Out of the **Ivory Tower**

Universities are positioning themselves as economic engines for their communities. By Amy Keller

UCF and Valencia are building a joint campus on the western edge of downtown Orlando.

Last fall, more than 600 University of Central Florida and Valencia College students moved into the 15-story UnionWest building at Livingston Street and Terry Avenue on the west side of downtown Orlando. The privately developed building sits kitty-corner from the 148,000-sq.-ft. Dr. Phillips Academic Commons — the heart of a new, 15-acre UCF/Valencia campus that offers more than 20 academic programs, including degrees in digital and media communications, health information technology and administration and legal studies.

The downtown location, 13 miles west of UCF's main campus, puts students within walking distance of internships and job opportunities — and offers easy access to downtown arts, culture and nightlife.

It also provides an anchor and critical mass for the city's 68-acre, $1.5-billion Creative Village development. City officials and developers are betting that the influx of more than 7,000 students and 300 or so faculty and staff members will help transform the sleepy section of the city into a bustling innovation hub that will attract high-tech businesses and investment — and also provide a lift to the neighboring Parramore community.

Early signs are positive. Last October, just weeks after the campus opened, Electronic Arts announced plans to move its Central Florida headquarters — and more than 700 jobs — from Maitland to Creative Village. The video game giant, which recruits talent from UCF's Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy, has said it could grow to 1,000 employees by 2025.

"All the cities are trying to attract the smart kids to their community," says Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer. "It's not even about attracting companies anymore — because companies will follow the talent. It's more about how you attract and retain talent, and we think that Creative Village is one of the very good ways to attract talent."

'Bumpability'

Their sizable budgets give universities in Florida and elsewhere plenty of financial muscle in their local economies. Many are the largest employers in their region — as well as talent factories for industry. Over the past several decades, the larger research universities have become increasingly entrepreneurial, leveraging their patents and licenses to spur startups.

Beyond growing intellectual capital, many schools are expanding their physical footprints into so-called innovation districts. Like UCF's new campus at Orlando's Creative Village, the aim is to accelerate economic growth in disadvanted or undeveloped areas by creating dense, "live, work, play" environments that will attract young talent, foster collaboration and spawn companies with high-paying jobs.

The University of Florida, among others, has embraced the concept as it works with Gainesville city officials and private developers to remake a 40-acre zone along the eastern edge of its campus near downtown into a tech district known as Innovation Square. A 106,000-sq.-ft. tech incubator called The Hub — with labs, light manufacturing space and offices — sits where Alachua General Hospital once was. It's across the street from 800 Second — a new, 55,000-sq-.ft. office building — and within walking distance of Infinity Hall, a 90,000-sq.-ft. residence hall with more than 19,000 square feet of "innovation and research space," including a lab for making mobile apps, a graphic design studio and a private business incubator. Both were privately developed.

While some 80 companies operate in the growing area, university officials have said they hope it will eventually become a magnet for Fortune 500 companies, as well as for more eateries, shops and housing. In the meantime, they're counting on the Opus Coffee shop at 800 Second and a planned food truck park to create more "collision space."

Other schools are jumping on the bandwagon as well.

The University of North Florida is seeking $23.8 million in state funds to establish a medical training program and center called UNF Medical NEXUS — or "UNF MedNEX" — in Palm Coast, about halfway between St. Augustine and Daytona Beach. The project aims to grow the region's pipeline of health care workers while creating a "hub of scholarly and technological advancement in health care fields for Northeast Florida and the state," according to the university's legislative budget request.

The proposed campus at Palm Coast's Town Center could also provide a boost for the 1,500-acre, mixed-use development, which took a hit following the Great Recession. In a letter of support for UNF's proposal to the Florida Board of Governors, ALLETE Properties, the largest landowner in the Town Center, noted that the campus would be located "between a high school, City Hall and AdventHealth" and within "walking distance of restaurants, galleries, theaters and parks."

Stephen Coulston, an Austin-based principal architect and urban designer for Perkins and Will who specializes in the planning and design of campus plans, research parks, and innovation districts, says the trend is all about creating spaces and places where people can collaborate. A typical innovation district may include everything from spaces for programming and job fairs to co-working space to cafes and bars.

"I've sort of coined a term called 'bumpability' — which is creating opportunities for accidental interactions between faculty, researchers, students

Left: Electronic Arts is moving its Central Florida headquarters (rendering) to Creative Village.

Right: The Hub is part of UF's effort to connect to downtown Gainesville.

UCF/Valencia Downtown Campus

**Enrollment:** More than 7,000 students

Buildings:

▶ **UnionWest**, a 15-story, privately developed, mixed-use building contains about 600 student beds, 105,000 square feet of academic and student support space and 12,000 square feet of commercial/retail space. *Cost: $105 million*

▶ The four-story **Dr. Phillips Academic Commons** contains classroom and study space, a library, a moot court and academic offices. *Cost: $66 million*

▶ The revamped **UCF Communication and Media Building**, formerly the Center for Emerging Media, houses the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy and the Nicholson School of Communication and Media. *Cost: $5.75 million*

▶ The four-story **UCF and Parramore parking garage** can accommodate up to 580 vehicles. *Cost: $14.6 million*
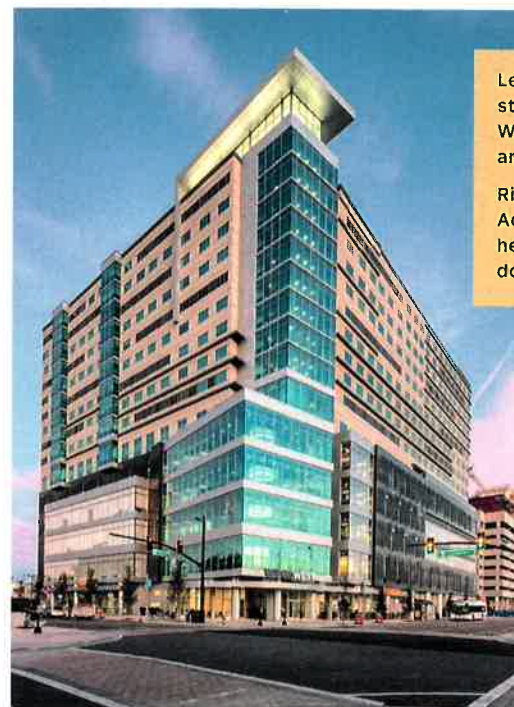
Left: UnionWest houses students and the Walt Disney World Center for Culinary Arts and Hospitality.

Right: The Dr. Phillips Academic Commons is the heart of the UCF/Valencia downtown campus.
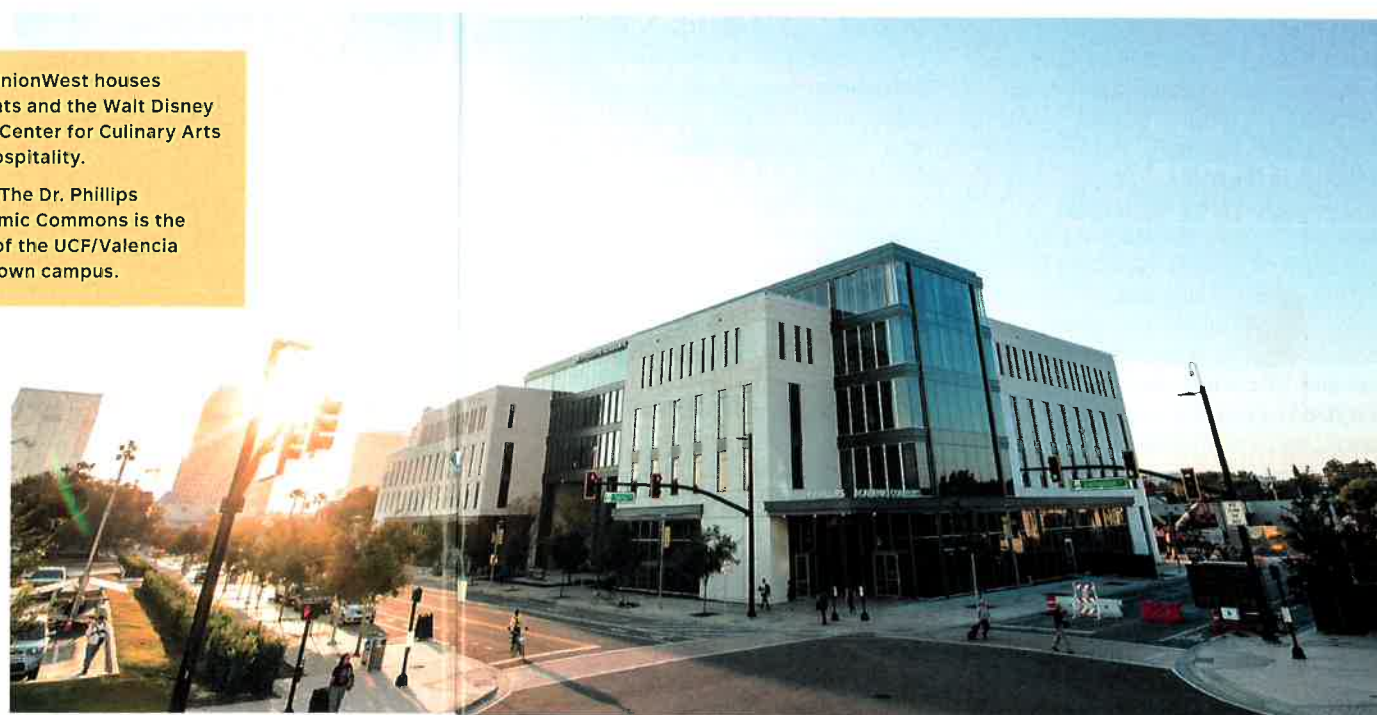
or employees who may not otherwise have an opportunity to convene," Coulston says.

There are other benefits for schools, including relieving crowding on main campuses. That was one reason the University of South Florida jumped at the chance to move its medical school to Tampa's downtown waterfront ("Daytime Anchor," 52).

Schools also are taking advantage of public-private partnerships to pursue opportunities for which traditional state funding might never materialize.

Randy Avent, president of Florida Polytechnic University in Lakeland, is supporting the development of a live-work-play research park on the 4,500 acres surrounding the university's 170-acre campus in Lakeland, and he's working with the Central Florida Development Council on a public-private model to get the project going.

"The state's not going to have a war chest of funds to build it out, like it has for other universities," he says. Instead, he envisions high-tech companies leasing space in privately owned buildings and sharing it with Florida Poly so faculty and students can collaborate on new technology and products.

UCF was one of the first Florida schools to dip its toe in the innovation pool in 2006.

Then-Gov. Jeb Bush wasn't sold on UCF President John Hitt's argument that the university needed a medical school to increase the supply of physicians in Florida. But Bush was intrigued by billionaire businessman Joe Lewis' vision that a UCF medical school — along with a branch of the Sanford Burnham Prebys Medical Discovery Institute and a new VA hospital — could help transform Lewis' 7,000-acre mixed-use development in southeastern Orlando into a vibrant biotech hub that would create thousands of jobs.

To sweeten the deal, Lewis' company, Tavistock Development, donated $12.5 million and 50 acres for the medical school. Fourteen years after Bush and Florida's Board of Governors greenlit the medical school, the former cow pastures are the fastest-growing part of Orlando.

Meanwhile, UCF's presence in Lake Nona's Medical City keeps expanding.In a joint venture with HCA Healthcare, the university is building a teaching hospital, and it's preparing a new university cancer center in space once occupied by Sanford Burnham, which left Lake Nona in 2018 amid financial difficulties.

Despite Sanford Burnham's exit, there are other new neighbors in the biomedical complex including the $18-million Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute; the KPMG Lakehouse, the accounting firm's $450-million learning and training facility; and the USTA National Campus, the largest tennis facility in the nation.

Thad Seymour, UCF's former interim president and once a Tavistock executive, says his work on Lake Nona's Medical City made him a "wholesale believer" in the innovation district strategy. "Innovation happens at the intersection of ideas and disciplines and people — and you need to create some density of all these things to really accelerate innovation," he says.

Center of gravity

Hitt, UCF's president from 1992 through 2018, saw the economic leverage a university can wield on a 2013 trip to Phoenix. There, Arizona State University President Michael Crow spearheaded the creation of a campus

that transformed a moribund section of downtown into a vibrant district filled with students, businesses, hotels and restaurants. It wasn't lost on Hitt that ASU's main campus in Tempe was about the same distance from downtown Phoenix as UCF's main campus is from downtown Orlando.

At the time, the city of Orlando was working on a plan to redevelop 68 acres where the Orlando Magic's old NBA arena once stood into a high-tech, digital arts district called Creative Village.

UCF already had a presence there: It was leasing space from the city for its video game design program, the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA). Hitt reckoned that the university might be able to emulate ASU's success by ramping up its downtown footprint.

In 2014, Dyer and other community leaders joined Hitt for a return trip to Phoenix. Dyer says he came home from the fact-finding mission convinced it would be a great match for UCF to come downtown in scale — not just with a couple programs, but with a full-fledged campus with 8,000 to 10,000 students.

To kick-start the project, the city donated 15 acres to UCF. Getting funding from Tallahassee proved a bit more challenging. "The original plan was a little grander than where we're at today. It involved a couple of buildings — about a $150-million investment between UCF

> **"Creative Village and the downtown campus is another example of a metropolitan research university stepping up to benefit the economic development of the community that it serves."**
> — Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer

The Nicholson School of Communication and Media (right) Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (bottom left) and Walt Disney World Center for Culinary Arts and Hospitality (bottom right) are all located at the downtown campus.

and the state and the Board of Governors," recalls Dyer.

In 2015, the Legislature earmarked $15 million for a scaled-down version of the project centered on a single academic building, but Gov. Rick Scott vetoed the funding. A year later, Scott approved a $20-million appropriation toward the $60-million project, with a caveat: The school couldn't tap into the state funds until it raised $20 million in private donations. The remaining third of the tab would have to come from UCF and Valencia's own coffers.

UCF cleared its $20-million fundraising hurdle by fall of 2016 and broke ground on their "21st century campus" the following spring.

While UCF and Valencia have a history of collaborating to provide access to higher education in Central Florida, the shared downtown campus put the partnership on steroids. Students attending the campus wouldn't be labeled as UCF students or Valencia students — they'd simply be "downtown students" — and

the two schools vowed to make the process seamless. "Student services, financial aid, record-keeping, security — everything would be partnered," says Valencia College President Sandy Shugart.

The partnership between the two institutions also cuts students a financial break. For their first two years, downtown students taking general education program courses can pay Valencia College rates — dropping the cost of a bachelor's degree from $24,650 to $18,920. The average class size, meanwhile, ranges from 24 to 31 students. "It's a very personalized education in an urban environment," Shugart says.

Shugart and Seymour, who spearheaded the creation of the downtown campus, cite another imperative in planning their downtown campus — choosing the right programs for the location and moving them at scale.

"We didn't want to make this just a regional campus or a campus where people would take some of their classes. We took whole programs down there, so it would become the center of gravity," Seymour says.

With City Hall, courthouses and dozens of law firms a short walk from the downtown campus, UCF's College of Community Innovation and Education was a natural fit. The school offers degrees in legal studies, public administration, public affairs, non-profit management, health services administration and other fields. UCF's Nicholson School of Communication and Media also moved downtown, joining the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy, which had been downtown for 14 years already, in a newly renovated Communication and Media building.

For its part, Valencia moved its entire Culinary Arts and Hospitality program downtown. With a $1.5-million donation from Walt Disney World Resort, the

■ *"The programs themselves are attractive. The small classroom learning is attractive. The downtown environment is attractive."*

— *Sandy Shugart, president, Valencia College*

program — known as the Walt Disney World Center for Culinary Arts and Hospitality — now occupies 50,000 square feet on three floors of the Union-West building.

Shugart say the building's private developer, Craig Ustler, gave the school three floors at "deep" bargain prices — effectively allowing Valencia to triple the size of its hospitality school in what would normally be a "very expensive downtown space." The culinary playground is filled with fancy kitchen equipment, including bread-baking ovens and an Italian ice cream-making machine. Other novel features include a micro-green growing cabinet, a chocolate crafting area and a mixology lab, where students can learn the art of bartending.

Hurdles and headway

There have been some hiccups along the way. Quick-service food options were slow to open at UnionWest and other issues — ranging from slow elevators to sluggish plumbing — prompted student complaints. UnionWest ended up crediting students $150.

The presence of homeless people in the neighborhood has also sparked concerns about student safety on campus. And while travel between downtown and UCF's flagship campus proved challenging during the first few days, the school worked with its shuttle vendor to make sure it adhered more strictly to the schedule.

As they work out the kinks, university and city officials are also focused on an-

University and city officials want to make sure residents of the Parramore district benefit from the educational opportunities nearby.

other goal — bolstering the adjacent Parramore community without gentrifying it out of existence.

Poverty runs deep in the historically black neighborhood sandwiched between I-4 and Orange Blossom Trail. Until 2017, Parramore didn't even have its own elementary school, much less a college campus. Now that it has both, Shugart and others are working to make sure local residents benefit from the educational resources.

Valencia has created scholarships for students from surrounding neighborhoods — as has Orlando hotelier Harris Rosen. The college also launched an "accelerated skills training program" to prepare individuals for living-wage jobs, such as building circuit boards or operating forklifts and pallet jacks used in automated warehouses.

Trainees can get stipends from the city so they "continue to feed their families" during their six to eight weeks of training, Shugart says. "Our plan was to reduce the opportunity cost to students in the program, so the program has to be

to be short in terms of calendar length," he says. "They can't take three years to achieve their dream."

There's still more to come at UCF downtown and Creative Village. The city plans to build a 2½-acre Central Park, and two market-rate apartment projects are in the works.

Ustler Development, which is leading the Creative Village development team, is working with Allen Morris Co. on a $108-million apartment building called the Julian, with 409 units that will overlook the park. Mill Creek Residential recently broke ground on a 292-unit apartment complex called Modera Creative Village at West Amelia Street and Ronald Blocker Avenue. The 256-unit Amelia Court apartments at Creative Village, which opened last summer, provides a mix of affordable and market-rate units.

Eventually, the city plans to repurpose the nearby Bob Carr Performing Arts Center and incorporate it into Creative Village. With EA's pending arrival, there's been talk of transforming it into an e-sports arena, but Dyer says the city hasn't committed to anything. "We're going to be very thoughtful. There's no lack of people saying, 'We'd like to have the Bob Carr,' " the mayor says.

It remains to be seen, however, how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the pace of development. The downtown campus has been eerily quiet for months — but developers like Ustler remain bullish about its long-term economic impact. "Health care or education — those are the two anchors that we're seeing that just fortify these urban districts, and they just last for a really long time," says Ustler. "It's not like a corporation that defaults on its incentive deal and leaves town." ⬛

Creative Village developer Craig Ustler is working with the Allen Morris Co. to develop the 409-apartment Julian.