
UCF Forum

10-16-2019

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STARS Citation

Kunerth, Jeff, "The Evolution of an 'Office Park' to a Campus with Vitality" (2019). *UCF Forum*. 374.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/374>

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The Evolution of an 'Office Park' to a Campus with Vitality

By Jeff Kunerth
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, October 16, 2019



(Photo courtesy of UCF Athletics)

True confession: Back when I was a reporter with the Orlando Sentinel, I once wrote a story that characterized UCF as having all the charm of an office park. I described campus architecture that stressed utility instead of style. Lots of square brick buildings that all looked alike.

I quoted a student to make my point: "If you were to peel all the labels off the buildings, you wouldn't be able to tell this is an institution of higher learning."

That was UCF in 2000, with an enrollment half of what it is today. UCF at that time was still a nose-to-the-grindstone school for students who were working, commuting and spending more time off-campus than on. There wasn't much to do on campus besides search for a parking spot and attend classes.

Well, there aren't many office parks that have a 45,000-seat stadium that shakes when students get bouncy. Office parks don't have a wide, grassy mall where students string up hammocks, toss Frisbees and tailgate.

They don't have an arena that hosts concerts, speeches and sports, or a campus town of restaurants, bars, bookstores and (most importantly) a place where you can send back the stuff you really don't need from Amazon.

I have yet to see an office park that declares itself Orlando's Hometown Team.

And that's the biggest difference between the UCF I described nearly 20 years ago and the one that exists today: UCF is embraced by the city, instead of separate from it.

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In 2000, it looked to me like there was little direct connection with the city and the city seemed to have little interest in UCF. The campus was about 15 miles from downtown Orlando on the fringes of the metropolitan area. It was remote in distance and perception.

The football team played in what then was called the Citrus Bowl (today's Camping World Stadium) downtown. It was too big, too far from campus for students and drew too few Orlando residents to its games.

The transformation of UCF from office park to college campus began with the decision in 2007 to build a football stadium on-site and surround it with places to go and things to see. A winning Knights team not only filled the stadium, but gave all of Orlando something to identify with and cheer. It brought the university and the city closer together.

The downtown campus – which looks something like a hotel complex – continues that. The city and the university today are more conjoined than ever. Part of the mission of the downtown campus is community involvement, bringing students and residents together. That's a big change from the days when UCF was distant and isolated from the city.

These days, I see UCF on bumper stickers, license plates, house flags, T-shirts and ball caps everywhere, not just on campus and not just students and alumni. I've also seen a change on campus – not only in a variety of architecture, but in a student body that reflects the demographic diversity of the city itself. I like that the classes I teach include

not only hometown students, but those from China, Brazil, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Miami, Jacksonville and New York.

Every day for the past five years when I walk to my office I see what I missed in 2000 – a beauty and vitality that transcends brown brick.

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