlook for success was bleak and when they despaired of success. The SFEC’s innovative idea had come to fruition.

After registration, the new students listened to university officials praising the remarkable accomplishment of establishing a new university. Warren Winstead emphasized the seriousness of the occasion and the importance of the first students: “You will make or break the university with your performance this year.” The new president could not have known at the time that the students’ performance would not be critical and that in three years the school would be near bankruptcy and he would be out of a job.

September 25, however, was a time of celebration, and Winstead excitedly proclaimed the opening of the new institution of learning. Professor Fischler stressed the freedom from traditional restraints in Nova’s new approach to graduate education. He promised that the educational experience would be stimulating and urged each student to be self-motivated and to pursue research with vigor: “You don’t learn to do research by staying on the sidelines any more than you learn dancing that way.” After registration and speeches, the university sponsored a cocktail party for students, staff, faculty, and several hundred well-wishers.

That first class of seventeen students included fifteen men and two women. One member of the class was Leroy Bolden, an African American student who had been an all-American football player at Michigan State University and who had come to Nova from California
to study science education. Gloria Cashin, one of two women in the class, held an MA from the University of Miami and had also enrolled to study science education. One student came from India and another from Venezuela.

These new Nova students were more mature than the typical graduate student. Most were in their twenties, had already acquired one advanced degree, and several were married with families to support. They were not interested in beer parties or spending time at the campus hangouts. They were already embarking on their life’s work. Physics student Paul Viebrock said, “You need to be more self-organized here than in any other graduate school. You work at your own pace, but you’re expected to achieve [knowledge] faster. Lectures are not required, but it happens we are always there.”

As Nova University embarked on its unique educational concept, the idea appealed to the imagination of educators who gravitated to proposals that were new, special, and different. Nova University represented a hope for higher education in South Florida, an institution that would keep the best and brightest students at home and would
attract superior faculty and students to a rapidly developing region of the United States. By stressing the importance of science and technology, Nova could provide the leadership necessary to make the country more competitive in the new frontiers of the 1960s. Nova would be in a position to provide new and innovative approaches to teaching, research, and learning. As the premier institution in the South Florida educational park, the university would serve as a catalyst for implementing new educational models that would be copied nationwide. Nova would serve as a magnet for technologically oriented business and industry to locate in Broward County. With such high expectations, now Nova had to live up to its promise.

Many national newspapers and periodicals, including *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*, wrote lengthy articles on the opening of Nova University. A national audience of university presidents, administrators, and faculty—the most important group to whom Nova wished to appeal—read the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the most influential U.S. educational publication. If Nova could secure publicity and approval from the *Chronicle*, that endorsement would help in establishing the university’s credentials. The *Chronicle* presented a positive discussion of Nova University, its goals, and its innovative curriculum. It reported that Nova aspired to be “ranked quickly with MIT and Caltech.” President Winstead, in a massive overstatement, noted: “We are doing what MIT and Caltech would do if they could start over today.” The greatest fear expressed by Winstead and others was that, despite their heralded opening, they would have difficulty remaining innovative and flexible because of certain forces and bureaucratic requirements (accreditation) that would eventually inhibit change.

Now that Nova University had opened its doors, it had to make the system work. Despite its auspicious opening and all the high-flown rhetoric about being the new MIT, Nova had neither the tradition nor the resources to operate successfully. Local support, commitment, and generosity of spirit would no longer sustain its radical plan for a graduate university.

In September 1968, one year after welcoming Nova’s first class of graduate students, President Winstead greeted a second-year class of twenty students and twenty-three faculty. Fourteen of the twenty graduate students had enrolled in the Social and Behavioral Science Center. Winstead asserted that the first year had begun with anticipation; the second year would be one of “reassessment and consolidation.” Despite retrenchment in some areas, Winstead announced new
research initiatives in training courses for teachers and in oceanography. He revealed that progress had been made in student housing. Three student apartment buildings had been completed and were being occupied by graduate students, some faculty, and married students attending Broward Junior College.\textsuperscript{6}

Winstead, looking to expand scientific research at Nova, asked the board of trustees for authorization to study the feasibility of acquiring the Germ-Free Life Research Center (GLRC), a cancer research center located in Tampa, Florida. The president indicated that the third floor of the Parker Building could be prepared to accommodate this activity at a cost of approximately $250,000.\textsuperscript{7} By January 1969, after much discussion, the university had tentatively decided to try to establish the GLRC as an integral part of Nova University. The GLRC would form the nucleus of the life sciences program.

Support for the GLRC, a not-for-profit, tax-exempt laboratory, had come from contracts with the National Cancer Institute and from numerous other private sources. Joel Warren, the center’s director, once served on the polio research team of Albert Sabin and was a highly regarded cancer researcher. In a presentation to the board of trustees, Warren explained that the research emphasis for the GLRC would be on the role of tobacco, chemicals, and viruses in causing tumors. The center hoped to develop a means of preventing cancer through the use of drugs and vaccines. To evaluate and test the potential of possible cures, the GLRC bred experimental germ-free mice in a germ-free environment.

While the board of trustees pondered the possibility of bringing the GLRC to campus, Winstead insisted this was “an opportunity that cannot be passed over. It will make this area nationally significant immediately in cancer research.” Board member William Horvitz agreed that “this is one of the better opportunities the university has had, and we should not let it slip through our hands.” Winstead announced that Theresa Castro would organize the women’s group, the Royal Dames, to raise $250,000 for cancer research over a period of five years.\textsuperscript{8}

The Germ-Free Life Research Center officially became a part of Nova University on June 1, 1969. In 1972, cancer research at Nova University entered a new phase, as the GLRC became the Leo Goodwin Institute for Cancer Research, named for Leo Goodwin Sr., founder of the Government Employees Insurance Company (GEICO) and a Fort Lauderdale resident. The Goodwin Institute would later evolve into the Life Sciences Center. Joel Warren would be the director of the Goodwin Institute and the Life Sciences Center,
which was teaching and doing research in scientific fields other than oncology.9

As early as 1972, financial problems developed in the Goodwin Institute partly due to a decline in federal funding. Leo Goodwin Jr. apparently came up with the money to pay off some of the institute’s obligations and provided it with a $50,000 electron microscope—the first one in Broward County. By 1975 the Life Sciences Center was again in debt. The failure to achieve a balanced budget prompted a letter from Abe Fischler stating that the university could no longer afford a center that did not balance its books and that the administration could no longer continue to subsidize life sciences. If the center had not balanced its books in one year, Fischler warned, then “drastic changes will have to be made, including asking some faculty members to leave.”10

In the summer of 1973, the Goodwin Institute welcomed a distinguished visitor when Albert Sabin, a friend of Joel Warren’s and the discoverer of an oral vaccine for polio, came to campus for a month-long visit. Sabin praised the development of the cancer research center and predicted it would become one of the leading research institutions in South Florida.11

In 1968, the main focus of the university was accreditation, for Nova could not survive without that imprimatur. On December 13, 1968, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) wrote Winstead to inform him that his institution had been designated as a Recognized Candidate for Accreditation. Candidacy was not accreditation, but SACS indicated that “steady and proper progress” was being made and implied Nova could be expected to achieve full accreditation by the time of its first graduating class. At that time SACS would then have an evaluation committee visit the university to determine eligibility for accreditation.12

In November 1969, the board of trustees decided to hire an executive vice president to ease the administrative burdens on President Winstead. The board chose Abraham Fischler, who accepted the position on the condition that the appointment would be temporary. It was clear at this point that President Winstead needed help. He had neglected some of his important duties, and the financial situation of the university was becoming desperate. Two weeks after assuming his new job, Fischler learned via a phone call from SACS, that a status report had to be filed with SACS each year until the institution became accredited, but Winstead had not sent in the initial report. Not only that, but Winstead publicly indicated that while accreditation
by SACS would be nice, it was not so important because Nova had such an outstanding advisory board. So not only had Winstead not complied with the requirements for accreditation, he had also insulted SACS.

Fischler immediately sent off the delayed report, but the failure to comply on time proved disastrous as SACS notified Nova that it had been removed from candidate status due to its failure to communicate. In January 1970, Fischler and Jim Farquhar visited Gordon Sweet, executive director of SACS, at SACS headquarters to repair the damage done by Winstead’s remarks and the late status report. The two men contritely asked SACS to reconsider its decision and assured them that Nova would cooperate with all the agency’s rules and regulations and would soon provide an updated status report. In January 1970, Nova got a reprieve when it received a letter from SACS advising that it had been placed on correspondent status for a probationary period of six months.

Fischler immediately launched a self-study, and in April 1971, SACS sent an evaluation team to spend three days on campus. The nine-member team was headed by oceanographers from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and educators from such schools as Vanderbilt University, Emory University, and Texas Christian University and roamed the campus from April 12 through 14, 1971. The team filed a complimentary report, recognizing a “very real spirit of dedication to the university on the part of all members of the university community.” The report referred to Nova as an “intriguing experiment in higher education” with a “highly individualized” instructional program. The evaluators rated the relationship between faculty and administration and between faculty and students as “remarkably good.” In the case of the quality of its students, however, Nova did not get high marks. The report noted that any new school found it difficult to attract high-quality students—“So it is with Nova.” The libraries were found to be inadequate, but the team softened this criticism by reporting, “The libraries are as unique as the institution itself.”

On December 1, 1971, SACS announced that Nova was fully accredited for master’s and doctoral programs. Nova would have to go through reaffirmation in four years, however, instead of the normal ten, at which time another self-study and site visit would take place. If reaffirmed in 1975, that accreditation would last for ten years. This decision enabled Nova to proceed with some major projects, including a law school and an off-campus doctorate of education program.
Accreditation also improved the university’s chances of receiving grants and financing from private and government agencies.\textsuperscript{13}

Someone at SACS, most likely Gordon Sweet, was looking out for Nova’s interests. The school had failed to comply with the basic requirements of SACS and had been put on probation. In 1969–1970, Nova was essentially bankrupt; it had only a barebones campus and no library to speak of. By any standard, Nova probably should have been denied accreditation. SACS’s decision to grant accreditation was yet another example of a favorable development for Nova at a critical juncture, for without accreditation, Nova would have been finished before it started.

In a time of economic distress, there were some positive developments. On February 18, 1968, Nova broke ground for what was then known as the $1.6 million Hollywood Education Center. Hollywood residents had raised $1.1 million, and the U.S. Office of Education added a $552,000 grant to complete the work. The building, which would house the social and behavioral sciences, opened to students on June 1, 1970. According to press accounts, the 49,000-square-foot, three-story edifice provided the graduate school with one of the state’s most advanced facilities for research in education and behavioral sciences. The structure included a television studio (the university planned to telecast its own programs), a library, a 200-person lecture hall with a film projection booth, seminar rooms, and a computer center.

An entire wing of the Hollywood Education Center was devoted to the Institute for Human Development, directed by psychologist Marvin Rosenblatt. The institute dealt with serious social issues such as child rearing, marital disharmony, juvenile delinquency, crime, emotional disturbances, and educational problems. The new center received much-needed help when Birdie Einstein (no relation to the famous scientist) gave $100,000 to the library at the Hollywood Education Center.\textsuperscript{14} The gift enabled Nova to make a significant improvement in one of its weakest areas.

A troubling internal schism over the university’s vision and its future developed between Professor Ray Pepinsky, the Robert O. Law Professor of Physics, and Dean Abe Fischler. The initial conflict occurred when Fischler failed to endorse Pepinsky’s recommendations for how the Physical Sciences Center should be organized. On May 20, 1968, the board of trustees offered new contracts to all faculty members except Pepinsky. The decision to terminate his contract, as explained by the board, was the culmination of a long series of annoyances, failures, and disappointments attributable to Pepinsky. He
had neglected to adequately fund his department and was cited for “intolerant and unprofessional behavior.”

Pepinsky appeared before the board on May 27, 1968, to answer the charges. He warned the trustees that his separation from Nova would have a negative impact on the physics program and would not be in the best interests of the university. The trustees were unmoved and decided that due to a lack of leadership on Pepinsky’s part, Nova did not have a viable physics program. The board voted unanimously not to renew his contract. Fischler noted with some satisfaction that the university sided with his position and got rid of Pepinsky.¹⁵

Pepinsky’s departure had a significant impact on Nova. Approximately seven of the physics students transferred, leaving Nova, in effect, without much of a physics department. With all of its financial troubles, Nova did not need to spend time on such divisive internecine warfare.

Professor Ed Simco, who had come to Nova as a member of the second class in 1968, recalled his decision to attend graduate school at Nova. His mentor had notified him of a new school, Nova University, which would provide an assistantship of $5,000 per year and would waive tuition. Simco had never heard of Nova, but with four children, he thought it was too good an economic and educational opportunity to pass up. He already had a master’s degree in physics and planned to complete his physics PhD at Nova, but when he arrived, he discovered that the physics department was being phased out. With Abe Fischler’s advice, he agreed to change his PhD to science education.

Simco not only lost out on his opportunity to complete his PhD in physics, but also, when he and his family arrived at Nova in 1968, his wife was appalled at the derelict campus. Simco said, “This is Nova University.” His wife asked, “Where?” Simco, however, saw the university’s potential and decided to stay. He had no tuition to pay, he had a $5,000 stipend, and the rent at the student apartments, then known as buildings A, B, and C, was fairly cheap. Simco completed his PhD in 1971, and then stayed as a postdoctoral student. He has been at Nova ever since.¹⁶

By the summer of 1968, the board of trustees, the governing board at Nova University, consisted of eighteen members and four honorary members. The board operated with five committees: executive, personnel, ways and means, building and grounds, and finance. At this juncture, finance was the most important and relevant committee as the board of trustees had finally recognized that they needed a dramatic and immediate solution to the deteriorating economic
situation at the university. The trustees needed to begin a major fund-raising campaign as soon as possible, but one member cautioned his peers that “public airing of our dire need for operating funds would be harmful,” as it would discourage giving to an institution that appeared unable to survive. The board even talked about selling the university property on Las Olas or going to the banks for a large loan to pay off its debts.\(^\text{17}\) Nova’s economic problems had worsened because of increased costs in faculty salaries and operating costs. Student tuition was virtually nonexistent and did little to allay the red ink. The new buildings needed books, furniture, and lab equipment; faculty expected to be paid; and vendors and suppliers were clamoring for the money owed to them.

Nova’s original economic model had committed its financial future to an ongoing need for outside funding from research grants and private donations. Unfortunately, the initial projections by the New York firm of Tamblyn and Brown for fund-raising in South Florida had fallen far short of expectations. Nova had been given land and buildings, but needed unrestricted operating funds to pay the bills and keep the university open.

To some degree, Nova was a victim of its own excessive and optimistic public relations campaign. Nova had not yet created the massive economic impact on real estate, new jobs, and new industry as predicted by Hunter Moss and Company. It became abundantly clear that not only was Nova not going to solve all the problems of Broward County, but also might not be able to support itself. In the early planning stages, everyone was a dreamer and somehow thought the sheer force of their idea would be enough for success. Nobody planned for exactly how much money would be needed or where it would come from—the founders assumed that someone would come to their rescue. As their dreams met reality, some donors and supporters became disillusioned and began to question the inflated rhetoric touting Nova as the wave of the future.\(^\text{18}\)

At the end of 1968 and the beginning of 1969, the financial situation reached an acute crisis point. Vendors were demanding payment for services, and some businesses would work with Nova only on a cash-on-demand basis. Faculty occasionally had to delay cashing their checks until the university could come up with funds. The power company threatened to cut off electricity. The federal government had served final notice on payment of withholding taxes and Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA), and pension commitments were not being met.
On April 22, 1969, President Winstead made a special report to the board of trustees about the financial crisis. He said that Nova needed to obtain more money from federal grants, ask some of their generous donors, such as Edwin Rosenthal and Louis Parker, for additional funds, and revive the $5 million fund-raising campaign in Fort Lauderdale. Unfortunately, only $150,000 had been raised in that campaign, and Winstead’s only option was to cut expenses, what he called “belt-tightening.” The business offices in the Las Olas property were moved to the recently completed first floor of the Parker Building, saving in clerical and secretarial personnel; the Las Olas property was then rented out. Several personnel changes were necessary. Winstead reported that the vice president for business affairs resigned and his position would remain vacant. Several secretarial positions were eliminated. Winstead warned that faculty and student morale was the lowest since the university’s inception and that even with further belt tightening, the situation was so grave that the crisis could culminate in “the dissolution of the university.”

Most insiders realized that Nova was at a critical crossroads. Several members of the board of trustees remember discussing the rapidly deteriorating situation; for all intents and purposes, the university was bankrupt. One frequently asked question: “Does anyone know a good bankruptcy lawyer?” Robert Ellyson described the drastic change in attitude on the board in 1969. The board realized that they had to be realistic in terms of what they thought was going to work. They understood that they could not compete with the Caltechs and the MITs, and finally recognized that Nova was not going to get the money it needed from the federal government or local donors. Nova had to look for new opportunities. As Abe Fischler remembered, everybody realized that the original model “wasn’t going to happen, that physicists weren’t going to come down here, that engineers were not going to come down here. We had nothing to offer them. We didn’t even have the resources to build them the laboratory they needed.”

Under these circumstances, the trustees began searching for an affiliation with another university. Inexplicably and unrealistically, they made overtures to MIT, Caltech, and Rensselaer. They should not have been surprised when none expressed interest in a merger. In 1969, the board of trustees contacted the University of Miami (UM), a private school. William Horvitz announced that he, Jim Farquhar, and A.L. Mailman had visited UM and had spoken with its president, Henry King Stanford, and the vice president for finance. The three emissaries revealed that President Stanford showed a strong interest.
in an affiliation and did not seem concerned about Nova’s debt. The 
trustees then authorized Winstead to call President Stanford and tell 
him that the Nova board would be happy to meet with him once he 
cleared the matter with his executive committee.

As it turned out, the University of Miami lost interest in the merger. 
One major sticking point in the negotiations was that Nova was un-
willing to give up the oceanographic center and Miami already had 
a flourishing maritime center. Stanford indicated that Nova lacked 
sufficient local support and that UM already had significant economic 
problems of its own, meaning it did not want to take on Nova Univer-
sity’s debt. Tinsley Ellis thought Nova could have had a good working 
relationship with UM, “but they were not the least bit interested.” By 
August 1969, UM had officially terminated any talks about a merger.

Although it is difficult to ascertain whether Nova or Florida State 
University (FSU) initiated the first overtures about an affiliation, on 
May 15, 1969, FSU president J. Stanley Marshall wrote a letter to 
the Nova Board of Trustees making just such a proposal. Marshall 
intended to develop the Nova campus into a major graduate center 
for FSU and was willing to relocate a substantial number of faculty 
and graduate students to the Nova campus, possibly by September 
1969. As a condition of a possible alliance, Marshall insisted that the 
graduate school numbers would have to be expanded significantly to 
make the new FSU campus economically viable, but he promised to 
maintain Nova’s academic standards. He also agreed to honor all per-
sonnel contracts in the event of a merger. He understood that Nova 
had some unpaid financial commitments, and FSU would work care-
fully with the Nova board to resolve these issues. He proposed that 
the name Nova University be changed to Nova Graduate Center of 
Florida State University. Marshall admitted that he was only speaking 
for himself and that no discussions had been held with the state board 
of regents or with the chancellor of the university system.

The same day, the board of trustees met with FSU dean Phillip 
Fordyce to hear Marshall’s proposal discussed in detail. Fordyce ex-
plained that if the merger took place, Nova would become a part of 
the state system and all property would be deeded over to the state. 
FSU would be willing to provide approximately $1 million to pay 
off Nova’s debts and would continue Nova’s graduate programs in 
oceanography and education while adding courses in fine arts and 
social welfare.

Winstead pointed out the advantages and disadvantages of FSU’s 
offer. On a positive note, the merger would end Nova’s financial
problems, enable it to fully utilize all of its facilities, and expand its science programs with state support. However, Nova would lose the flexibility of a private institution and would be controlled by a politically influenced state bureaucracy. Nova’s founders would have very little input in running the institution. Robert Ellyson argued that Nova would end up being a university far different from the one the SFEC hoped to create. The board, facing an uncertain future, ignored the negative aspects of a merger and voted unanimously to go on record as favoring the possibility of a partnership with FSU.22

By May 24, 1969, local papers had gotten wind of the possible merger and asked Winstead to discuss what negotiations had taken place. Winstead replied that any talk about a merger was “just a preliminary discussion,” although he had recently met in Tallahassee with Stanley Marshall and Robert Mautz, chancellor of the State Board of Regents. Chancellor Mautz indicated that a merger with FSU was highly unlikely since the state would have to take over ownership of Nova. He said there might be the possibility of some sort of affiliation between Nova and FSU, but that possibility never materialized, and FSU broke off discussions with Nova.

Similar talks were held with Florida Atlantic University (FAU) president Kenneth Williams, who declared that FAU would be pleased to work with Nova in any appropriate way. The Nova board passed yet another resolution stating that Nova would be happy to have formal discussions with FAU about an alliance, but as with FSU, nothing came of this attempted union.

Jim Farquhar added to the list of possible affiliations when he remarked that Alexander Schure of New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) had called Winstead to express his interest in a merger. For the fourth time, the board approved a resolution of interest in an association with another institution and invited NYIT to make a presentation if it were still interested.23 Nova University, desperately seeking salvation, had cast as wide a net as possible.

Although the board of trustees had approved a search for possible mergers with four different universities, Winstead insisted that while there were discussions going on, Nova had not initiated any of the talks and was not “seeking affiliations with any institutions at this point.” The Fort Lauderdale News speculated that Nova was trying to get the state to take over the school for financial reasons, but Winstead said that idea would be “misleading.”24 How could the paper’s view be misleading since it was an accurate depiction of Nova’s objectives? Winstead’s statement that Nova was not seeking any affiliations
was an outright fabrication. In his defense, he tried to cover up the possible mergers because he knew the news that Nova was willing to give up its unique identity would negatively affect any possible financial contributions to the university.

Jim Farquhar had earlier observed that there had been a split on the board of trustees over whether Nova should remain independent or form some sort of partnership. Some board members feared that the driving motivation for an affiliation with another university was simply a strong desire by some members to get out of debt without understanding the importance of preserving Nova’s uniqueness.

The desire in some circles to remain independent was borne out by the remarks of Cy Young, president of Gold Key at Nova. Young admitted that Nova “needed help” and had launched a new fund-raising drive “to unlock the great bulk of the community’s resources” because “it seems to us imperative that Nova University be assured of sufficient financial strength to permit it to remain an independent institution.” Furthermore, Young thought it possible that Nova could merge with another private institution “tuned to the Nova philosophy,” but he ruled out any affiliation with tax-supported state universities such as Florida State.25

On June 7, 1969, the Florida State Board of Regents, the governing board of the state university system, set up a task force to explore the possibility of a state university merging with Nova University, but Chancellor Mautz made it clear from the beginning that there was no chance of establishing Nova as a separate state university. By early July 1969, the Board of Regents task force concluded that there would be no more exploratory talks about an affiliation with Nova because the state system already had too many other commitments, including two new universities, and did not have enough money to finance a takeover of Nova. In essence, the state was no longer interested in taking on a private school with debt. This decision, in effect, eliminated FAU and any another state university as a possible partner. Meanwhile, President Winstead had focused his attention on NYIT; on July 2, he went to New York for more discussions about a possible merger.26

Prior to Winstead’s visit to NYIT, Nova officials, disheartened by their inability to find a partner, in a hasty and imprudent move, tried to form some sort of relationship with Fort Lauderdale University (FLU), formerly Drake Business College. Secret negotiations had been going on for some time, and the newspapers reported that Nova had approached FLU “in order to loosen the financial death grip that had
threatened to undermine the five-year-old institution.” It was not certain if FLU was an accredited institution, but apparently that did not dissuade Nova as the university proposed that FLU students use some of its classroom space and empty buildings and have the benefit of being taught by some of Nova’s top science people. In exchange, FLU would give Nova $250,000 to pay off its debts. Not surprisingly, the FLU board turned Nova down. Stanley Drake, president of Fort Lauderdale University, revealed that they opted out because “they [Nova] wanted us to become tenants only and we are interested in becoming one big university.” Drake went so far as to allege that because of its financial situation, “Nova needs us much more than we need them.” The rejection by a business school was the ultimate dismissal. The situation at Nova had become so hopeless that it would approach a former business college for a bailout, but even an unaccredited business college was unwilling to form an affiliation.

President Winstead, visibly embarrassed by the inability to arrange any sort of union with another institution, denied that he had sought an affiliation with FLU or the University of Miami. Winstead observed that FLU was a two-year business school trying to become a four-year university, and the two schools had totally different concepts about education. Nova was a small, high-quality, research-oriented institution. “We want to stay that way,” said Winstead. Nor had Nova, he continued, approached any other university for affiliation. Winstead said he wanted to counteract the rumors that “we were trying to market the university” and called attention to the fact that he had collected “letters refuting statements that we were bidding for affiliation with other institutions.”

One cannot imagine from whence those letters would come, certainly not from the Nova Board of Trustees, who were on record for unanimously encouraging just such mergers. Winstead alleged that all contacts “originated outside the board of trustees, undertaken by various individuals who felt they saw ways in which Nova” could eliminate its debt. Once again, the overriding reason for Winstead’s remarks appeared to be that all the talk about mergers had hurt the school’s ability to raise funds. An unrepentant Winstead proclaimed that Nova, faced with some financial problems, had “firmly rejected all proposals that would have turned this university into an institution of lower stature and lesser quality.”

Winstead’s comments defied credulity. The meetings with Stanley Marshall of FSU and the board of regents, as well as the talks with FAU and the University of Miami, had been widely reported in the
press. Certainly the university administrators and the board of trustees knew better. The question is did Winstead make these remarks on his own, or was he instructed to do so by the board? There is no indication in the board of trustee minutes that they had requested he deny attempts at affiliation, so he must have done so on his own. If so, it undermined his credibility with the board.

On November 3, 1969, the Nova community was shocked to learn of the sudden resignation of Warren Winstead, the university’s first president. The board granted him a nine-month sabbatical and full pay, but he cleaned out his desk and departed before the nine months were up. Abe Fischler, the executive vice president, now had to assume greater responsibility for running the university.

Why did Winstead resign? Certainly some members of the board of trustees were unhappy with Nova’s progress under his tenure. He had not been able to raise sufficient money, and the financial situation had gone from bad to worse. His greatest failure probably was his inexplicable decision not to submit a status report to SACS, and then he downgraded the importance of accreditation by SACS, the only accrediting agency. His shortcomings in dealing with SACS came close to undermining the viability of the university and were inexcusable. The president had also failed to arrange a merger with another university and denied that Nova sought such mergers and tried to blame individuals outside the board of trustees for the unsuccessful approaches.

There was some talk that Winstead had personal problems and had been too involved in social activities. Critics pointed out that he did not always attend to the details of his presidential responsibilities. Abe Fischler remembered that when he took over Winstead’s office, he found bills that had not even been posted. Fischler thought Winstead failed not only because he did not tend to essential university operations, but also because he just did not realize that the original concept would not work. Fischler commented that Winstead was unable to see the real picture: “He kept his eye on the hole and not on the doughnut.” Winstead was a good guy, continued Fischler, but “he lost sight of why he came down here.” Despite the initial hoopla and big promises at the beginning, with the departure of Winstead, Nova had no president and was one step from closing its doors. One never knows for certain, but a combination of these failures likely led to the board asking for Winstead’s resignation.

Winstead was a better salesman than an administrator. He traveled all over the country successfully selling Nova and attracting
top-notch people like Bill Richardson and Abe Fischler to the campus. His ability to persuade some of the best scientists in the world to sign on as advisors was nothing short of phenomenal. He generated a lot of enthusiasm for the university, getting national exposure with his appearance on the *Today* show and an article in *Time* magazine. He managed to raise some money with innovative methods. Many who worked with him described him as a visionary and a delightful colleague. But the challenge of building a new university from the ground up, especially one with only a graduate school, would have tested anyone’s capabilities. Certainly there was no personal animosity against the man; board members praised him for his significant contributions in getting Nova established.

Once again, Nova University faced adversity. The school was now leaderless and had been unable to find an institution with which to merge, and its financial stability became more precarious each day. Board members and some outsiders thought this noble experiment would end in 1969; there were just too many obstacles to overcome. But Nova, like the mythical phoenix, rose again from the ashes. As before, Jim Farquhar and other stalwart friends came to the rescue. The university finally managed to conclude a merger with the New York Institute of Technology and found a president, Abe Fischler, who, over the next twenty-two years, would lead the school out of the educational wilderness to become a successful institution of higher learning.