Accelerating Students Forward to Excellence with UCF Online

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Abstract

The Center for Distributed Learning, in the Division of Digital Learning at the University of Central Florida (UCF), has been instrumental in driving the use of educational technology to expand online teaching and learning opportunities. The advances have occurred while retaining the level of excellence for which its online learning has been nationally recognized and awarded over the last 20 years. As online educational trends have evolved due to a demand for more expansive offerings, the fully-online UCF Online initiative was born. UCF is accelerating students forward to excellence by expanding the reach of an affordable higher education with UCF Online. Reaching educational goals is attainable regardless of geographical limitations or life circumstances. The initial phase of UCF Online is designed to primarily serve transfer students in the state of Florida, as well as masters and doctoral students. To foster Florida state college transfer student transitions to UCF Online, partnerships are formed between UCF and some Florida colleges. UCF Online students may take advantage of many student benefits in addition to having exclusive access to UCF Online Success Coaches. Since UCF Online programs are fully-online, there is a waiver of some campus-based fees that also reduces access to some on-campus student resources and services.
Keywords: UCF Online, fully, exclusively, online, enrollment, personal, individually, guide, future applicants, appropriate programs, staff, services, lightly-facilitated, distance learning, OnRamp, designed, enhanced partnerships, digital community, departments, collaborated, collaboration, development, course developers, Dr. Beth Nettles, Bren Bedford, Karen Tinsley-Kim, Center for Distributed Learning, UCF-CDL, share, journey, heading forward, Transfer Connect, Digital Learning, University of Central Florida, UCF
Introduction

The University of Central Florida (UCF) was established in 1963. It is a young, hungry, energetic, and innovative university with a total enrollment of more than 66,000 students and a fully-online segment that is growing. UCF does not stand still for the status quo but rather positions itself as a “progressive disruptor of higher education” and is ready to “push boundaries and shift paradigms” to resolve complex issues in the world (“About Our Brand,” n.d.). In 2017, UCF was ranked as one of the top online bachelor’s programs by U.S. News & World Report (“Best Online,” 2017).

Relative to its enrollment size, The Washington Post was quoted as saying that “UCF storms higher education” (Anderson, 2015). UCF does not see itself as just one of the largest universities in the country. Because of its size, UCF sees itself as having the ability to make bigger positive impacts on society. It does this by building on five foundational pillars:

- Access and Excellence,
- Innovation,
- Partnership,
- The Power of Scale, and
- Community and Leadership.

UCF positions itself to provide opportunities to people who might not otherwise have access to earn a high-quality college degree while they strive toward institutional excellence; engage world-wide thought leaders to conduct innovative research to solve big problems; and create a positive, lasting impact on the Central Florida community and the world beyond (“About Our Brand”, n.d.). UCF believes that its students, faculty, and staff make success happen through expanded opportunities and by meeting the demand of excellence (“About Our Brand”, n.d.). One way the university assists students with achieving their personal excellence is through UCF Online, its fully-online initiative.

Division of Digital Learning

The Division of Digital Learning includes the Center for Distributed Learning (CDL), a department that provides UCF leadership in distance learning policies, strategies, and practices (Cavanagh, 2017). CDL has been instrumental in driving the use of digital educational technology to expand online teaching and learning opportunities over the last 20 years. Through decades of technological advances, the level of excellence has been maintained for which its online learning has been nationally recognized and awarded. UCF applies the Principles of Good Practice, as defined by the Southern Regional Education Board for the Electronic Campus (SREB), including the policy that states regardless of the instructional modality the academic standards are the same for all programs or courses at the institution where the programs are derived (“Principles of,” 2012; “SREB principles,” n.d.). Therefore, UCF’s students at-a-distance can expect that online instruction is the same and held to the identical high standards of excellence as its other modalities. Regardless of instructional method of delivery, UCF is dedicated to ensuring student retention and success.

Online educational trends have evolved as life styles and needs have changed for prospective students. In the past, geographical limitations or life circumstances may have restricted opportunities for people to continue their education. The growth of online enrollment indicates there is a demand for more expansive learning-at-a-distance options along with lowered
student costs. With these considerations in mind, the fully-online UCF Online initiative was conceived. Since its recent inception, UCF Online has surpassed its targeted enrollment growth. The early success of UCF Online would not be possible without the vision of Dr. Thomas Cavanagh, Vice Provost of the UCF Division of Digital Learning, and collaboration with other UCF leaders.

**UCF Online Leadership Team**

During the initial planning stages of UCF Online, three core departments lead the strategic effort: CDL, UCF Connect, and Communications and Marketing. Since the launch of the UCF Online, responsibilities have been distributed amongst the areas in the following ways:

- CDL supports and manages the learning management system (LMS) and provides faculty development for online teaching,
- UCF Connect, through the Online Connect Center, provides fully-online student support through Success Coaches that manage inquiries of prospective students, and assist and support UCF Online students from pre-admission to graduation, and
- Communications and Marketing implements web-based advertising strategies for degree program promotions and designs the UCF Online website.

As the UCF Online project planning expanded, it was clear that the expertise of other departments across the university was also needed, including the Registrar’s Office, Student Development and Enrollment Services, Office of Graduate Studies, and others. These departments help with university system and process adjustments that are needed to identify students enrolled in fully-online programs ensuring that appropriate fees were waived and other administrative requirements of a UCF Online student are met. UCF Online students are restricted from enrolling in campus-based classes so their fully-online student status is flagged in the university system. For this to occur, the Registrar’s Office makes a system and process adjustment aligning the program modality, in this case fully-online, with the correct course enrollment type. Although there are some campus-based limitations as a UCF Online student, there are also additional student benefits.

**UCF Online Student Benefits**

A reduction in student fees is an important benefit for UCF Online students. For the 2017-2018 academic year, the UCF Online undergraduate fee waiver amounts to a savings of $33.09 per credit hour for Florida residents and $365.03 per credit hour for out-of-state students (“Tuition and fees,” n.d.). For a 12-hour semester, the total savings is $397.08 for Florida residents and $4380.36 for out-of-state students. UCF is constantly evaluating ways to lower student costs.

UCF Online students have access and privileges to a variety of student services and resources, such as:

- UCF Online Success Coaches,
- Career Services,
- Office of Financial Assistance,
- Office of Student Involvement,
- Student Academic Resource Center,
- Veteren's Academic Resource Center,
- Student Accessibility Services,
Universal Design Online Content Inspection Tool

UCF, CDL, and Student Accessibility Services (SAS) strive for accessibility to online course content for all students. With the use of its award winning universal design online content inspection tool (UDOIT), faculty can identify accessibility concerns in their courses through the learning management system, Webcourses@UCF, which is sourced from Instructure’s Canvas platform (“Universal design online,” n.d.). Within their online course, the instructor runs the UDOIT utility to initiate a scan of course content; an issue report of resulting errors and suggestions, if any, is generated; and instructions are provided on how to correct accessibility-related issues. The UDOIT tool has won several awards including the 2017 IMS Global Learning Consortium Learning Impact Award and the 2017 Florida TaxWatch Prudential Productivity Award (“Our Awards”, n.d.).

UCF Online students are supported with Success Coaches and various other student benefits. The UDOIT content inspection tool also supports students by ensuring course content is accessible to all. For students transferring from partnering Florida colleges, there is another type of assistance provided through an online course called OnRamp.

Transfer Connect Partnerships and the OnRamp Web Course

The initial UCF Online strategy is to promote undergraduate program opportunities to transfer students. UCF has taken this focus a step beyond by establishing partnerships with some Florida colleges; the transfer partner program is called Transfer Connect. Transfer Connect is a pathway to help students transition and complete an online bachelor’s degree at UCF, with a goal of partnering to provide access so students can earn a high-quality degree from anywhere (“Transfer Connect”, n.d.).

A special benefit for Transfer Connect students is exclusive access to the UCF Online OnRamp web course. In OnRamp, fully-online UCF students get to know UCF and UCF Online. Specifically, the course helps the student to:

- learn about technology requirements,
- determine career goals by taking assessments to discover personal strengths and interests,
determine an appropriate major,
evaluate their online readiness,
understand the benefits of having a Success Coach,
complete the UCF admission process,
learn what it means to live as a UCF Knight,
explore financial aid options, and
learn about ways to stay connected with the UCF community.

After completion of the OnRamp course, students are awarded a digital badge they can share via social media. With the inaugural launch of the UCF Online program, Transfer Connect partnerships, and OnRamp course, the Vice Provost of Digital Learning is planning the next steps for online learning at UCF.

The Future of Online Learning at UCF

UCF is strategically evolving from a traditional brick and mortar university that offers some online courses and a few majors that can be completed online. With UCF Online, UCF is complementing its campus-based degree offerings with a growing catalog of accredited degrees that can be earned fully online at a reduced cost to the students.

According to Cavanagh (2017), as UCF Online continues to grow, the Division of Digital Learning will serve as the primary liaison with UCF’s colleges and online programs. Fortunate for UCF, the university is able to capitalize on the online experience and expertise of the Center for Distributed Learning as it navigates a path for continued excellence. Cavanagh (2017) says accountability will be measured by UCF Online program and student successes. His plan is for student success to be evaluated using learning analytics and impact evaluations.

At UCF, the Division of Digital Learning is aligned with others across the campus to create a collective impact. The primary impact goal is to innovate academic, operational, and financial models to transform higher education (Cavanagh, 2017). Cavanagh affirms that the secondary collective impact alignment goals are to “harness the power of scale to transform lives and livelihoods, deploy our distinctive assets to solve society’s greatest challenges, create partnerships at every level that amplify our academic, economic, social, and cultural impact and reputation”. These strategic impacts will best assure that UCF Online student retention and success are achieved.

Conclusion

As its fully-online UCF Online program continues to advance, UCF keeps dreaming big while also holding itself accountable for the use of its greatness and size to unleash the potential of its students, university, and community through three outcomes: access, innovation, and impact. The university continues to keep a pulse on the trends in technology and online learning for potential changes that it may implement to enhance the retention and success of its students, while also evaluating additional ways to lower student costs while earning a UCF degree at-a-distance. Accessibility for all students remains a priority at UCF regardless of the instructional modality by which the content is delivered.

The UCF internal partners that lead the grassroots planning effort of launching UCF Online persist as they strategize to support, grow, and manage the fully-online program that has already surpassed its initial targeted enrollment growth and continues on an upward trajectory. UCF continues to make impacts by fostering and developing new Transfer Connect partnerships,
in order to offer place bound transfer students an opportunity to advance their education. By expanding access of an affordable higher education through UCF Online, UCF is maximizing inclusion for a higher education and increasing the opportunity for students to achieve excellence. The results are big impacts on the lives of students, staff, faculty, in communities, and in the world.
References


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