

# Hitt Looks Towards Future as UCF Enters Next Millennium

By Ryan Anderson  
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While growth in enrollment and classroom space has been constant during President John Hitt's five-year tenure, UCF has not grown in a vacuum.

Another area of concentration is the 1-4 Corridor stretching from Orlando to Tampa. UCF, in conjunction with the University of South Florida, is trying to lure high tech businesses to set up shop along the corridor. The idea for the partnership came to Hitt in an unusual setting.

"That was an idea that came to me in the shower one night," Hitt said. "It has turned out to have some real currency to it because if you look at a satellite image of Florida at night, you can see all these lights along the 1-4 corridor. Where there are lights there are people."

Once it was established that there was a high concentration of people living around 1-4, the next question which came to Hitt's mind was, "what type of jobs do we want the people who live there to have? Do you want them to have jobs which pay \$15 to \$20,000 or \$30 to \$35,000 a year? Do you want the growth to be continuous, or do you want it to be sporadic? Most people make that choice pretty easy," Hitt said.

UCF and USF received funding from the legislature to help keep existing businesses from leaving town to conduct research into ways to lure new business into the area.

"We are working on some really big projects," Hitt said. "This could help us enormously as a university to increase the quality of the local economy."

One of the models for the corridor is the UCF Research Park adjacent to the campus. The Research Park employs 5,000 people with an average salary of \$48,000, according to Hitt.

"There's a big part of the economy of East Orange County," Hitt said. "What is great about those companies, also, is that they are eager to be located close to the university so they can hire students in part-time jobs and then migrate some of them to full time jobs. I think we are developing a new model of how you grow a university."

Another asset for continuing growth at UCF, according to Hitt, is the relationship between students and faculty.

"A lot of people around the country see campuses where faculty members won't cooperate together or with the administration. We don't have that here," Hitt said. "We have a real good community atmosphere here. We have got a pretty darn good situation here at UCF and we are proud of it."

While Hitt has had many memorable moments since starting at UCF, there is one moment which stands above the rest.

“My proudest moment at UCF was probably when we got the Equity Funding Program approved and funded,” Hitt said. “This is a problem that is probably 20 years old that UCF has always been the least well-funded of Florida’s public universities. We were getting less than 80 percent of the system average for funding.”

Currently, around \$13.5 million has been added to UCF’s normal growth budget. Hitt said that the additional money will be used to hire more faculty and staff members and offer less part-time instruction.

“While I do not want to suggest that it was I alone that got the funding increase, not getting the funds was something that was going to keep UCF from reaching its full potential,” Hitt said. “It is hard to be competitive with the other state universities without the proper funding.”

In addition to increasing Equity Funding, UCF has also seen an increase in funding from the UCF Foundation during Hitt’s tenure.

“When I first arrived here the assets of the UCF Foundation totaled around \$21 million and they top \$50 million now,” Hitt said. “We have had real good growth there. What we are really working towards is an increase in student scholarships. That is something a lot of people can understand the need for and are eager to donate towards.”

Another fundraiser in the works with the city of Orlando will help build a performing arts center across from the Orlando City Hall.

“We would have about half of the facilities, a couple of theaters, concert halls and office space and rehearsal space for music and theater,” Hitt said. “Once we establish that it is something feasible to do, we will start working towards raising our share of the money and making the art center a reality. If we can do that, it will be a really premiere facility for both UCF and the city of Orlando.”

Besides wanting to see the construction of the Performing Arts center, Hitt has several other goals for the immediate future of UCF.

“I think we need to continue the progress we are making on growth in quality as well as numbers. Everyone focuses on the tremendous enrollment growth, in the fall of the year that I came here they enrolled 21,300 students. This fall, we will have around 28,600 students. That is phenomenal growth and everybody is proud of how well the university has accommodated that growth. I think that obscures the equally impressive growth in quality.”

Since 1992, UCF has moved up in the ranking in terms of the quality of education offered, according to Hitt. Another indication of the trend toward the growth in quality is the increase in the number of SAT scores being sent to UCF.

“Five years ago, 9,000 students sent their SAT scores to UCF. This year, I wouldn’t be surprised if the number jumped to 14,000,” Hitt said. “We are third in the state in the number of SAT scores received. Only Florida and Florida State receive more SAT scores.”

UCF is also third when it comes to the average SAT score and high school GPA being submitted behind UF and FSU.

“We haven’t moved up in the ranking by being elitist,” Hitt said. “We have grown in quality even while serving more students. I take very seriously the importance of offering opportunities for students. The University was not built here to here to keep people out of school.”

Helping to draw more students to UCF is an aggressive advertising and promotion campaign which shows perspective students the benefits of attending UCF.

“I want to see UCF become the premiere metropolitan university in the country,” Hitt said. “Metropolitan universities serve areas with a population of over 250,000 people and they align their programs to serve the region they are in. There is a belief in social science that wealth is created by city-states. We talk about nations but the unit of society that creates wealth is the city-state.”

According to Hitt, the city-states in Florida are Jacksonville, Miami, Tampa, and Orlando. Each of those cities has one or more state universities.

“I think we are the most advantageously situated. I think Orlando will outgrow those other cities,” Hitt said. “If I had to look out and see what my fondest dream 15-20 years from now it would be that we would be recognized as the premiere metropolitan university, that we would be a Research One according to the Carnegie Commission's classifications, and that we would still be regarded as having a lot of concern for an excellence in undergraduate education.”