

# HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

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## BUILDING SEAMLESS DEGREE PATHWAYS IN FLORIDA

Growing up, Yuly Mojocoa dreamed of following in her dad's footsteps and becoming an architect. When she began her college search in her junior year at Timber Creek High School in Orlando, she quickly decided she wanted to remain close to home. Having heard stories of students struggling to pay their student loans, she opted to live with her parents during college so she could reduce her bills while helping out her family. Mojocoa took a part-time job as an office assistant with the goal of paying for everything out of pocket.

Despite a population of a quarter of a million, Orlando offered limited higher education choices. Private colleges, like Rollins College, were too expensive and the University of Central Florida (UCF) accepted less than 50 percent of applicants. Mojocoa started to have doubts about her plan. "Saving money in the early years of college was important because I knew that I would need a master's degree to get a good job in architecture," she said.

During a visit to her high school guidance office, Mojocoa heard about DirectConnect. The program, which was starting the following year, guaranteed graduates of four community colleges, including nearby Valencia College, admission to UCF. "It laid out an easy path to a bachelor's degree," Mojocoa said. In the fall of 2005, Mojocoa enrolled at Valencia.

DirectConnect was a response to a nationwide problem: the leaky pipeline for community college students who wanted to go on to earn a bachelor's degree. Although some 80 percent of community college students say they plan to transfer to earn a four-year degree, only about 40 percent do, and only 17 percent actually earn a bachelor's degree within six years.

Articulation agreements between two- and four-year colleges can help students make the transition between colleges, but those pacts usually don't spell out in enough detail what is required of each institution. As a result, the credits that students earn from classes at community colleges do not always transfer to four-year institutions.

Community college students who are able to transfer all or nearly all of their credits are twice as likely to finish a bachelor's degree as those who have half or fewer of their credits counted, according to research by Paul Attewell and David Monaghan of the Graduate Center of the City

University of New York. Indeed, if two-year students didn't lose so many credits, those who go on to four-year colleges would have a higher graduation rate than the students who started there.



Automatic admission to a four-year college and guaranteed 2+2 pathways to a bachelor's degree, such as those Valencia and UCF offer, give students confidence that they'll be able to complete the credential. "Students need to have it spelled out for them," said Fontella Jones, an academic adviser at Valencia. "They want to see the end point and exactly how they get there."

With DirectConnect, Valencia and UCF were able to plug the leaks in the pipeline. Four in five graduates from Valencia transfer to UCF and the students who come through DirectConnect have similar graduation rates and grade point averages as those who spent all four years at UCF. Community college students who have transferred to UCF now represent 48 percent of all students who are awarded bachelor's degrees.

The DirectConnect program also has helped diversify the University of Central Florida. In 2013, minority students earned some 40 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded to transfer students to UCF. By comparison, that same year, minority students earned roughly 30 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded to students who had started at UCF as freshmen.

There's evidence that students in other parts of Florida without similar programs also are looking for direct pathways. The number of out-of-district, in-state students enrolled at Valencia has climbed nearly 30 percent since 2006.

Valencia and UCF have gone a step further than most transfer agreements between two- and four-year institutions nationwide. UCF has opened an outpost on two Valencia campuses, allowing students to remain at the two-year college and earn a bachelor's degree without ever leaving the Valencia campus.

On Valencia's West Campus is Building 11, a glass-encased facility with 40 classrooms, computer labs, and study rooms that is shared by UCF and Valencia. "The building is a signal to students that we want to make this journey as easy as possible," said Jones, the academic adviser at Valencia.

For students, it's more than just a symbol, it's a lifeline. The main UCF campus, with over 50,000 students (one of the largest in the U.S.) is more than 20 miles away, and in heavy traffic it can sometimes take an hour to get there from Valencia's West Campus.

What's more, the first-year classes at Valencia are much smaller than the typical large lecture introductory courses at UCF. "Community colleges get a bad rap but the intro classes are so much better because you actually get to know a professor," said Barry Grogan, who transferred to Valencia from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and is now studying engineering at UCF.

"The hands-on experience is invaluable to knowing whether they want to pursue a career in the field."

- Allen Watters, Chairman of Valencia College's Architecture Program

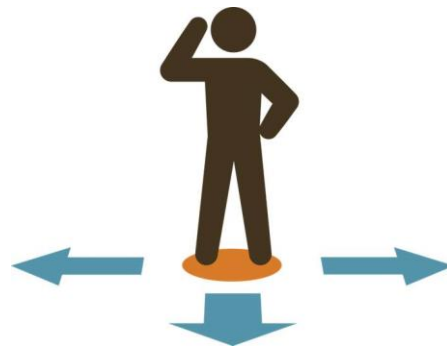
Also on Valencia's West Campus, Building 9 houses the school's architecture program. The program's studios mimic the working environment of an architectural firm, giving students real-world experience while still in college.

"The hands-on experience they get at Valencia is invaluable to knowing whether they want to pursue a career in the field," said Allen Watters, the chairman of Valencia's architecture program. The cost of that exploration, he notes, is significantly less expensive at Valencia than at UCF since tuition for a credit hour at Central Florida is more than twice as much as at Valencia. "And knowing that UCF is waiting for them takes away the anxiety of what's next," Watters added.

Mojocoa wanted to work while going to school so she enrolled part-time at Valencia. She earned her associate's

degree in four years and then faced a choice. She could move right on to UCF, but Mojocoa knew from her father that a four-year degree in architecture was not very valuable in the job market. At best, she might be able to secure a drafting job making about \$15 an hour, not much more than her job as an office assistant.

Mojocoa also considered programs at the University of South Florida in Tampa and Florida International University in Miami, which would allow her to simultaneously earn a bachelor's and master's degree. However, because she wanted to stay in Orlando, she took a year off from school to work on freelance architecture jobs while she considered her next step.



Then Mojocoa heard that UCF was adding a master's degree program in architecture by partnering with another public institution, the University of Florida. The best part for Mojocoa was that the program would be housed in Orlando instead of at the University of Florida's main campus in Gainesville, 112 miles to the northwest. "The University of Florida has one of the best architecture programs in the country, but I couldn't go to Gainesville for my master's," Mojocoa said.

The 2+2+2 program in architecture between Valencia, UCF, and the University of Florida is one step in the next stage of the development of the DirectConnect program. "For some professions, a bachelor's is simply not enough anymore," said John Hitt, president of UCF.

The key, Hitt said, is to determine which professions require a master's degree for licensure or increased earnings, and then add seamless pathways from existing 2+2 bachelor's degree programs to turn them into 2+2+2 programs. Some master's degrees already can be earned at UCF, but others will need to be developed through alliances with other universities.

"By working together, we can go further more quickly than trying to develop all these programs ourselves both at the freshman-sophomore level as well as at the graduate level," Hitt said.

Developing more 2+2+2 programs will require alignment between higher education and the business community as well as between the colleges and universities that often compete for students, said Frank Bosworth, who helped get the master's in architecture program off the ground in Orlando. "The development of this was spurred by the local chapter of the AIA {American Institute of Architects} and institutions that saw a mutual benefit," he said. "That doesn't happen often."

The architecture community in Orlando, Bosworth said, was a driving force. "Being such a large city and not having an architecture program was odd to them," he said. "Talent was being developed locally then going off to graduate school and not coming back."

Now in its second year, the Orlando master's program enrolls mostly place-bound students, Bosworth said. "More than 50 percent are married with children. That's like 2 percent in Gainesville. Without this program, they wouldn't be going anywhere."

Of most interest to the Orlando architects in starting the program was diversifying the workforce. Nationwide, under-represented minorities make up only 13 percent of the membership in the American Institute of Architects, the largest organization of professional architects. Last year, of the first graduating class from the Orlando program, half were under-represented minorities. And, perhaps most notably, every graduate had a job lined up by the end of the program.

Earning three separate degrees, from three separate institutions gives students a sense of progress, said Bosworth. "Architecture programs are extremely difficult, and it's very easy for first-generation students particularly to get bogged down and not finish," he said. "A two-year degree, a four-year degree, and then a master's give them real benchmarks to hit."

Moreover, the city of Orlando provides students with access to a broad range of architects and design firms. Students are encouraged to intern and most do, allowing them to see the connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what happens in the real world of work. "In Gainesville, it's much more about being in the classroom and studio, whereas in Orlando it's about being in the field and applying what you're learning," Bosworth said.

Mojocoa had an internship and continued to take on freelance projects while in graduate school. "Working in the field while in school gives you a perspective that you just don't get in the classroom," she said. In the spring of 2014, as she was finishing her master's program, she began to apply for jobs at small firms where she could learn all facets of the field.

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- *Frank Bosworth, Director of Citylab-Orlando School of Architecture*

Mojocoa is now working as a designer at an architectural firm in an Orlando suburb where she is in charge of designing projects for presentations to clients. She is currently working on a renovation to a Bank of America building in Orlando.

A master's degree also means that Mojocoa is one step closer to taking the professional licensure exam, one of her goals. She often thinks about the time that she took off after she graduated from Valencia. "If UCF and UF didn't start this program in Orlando, I'm not sure I would have moved to Tampa or Miami to get my master's," she said. "I would have missed my family and it would have been really expensive. At the time, it seemed like I had choices, but I really didn't. This was it for me."

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