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Value Judgement

Is your UCF degree worth more now than when you graduated?

BY KEVIN FRITZ

Glance up at the wall of your office or home and take a good look at your degree. If you have to, dig it out of that box you have been meaning to unpack.

When the flood of memories subsides, think about how much that degree is worth to you. Now ask yourself: “Is it worth more than when I graduated? Did this baby go up in value?”

Although there is no known formula to calculate whether a degree — one from UCF or otherwise — can actually rise in value, in the eyes of the public, educators and alumni, it’s a pretty good bet you are holding one such piece of parchment.

Roger Pynn, ’73, CEO of Curley & Pynn Public Relations Management in Orlando, asserts that there is no doubt the value of a UCF degree has increased expeditiously, especially since President John Hitt arrived 16 years ago.

“It is a testament to the work done by his predecessors,” says Pynn. “The ball was on the tee when [Hitt] got there.”

Pynn, who graduated when the school was still called Florida Technological University (its name from 1968 to 1979), has known all four UCF presidents over the years. He believes the proof of increased degree value lies in such areas as greater media attention, an advanced curriculum, a rising enrollment and, especially, the attitude of local residents.

“A lot of people look at the university as a point of pride in the community,” he says, “even those who did not attend or graduate from UCF.”

And that carries a lot of weight. Face it, the love hasn’t always been there.

Terry Helms, associate vice president of marketing at UCF, concedes terminology such as UCF standing for “you can’t finish,” or notions that UCF was nothing more than a commuter school, took years to reverse. Even today, he still hears such comments being uttered. Yet, he says those perceptions just make him work even harder to disseminate news about the present-day culture, such as the fact that while UCF does have its share of commuters, it now has more sleeping beds than any other state university in Florida when combining on-campus and affiliated housing.

“A huge part of our job is communicating with the public and changing perception,” explains Helms, whose MCA division — marketing, communication and

admissions — was created to oversee brand and image building for the community and alumni.

“It’s not by accident,” he says of the perceived growth in value of a UCF degree. “Dr. Hitt’s 16 years have worked the reputation, creating a better degree and increasing the value of the degree held by alums.” He contends that is quite a change from the past, when greater negativity about the university existed, even among the UCF family.

Leah Nash, who earned her graduate degree in interpersonal communication from the Nicholson School of Communication in 2001, agrees there is a much more positive vibe toward UCF than there was just seven years ago.

“School pride makes a degree more valuable,” she says, noting that she hears so many more people these days say, “Go, Knights!” when she dons the UCF logo.

Nash, director of member services and leadership development for the Orlando-based Florida Nurses Association, believes the value rises each time UCF receives recognition for its accomplishments and the quality of its programs.

“To see UCF grow, it makes you feel part of a big plan,” she says, smiling.

Grads in Demand

Cecilia Rouse, a Princeton University professor of economics and public affairs and a published expert in the value of a college degree, says a university such as UCF needs to continually prove and promote itself on the local level, since that is where many of the graduates will find it easiest to land a job.

Rouse explains that many employers still rely solely on the school’s reputation. Because of that tendency, she says graduates of the most well-known schools, such as Princeton, have a better chance at landing jobs nationally. “Let’s say you went to Harvard,” she says, “that signals to employers that you are hireable.”

Regarding many other lesser-known four-year schools, Rouse suggests it becomes more local.

“It is important that employers know the college has done a good job with admission standards,” says

Rouse. "If the employer keeps up locally, that's good for the local graduate."

Pynn is one such employer. "I recruit first and foremost from UCF, not just because I am an alumnus," he says, noting that UCF graduates know the area and can hit the ground running. Plus, he does not have to pay relocation costs. Two of his most recent hires are account managers who graduated from UCF in the past two years. "Native knowledge is of great value," he believes.

For Pynn, finding a job after graduation was no problem. He was already working his way through school at the *Orlando Sentinel*, and on the day he graduated, he was named metro editor, a promotion he said he would have never received without his degree. A year later, he was hired by an advertising agency, and the rest is history.

Pynn has also seen some of his brightest UCF grads move on to admirable positions in the community. Brie Turek, '03, for example, was recently named Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer's chief of staff. Joan McCain, '82, his most senior employee, returned to her Knight roots and now teaches at the Nicholson School of Communication. "UCF puts out a special brand of people," he says.

Proof Positive

Helms rattles off facts and figures that make it hard to argue the point about UCF's broadening stature.

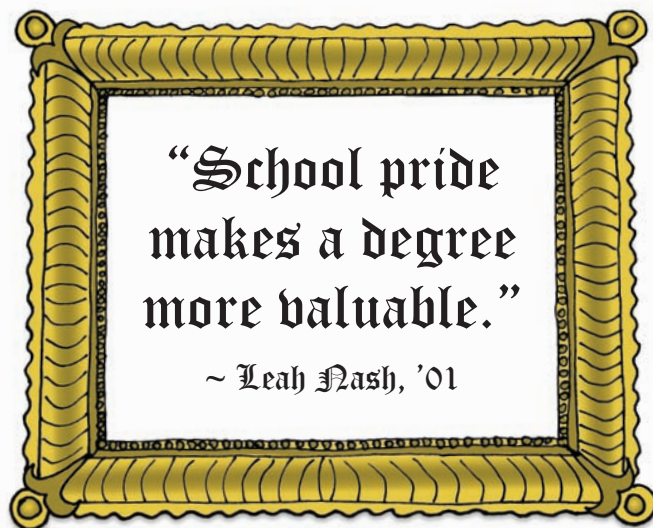
He says the average GPA is now 3.73, and SAT scores of incoming undergraduates are the second highest in the state. Helms adds that UCF is rated second in the state for first-time students with national merit scholarships. "It's the first time we ever broke into the top 50," he notes.

Moreover, Helms cites that UCF used to be the third in-state choice among students. Now, the rank is second, according to College Board, a nonprofit that helps students choose a higher education institution. UCF also has the second-largest undergraduate enrollment and the sixth-largest total enrollment in the nation.

"Our reputation has grown," says Helms, "and it all snowballs into better students and better alumni."

Indeed, UCF's reputation continues to rise in the eyes of the world with positive reports spanning from research to athletics to its soon-to-open medical college. For example, UCF exceeded \$100 million in research funding during each of the last two years, a major milestone for a university without a medical college.

And the UCF College of Medicine will debut next fall with every student in its inaugural class of 40 receiving a full four-year scholarship, thanks to private donations from the Orlando community. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, no medical school in the United States has ever achieved that feat.



Tom Huddleston, UCF's vice president of marketing, communications and admissions, believes the value of a degree from UCF is determined by the university's visibility, services, academics and residential programs, along with the quality of students coming onto campus.

"It will probably become even more valuable in the future," he says. "We have so many opportunities to give young people success, to continue to bring in quality faculty and to create more partnerships."

Fifteen years ago, most UCF students were from the Orlando metro area and most commuted, Huddleston points out. As a result, there wasn't much happening on campus. At the time, there was just a 68 percent retention rate. Today, the retention rate is up to 85 percent.

"They are attracted from everywhere now," Huddleston says about the student body. "What has been created here is a student-centered environment."

That's good news, he adds, because students and alumni are by far the school's most important ambassadors.

"If they have a good experience, they go back and tell others," he says. "It's terribly important what people say about their experience at UCF."

Helms realizes that UCF still has an uphill battle in increasing the value of its degrees, since time is needed to build legacies, alter perceptions and heighten expectations.

"We've only been around for 40 years," he concludes. "So it is hard to compete on the historical level concerning traditions and deep-seated roots. It's not an excuse — just a fact."

At the rate the university's reputation and dedication to excellence are growing, in another 40 years the gap may all but disappear. So keep your diploma close at hand. Like a priceless original work of art, the value of that framed certificate is on the rise.