

## INDUSTRY CERTIFICATION INCENTIVE FUNDING

### 2013-2014

- In 2013-14, the state allocated \$5 million for Industry Certifications in the areas of:
  - a. Computer Virtualization
  - b. Manufacturing
- Colleges in the FCS were eligible for up to \$1500 for every one of our students who passed an industry certification.
- We held workshops to help students prepare for exams.
- **Valencia Received: \$49,000**

### 2014-2015

- In 2014-2015, the total amount available was again \$5 million.
- Fortunately, incentive funding for industry certifications was extended to
  - a. Health
  - b. Law Enforcement,
  - c. Fire Service
- Following last year's successful model, we again hosted two IT workshops.
- We also actively tracked student records to ensure we would receive credit for all successful students.
- 8,426 records were submitted, so the incentive was prorated to \$593
- We submitted 664 records.
- **Valencia Received: \$379,776**



## WHAT WORKS

### Where Dreams Come True

Orlando doesn't just represent Mickey and Minnie anymore. Central Florida's institutions of higher learning are creating a seamless pipeline of social mobility.

By SAUNDRA AMRHEIN | June 18, 2015

📷 Lead image by Mark Peterson/Redux.

Orlando doesn't seem like ground zero for the debate over higher education and social inequality. This Florida city, after all, is still best known for Disney World, the iconic Cinderella Castle and endless days of butter-yellow sunshine.

Yet for much of the past decade, Orlando's University of Central Florida and four Florida state colleges (formerly known as community colleges) have been forging a path that could be as groundbreaking as the dreams that once carved out a magical kingdom here amid cow pastures.

At first glance, the innovative program—known as DirectConnect to UCF—seems to represent a modest goal: Ensure that students who enroll in community college

graduate successfully, then make a seamless transition to UCF, a four-year degree and, later, a career. That straightforward mission, though, actually cuts to the heart of the national conversation about access to higher education: Who gets it? Who can afford it? And where will it take you?

Community colleges were originally designed to be affordable and accessible gateways to four-year colleges and middle-class professions. Yet the myriad pressures on community college students—from poor academic preparation, to financial challenges, to the need to often balance education and outside employment—means that the best intentions often don't lead to positive results. Studies have found that while more than 80 percent of the 1.5 million students who enter community colleges every year nationwide say they want a bachelor's degree, just 17 percent reach that goal within six years. And, in a society where high-paying jobs increasingly require advanced or specialized education, the difference between a degree and no degree can mean the difference between making it into the middle class or remaining in poverty.

UCF and its partners are proving a new model, though—heavy on individual attention and clear academic goals—that paves a surer path to a degree. Together, they're charting a new course in a geographic zone roughly the size of Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.

Graduation rates at DirectConnect's two-year colleges have climbed, even as national graduation rates at similar schools have dropped or stalled. Once at UCF, 71 percent of the program's students are completing a bachelor's degree.

“If you want to diversify opportunity, it is the way to go,” says Sanford “Sandy” Shugart, one of the architects of DirectConnect and the longtime president of the Orlando area's Valencia College, which is consistently ranked as one of the top two-year colleges in the nation.

What Shugart saw on the horizon in Central Florida more than a decade ago would become instrumental in the formation of DirectConnect. UCF, the regional university and second-largest public university in the nation, was becoming increasingly selective and out of reach for local students. At the same time, the Hispanic population in the area was exploding, particularly among Puerto Ricans, involving

some of the fastest and largest growth rates in the country. High tech in the Orlando area was booming, creating the need for highly educated workers in the fields of medical and military simulation, gaming, information technologies and health care.

Shugart knew more needed to be done to give his students a better shot at these jobs. Valencia—named after the local citrus—has nearly 60,000 students, about 60 percent of whom represent minority groups. If Shugart couldn't figure out how to get his students prepared for Orlando's growing high-tech and medical fields, they could be relegated to the low-wage tourism sector, the area's biggest employer.

Twenty-year-old Alexandria Castro is exactly the kind of student Shugart had in mind. The daughter of a single, working mother wanted to go to college close to home after high school, but she lived hours away from UCF and was worried about the cost and whether she was academically prepared. Remedial classes and intense academic advising first at Valencia helped shape her career path. "They made you want to do more because they knew you could," Castro says.

Policy discussions about community college often focus on cost—as President Barack Obama did when he proposed in his 2015 State of the Union address that community college should be "as free and universal in America as high school."

"Forty percent of our college students choose community college," Obama said in January. "Some are young and starting out. Some are older and looking for a better job. Some are veterans and single parents trying to transition back into the job market. Whoever you are, this plan is your chance to graduate ready for the new economy, without a load of debt."

But Shugart understands that cost is just part of the equation—and part of the challenge—facing his students. To address the needs of students like Castro, UCF and its college partners needed to tackle other challenges too, such as language barriers, lack of preparation by underperforming high schools, transportation and—most critically—the often bumpy and complicated transfer process itself.

"The biggest impediment to community college students getting a bachelor's degree is the inefficiency of the transfer process," says Davis Jenkins, senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at the Columbia University Teachers College.

Jenkins called DirectConnect “a very important model for the country.”

As the program took root and grew, so did its reach. DirectConnect is now trying to become one seamless pipeline of social mobility, pushing its tentacles both down into local school systems and upward into the private sector.

“That is enormously powerful,” Jenkins says, “because if you want some of the students to get onto a STEM path and into nursing or into the tech field, which, of course, are going to be the high growth fields in Orlando, you are going to have to start early.”

That’s exactly what UCF and its partners had in mind.

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**It all began** in a parking lot. Shugart remembers a decade ago sitting through a boring meeting of local higher education administrators that included the highly regarded UCF president, John Hitt.

Hitt, who took over UCF in 1992, had already transformed the college, overseeing rapid growth that took it from 115<sup>th</sup> in enrollment nationally to the second-largest public university in the country, after Arizona State University. (Currently, it boasts more than 60,000 students.) Once dismissed as a commuter school with lax admission standards, UCF remade itself as a selective, major metropolitan research university. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush once said he believed [Walt Disney and John Hitt](#) had done more to transform Central Florida into a “vibrant, dynamic place” than any two people.

At that meeting years ago, Shugart felt no one was discussing the elephant in the room— how more two-year colleges were changing their mission and tacking on four-year degrees that made them all compete both for students and shrinking state resources.

“Don’t you think we need some direction?” Shugart recalled asking the group. The room was silent until Hitt spoke up: “I think we need that,” Shugart remembers him saying. Out in the parking lot, Hitt suggested he and Shugart meet to discuss the matter further.

When they spoke again, the first order of business was Florida's 2+2 program, which guarantees any community college graduate an automatic transfer to a state university. But it doesn't guarantee *which* university or program. And Shugart knew that the transfer process itself was often a huge stumbling block for students. Hitt thought the 2+2 model was good but that it had "glaring deficiencies." They needed to take the paper guarantee and work together to realize its actual promise and full potential.

"Why don't we just put it on steroids and see how far we can take it?" Shugart said.

A few weeks later, the two men came up with the broad outline for what would become DirectConnect. It would be an audacious and closely integrated program that guaranteed admission to UCF for anyone graduating from Valencia with an Associate degree and certain Associate in Science degrees. It would include a heavy emphasis on student advising and the linking and sharing of resources, providing UCF degree offerings on Valencia's campuses and access for Valencia students to UCF junior- and senior-level programs and faculty on all UCF regional campuses, the mutual use of facilities and faculty and a concerted effort to align the schools' curriculum to ensure as much continuity for students as possible. They also ultimately agreed that to serve the whole region, they needed to bring in the other three two-year colleges in the area. (Earlier this year, the university announced a fifth partner.)

DirectConnect launched in 2006—and it transformed both the two-year colleges and UCF itself. DirectConnect participants now make up a bigger share of new students at UCF, 41 percent in 2013-14, compared with incoming freshmen, 37 percent. (Transfer students from other institutions make up the rest. All together, more than 37,000 students—half of them minorities—have enrolled at UCF through the program.

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**As predawn darkness envelopes her house**, Alex Castro sits at a table in her bedroom putting on the last touches of mascara and spritz of perfume before shoving books and frozen waffles in her backpack. "I brought waffles for breakfast since I don't have a chance to eat anything," she says.

Castro flicks off the light in her bedroom and makes her way through the dark house

by the light of her cellphone, stepping softly down a hallway so she doesn't wake her mother and two young siblings.

Outside, the street is illuminated by spotlights from neighbors' garages. She checks the time—almost 6:30 a.m.—while waiting in her driveway for the small connector bus to pull into her subdivision. If she misses the connector or can't schedule it, she must walk a mile in the dark to the closest bus stop.

On this morning, as it was, she has two more bus transfers ahead of her and more than a two-hour ride to class at the nearest Valencia College campus. "I literally leave at six o'clock in the morning and come back at six o'clock at night," she says.

The bus pulls out and the sun rises slowly over the sprawl of shopping plazas and subdivisions with names like Solivita and Bellalago. Castro and her family live in Poinciana—a 43-square-mile unincorporated territory, riddled with subdivisions in suburban Osceola County, a still mostly rural county of citrus and cattle, south of Orlando. Part of Disney World sits in Osceola's northwest corner.

While Valencia's Osceola campus is only about 18 miles north in the city of Kissimmee, only one main road gets there. And on this morning, like every morning, Pleasant Hill Road is crawling with bumper-to-bumper traffic. Castro, on her second bus ride of the day, sighs as she checks the time on her cellphone. She will miss her next connection and have to take a later bus, leaving just 15 minutes on campus to heat up and eat her waffles before class.

Yet for Castro, Valencia's Osceola campus is a godsend. Of Dominican descent and raised by a single mother, she wasn't ready after high school to move away. "I'm a mama's girl, oh my goodness!" she says. Even if she were admitted to UCF as a freshman, it would have been too expensive and even farther than Valencia, possibly three hours by bus.

She had at first dismissed Valencia, considering it "Grade 13," as some students called two-year colleges. But a high school teacher convinced her that Valencia would help her, and she entered an intense individualized instruction program at the school that included remedial reading, writing and math. Her schedule was carefully mapped out for her.

She excelled in student leadership and was tapped to meet President Barack Obama twice when he visited campus. A Pell Grant paid for tuition and books, while her work-study job covered expenses. “They pushed me,” she says. “I think that’s what I needed.”

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**There was broad skepticism at first** about DirectConnect from the community, Shugart says. Critics thought DirectConnect was “watering down” UCF by admitting students who had not achieved the same SAT scores as freshmen. “This guarantee [of admission to UCF] doesn’t apply to everyone who attends Valencia. It’s everyone who succeeds at Valencia,” Shugart swatted back. “And the data are quite clear: Those who succeed at Valencia are going to succeed at UCF.”

Time has proved Shugart right. At a time when national graduation rates at two-year institutions were stalled or falling, those at DirectConnect partners soared. In DirectConnect’s first six years, the number of Associate in Arts degrees Valencia awarded annually spiked more than 110 percent, from 3,164 to 6,666, far outpacing the college’s enrollment increases. Likewise, at DirectConnect’s second-largest college partner—Seminole State—AA degrees more than doubled, climbing above 2,200 annually.

Valencia saw its graduation rate climbed from 24.6 percent to 35.2 percent for first-time-in-college students five years after starting. (Nationally, the six-year completion rate at two-year institutions is 26.1 percent, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.)

DirectConnect students continue to succeed once they’re at UCF: 71 percent of a recent DirectConnect cohort graduated from UCF with a bachelor’s degree within six years after transferring.

Minorities—who overwhelmingly start higher education in Florida through community colleges—are especially benefitting from DirectConnect. The number of Hispanics who earned a bachelor’s degree at UCF and who passed through DirectConnect from 2009-10 to 2013-14 shot up 134 percent, from 447 to 1,047. The number of black students in DirectConnect getting bachelor’s degrees in that time nearly doubled, from 242 to 442. DirectConnect has helped diversify UCF’s student



body, growing it from 25-percent minority population about a decade ago to about 41 percent currently.

DirectConnect—one of the biggest trailblazing transfer programs in the country—has come to be considered a national model. For one example, Arizona State University—the only school larger than UCF—copied DirectConnect’s concept, creating its own transfer program called MAPP (Maricopa to ASU Pathways Program), which provides guaranteed admissions and building on what Maria Hesse, ASU’s vice provost of academic partnerships, says is UCF’s “impressive” deep partnerships with surrounding community colleges.

MAPP works by providing students at Maricopa Community College with a detailed sequence of coursework that meets both requirements for an associate degree as well as lower-division prerequisites toward an ASU major and bachelor’s degree.

MAPP, Hesse says, has helped the university know well in advance which community college students hope to transfer versus those merely attending workforce-training classes. The road map and strong relationships between the schools helps them efficiently gear guidance toward students who need it and prevents wasteful accumulation of unnecessary credits, she explains. “We would never know at the university which are the specific students who need help until the point they applied for admission to the university,” she says. “But that’s too late to be working with them.”

But DirectConnect’s mere existence doesn’t guarantee access or success for all. It still faces an uphill climb in an economically challenged region.

In 2010, Simone Delerme, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Mississippi, started two years of field work nearby, living with residents around Kissimmee, including in the community of Buenaventura Lakes, which, along with Poinciana, is one of the largest enclaves of Puerto Rican residents in the Orlando region.

She found that many Puerto Ricans—both in Puerto Rico and in New York—were drawn to the Orlando area by real estate advertisements that promised “affordable, luxury, country club living,” sunshine, and proximity to beaches and Disney World. But many were also lured by the promise of work in the tourism industry and

positions that turned out to be low-wage, dead-end jobs, she says. “They were fooled by the pixie dust,” Delorme recalls one person she interviewed telling her.

Education was a constant frustration among working families she studied was.

“The No. 1 barrier was their work schedules,” she says. “If they had children or families, forget about it. It just wasn’t feasible.”

Their low-wage service and hospitality jobs demanded flexible hours, but left them unable to take classes because they never knew their schedules from week to week, she says. “You need to be able to support yourself financially, but education ended up being a luxury. Most couldn’t afford it even if they could get the financial aid.”

That’s a situation that Kathleen Plinske knows all too well. As president of the Valencia’s Osceola campus, Plinske serves a zone with some of the worst performing public schools in the state and some of the lowest rates of high school graduates continuing on to college.

“A lot of that has to do with access. It was hard to convince the community that UCF was here,” Plinske says of the new joint-facility on Valencia’s Osceola campus.

Valencia’s presence here itself only dates to the mid-1990s. Before then, there was no higher education institution in a county that was experiencing surging growth. In presentations, Plinske shows parents lifetime income earnings for degree earners—trying to convince them of the benefit of sending their kids to college instead of pressuring them to work right away.

A “game-changer” for the county, she says, will be the future Florida Advanced Manufacturing Research Center near the campus on which partners, including UCF, envision developing high-tech jobs and research related to smart sensors for cars and appliances.

Plinske wants to make sure there is a pathway into her community for these jobs. Her campus does a lot with local high schools through dual enrollment and has adopted a local elementary school and holds tours and activities for those students and their parents.

At an open house in May, Jaswantie Loo, from Venezuela, listened intently with her

11-year-old daughter Vanessa at her side, during a presentation about financial aid, the cost of a Valencia education (about \$100 per credit hour, versus twice that at UCF) and DirectConnect.

Vanessa had attended past tours at Valencia with her school.

“Mom, it’s so beautiful there. It’s huge, they have everything,” Loo says her daughter told her.

Loo was thrilled to hear about grants and financial aid and that Vanessa could complete a bachelor’s degree on this campus. The family has one car, used by her husband for his job as a bellman at a resort.

“The teacher said you can do it here,” she tells Vanessa, a fifth-grader. “That makes it so much easier for us.”

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**The DirectConnect program** also came at just the right time for the Orlando area. While tourism and hospitality still makes up 20 percent of the labor force—remaining the biggest player in a regional economy dominated by low-wage jobs—the area is seeing important growth in high-tech and health service jobs like at Lake Nona’s Medical City, growth that required better education for better jobs. That diversification is critical for the area, says Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer. The region loves its tourism, he says, “but you don’t want to be too reliant on one industry.”

The new growth and high-paying jobs are coming from people like Ben Noel, who arrived in Orlando a decade ago with a single task assigned by his bosses at EA (Electronic Arts), one of the world’s largest video gaming companies: Build up the local 150-person gaming studio to 1,000 employees.

Noel had grown up in the area, but had left for Texas when it came time to pick a college in the 1980s. UCF wasn’t considered a top option, he says. The running joke about the school at that time was that its initials stood for “U Can’t Finish.”

When he later returned to head up EA’s efforts in Orlando, just as Shugart and Hitt were launching DirectConnect, he discovered he couldn’t fill his needed positions fast enough. Out-of-state recruits were time consuming and expensive. So he turned to

UCF. “We have to have some home-grown talent,” Noel says.

Noel spoke with Hitt at UCF and suggested a new master’s degree program in video game design. In 2005, UCF launched the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA) in a former expo building in downtown Orlando that the city leased to UCF for \$1 a year. Noel is now executive director of FIEA, which has graduated more than 400 students, sending many of them to work on popular games from *Madden NFL Football* to *Call of Duty: Black Ops*.

FIEA is a popular example that UCF and DirectConnect partners list when talking about their dual mission of both meeting the needs of Orlando’s booming, high-tech industries and helping the region’s underserved communities get access to high-wage jobs. FIEA sits at the heart of the planned Creative Village—a 68-acre hub and technology incubator that will hold new UCF and Valencia campuses as well as new urban living spaces, businesses and public schools.

Other long-term local employers like Lockheed Martin rely on UCF to help feed its employee rosters through internships and job placement. “We see an increasing demand for STEM employees, that’s why having the relationship with UCF that we do have is critical,” says Frank St. John, vice president of tactical missiles and combat maneuver systems with Lockheed Martin.

In addition, UCF’s main campus hosts a simulation training institute next to a research park that includes the nation’s largest cluster of military simulation and training companies.

Engineering student Caillyn Caba, 19, says starting DirectConnect at Valencia College ensured that he received more individualized attention on crucial math and science classes and in labs than his friends who went straight to UCF. It also helped get personalized references to professors’ colleagues that can lead to internships and jobs.

Caillyn, whose family is from the Dominican Republic, is specializing in mechatronics engineering at UCF—the type of technology that drives the Harry Potter rides at Universal Studios. “It’s like the perfect job to get in Florida right now,” he says.

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**It is a warm afternoon in May**, with temperatures near 88. A soft breeze stirs the green fronds atop tall palm trees. The large crowds have already dispersed outside the concrete plaza in front of the CFE Arena on UCF's main campus, one of three commencement ceremonies for UCF's large graduating class.

A smaller crowd is trickling into the parking garages and up the walkways toward the arena—the families and graduates from Valencia College.

Among them is Irene Acevedo-Melendez, 20, dressed in a black, sleeveless dress, red high heel shoes and a graduation cap. Walking alongside her is her father, pushing her disabled mother in a wheelchair. The day represented a milestone for their family, which had come to Orlando from Puerto Rico when Irene was in high school.

Irene received a Pell Grant and scholarships to attend Valencia but felt pressure from her father to work more hours and take fewer classes to help with expenses of the family. Her mother encouraged her to finish her AA degree and move through DirectConnect to attend UCF, where Irene will begin in the fall.

Irene's mom, Milagros Melendez, was distraught thinking she wouldn't be able to see this day when her daughter walked in commencement. She'd been released from another hospital stay five days before.

"I know it's not a bachelor's," she says, starting to cry, "but to me it's important because to come over here from Puerto Rico and be able to study in the United States at a university, for me it's a huge achievement."

Her husband hands her a napkin. She still has an IV port in her arm, covered by her shawl. Her long, black flowing dress covers her surgery scars and other tubes. Irene looks up from checking her lipstick in a compact mirror to make sure her mother is okay.

"I knew she's very determined," Melendez says. "She really wanted to finish. If she doesn't finish [a bachelor's degree] in four years she can finish in five." She tells Irene not to make the same mistakes she did—working on a bachelor's degree later in life when married and with children. It exhausted her. She fell ill just a few years after graduating.

“I always tell her it’s such a good feeling to finish something with such effort,” she says.

Across the plaza, Alex Castro’s mother is racing the car onto campus. Castro jumps out and runs to get in line while her brother and sister, 12 and 9, go with an aunt to find seats.

Castro’s mother, Rebecca Duran, had made the family breakfast that morning and gave Castro a pedicure, breaking down in the middle of it. “Mommy, are you crying?” Castro asked her.

The whole family is proud of Castro, Duran says. All those times the bus left Castro in the dark when it was raining, she could have given up. But she didn’t. She’ll begin classes at UCF’s Rosen College of Hospitality Management this fall; she’s trying to save money to fix up a broken-down car to make the one-hour commute. “She could have said no, but she knew that wasn’t an answer,” Duran says. “She grew up with a sense of no excuses.”

Her siblings look up to her; her brother cried at an awards ceremony leading up to graduation where Castro was presented with commendations. Tonight, they’ll go to Universal CityWalk to celebrate. And tomorrow to the beach on the Gulf side of the state.

But for now, Duran is going to enjoy her daughter’s moment.

“She’s halfway there,” Duran says. “She’s halfway there.”

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**Additional credits:**

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