

# Off-Campus Degree Programs: Lessons from Florida's Experience

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## Abstract

This paper describes the efforts of the UF/IFAS College of Agricultural and Life Sciences to build undergraduate degree programs at off-campus sites. The principle objective of the paper is to provide experience-based observations and recommendations to institutions considering or planning to launch off-campus degree programs. Attention is also given to the background and development of these statewide partnership programs. The recommendations and observations are based upon the experiences accrued as a consequence of developing six off-campus baccalaureate degree-granting programs. This paper is designed to share the lessons learned in the hope that other institutions intending to build programs such as ours will benefit. Development of these off-campus programs allows UF to improve the accessibility to some of its educational programs by taking the State's land grant University to the people.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences' College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (UF-IFAS-CALS) has worked aggressively to build undergraduate degree programs at off-campus sites. Today, we offer full Bachelor of Science degrees in partnership with local institutions, at six locations beyond our central Gainesville campus. The initiation, development, and processes used to establish these programs have been described in the literature (Comer et al., 1996; Duke et al., 1994; Klock-Moore et al., 2000; Linehan et al., 2000; Tignor, et al., 2002; and Verkade and Fitzpatrick, 1989).

A great deal has been written, in recent years, on approaches, strategies and challenges of offering distance education degrees. Rumble (1986) offers a comprehensive overview of the philosophy of and models for distance education. Along with a discussion of the pedagogy of teaching from distance sites, he addressed economic, political, staffing, organizational, fiscal and administrative issues. A similar, more recent, treatment of distance education opportunities and challenges is offered by Barry Birnbaum (2001). However, most of the current literature focuses on delivery of coursework and degree programs to off-campus sites via technology. The UF-

IFAS-CALS' distance education model utilized technology to augment on-site teaching/learning capacity. In 1998, Telg and Cheek wrote about the development and implementation of distance education in CALS to support these off-campus distance education degree programs. Sandy Wilson and Mac Thetford co-taught a distance education course from two different locations in Florida using interactive video and web-supported instruction. They also taught "face to face" to students at the two originating sites. The results of their experiences are documented in an article appearing in *HortTechnology* (Wilson and Thetford, 2003).

As we've implemented these educational programs we've experienced successes, encountered problems and made a few mistakes. This short paper intends to share the lessons learned from our experience in the hope that other institutions intent on building programs such as ours will benefit.

## Background

In an attempt to serve time- and place-bound students, UF-IFAS-CALS has developed "state-wide partnership" baccalaureate degree programs at several sites around Florida. These off-campus programs are partnerships in the true sense of the word in that they are offered in conjunction with a local community college and another public four-year institution. At each site, the community college offers freshman and sophomore level general education, basic prerequisite course work, and an associate of arts (AA) degree. CALS has a tradition of working closely with community college students to ensure a smooth transfer to the University of Florida. The CALS Transfer Manual communicates the specific courses that must be completed at community colleges prior to transfer to our off-campus and on-campus programs. It may be accessed at the CALS web site at [www.cals.ufl.edu](http://www.cals.ufl.edu) by clicking on Prospective Students. The partner four-year institution provides the electives and upper division courses not specifically related to the major. The major specific courses are then taught by UF-IFAS-CALS faculty. In most instances, the UF-IFAS-CALS faculty is located at one of our UF-IFAS Research and Education Centers (REC). In some cases, courses are made available through distance delivery. Table 1 shows the locations, partners and majors for each of

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our off campus programs. The table also indicates the number of students enrolled in Fall, 2003.

On balance our partnership degree programs are remarkably successful. The partner institutions have been consistently cooperative and responsive. Community leaders at each site have worked to promote our programs and recruit students. As a consequence, the programs have attracted academically strong, mature, motivated students. While most work and/or have family responsibilities, they fully engage in all aspects of a university education.

Graduates from our partnership programs are regarded in the job market or by graduate programs as co-equal with those who graduate from Gainesville campus-based programs. All reports suggest the partnership program graduates have succeeded in their graduate programs and are succeeding in their careers and communities.

One special case deserves mention. A student who completed our undergraduate program at Ft. Lauderdale, went on to earn a doctorate at Yale University and has since joined our Ft. Lauderdale faculty. Still, the successes we've experienced have come with a few set backs and have yielded a number of lessons.

**1. Find committed, adaptable partners.** The quality, responsiveness and cost effectiveness of off-campus programs depend heavily on the strength and cooperation of the partners. There must be a willingness to modify courses to meet the needs of students in the off-campus majors. This may involve modifications to course curricula, offering additional sections of some courses and adjusting the course offerings to fit the schedules of non-traditional students. In some cases, our partners provide office space, facilities and support for UF-IFAS-CALS faculty.

**2. Ensure the availability of high quality technology.** Because some courses are offered via distance delivery it is essential that dependable technology be in place. Also, competent technological support personnel must be available. A breakdown in distance delivery technology costs valuable teaching time and gives rise to frustration and dissatisfaction among students and faculty. Many of the off-campus students are older and pursuing a degree in addition to working and/or raising a family. They become particularly impatient when they feel their time and money is being wasted. Likewise, to attract faculty to develop and offer courses for distance education, technological failures or glitches must be held to a minimum.

**Table 1. UF-IFAS-CALS Statewide Partnership Degree Programs**

<u>Location</u>	<u>Year Est.</u>	<u>Primary Partners</u>	<u>Majors</u>	<u># of Students</u>
West Florida REC at Milton	1996	Pensacola Junior College University of West Florida	Turf Grass Science Landscape and Nursery Operations Natural Resource Conservation	61
Indian River REC at Ft. Pierce	1998	Indian River Community College Florida Atlantic University	Horticultural Sciences Agribusiness Management	50
Ft. Lauderdale REC at Davie	1984	Broward Community College Florida Atlantic University	Landscape and Nursery Operations Turf Grass Science Urban Entomology	65
Tropical REC at Homestead	2000	Miami-Dade Community College Florida International University	Landscape and Nursery Operations	19
Mid-Florida REC at Plant City	2002	Hillsborough Community College University of South Florida	Landscape and Nursery Operations Natural Resource Conservation	21
Mid-Florida REC at Apopka	2001	University of Central Florida Valencia Community College Seminole Community College	Landscape and Nursery Operations	58

## Results and Discussion

Based on experiences at UF-IFAS-CALS, we offer the following observations and recommendations to institutions considering or planning to launch off-campus degree programs.

**3. Fully assess the long-term population of potential students.** For off-campus programs, “build it and they will come” simply does not work. It is extremely important that planning for an off-campus program includes a projection of population

## Off-Campus Degree

and demographic dynamics in the service area. Because these programs attract a relatively large proportion of non-traditional students, it is possible to use up the available supply rather quickly. Initial enrollment will be quite encouraging but then may taper off to non-sustainable levels.

**4. Adopt a phased-in approach.** Rather than deploying all necessary resources to offer a complete major at the outset, it is preferable to take a phase-in approach. This may mean that some potential transfer students may not be able to immediately enter the program or complete their degree as rapidly as they may desire. But our experience suggests that it works best to grow the curriculum as sufficient numbers of students grow with it. Clearly it's most cost effective to start with majors that require minimal fixed infrastructure investments. Agribusiness management or agricultural education majors are less expensive to start up than majors that require specialized equipment, teaching laboratories, or greenhouses, etc. Still, degree offerings must fit local needs. Moreover, taking a phased-in approach avoids the problem addressed above. That is, if enrollment peaks and then declines, underutilized faculty resources will not be in place.

**5. Carefully and completely specify all expectations.** New faculty hired to participate in off-campus programs must fully understand and accept the challenges they will face. Along with developing and teaching courses, they will have to advise students, assist in recruiting and interacting with community leaders, build alliances with counter parts at partner institutions and be flexible enough to respond to unforeseen situations. The new faculty hired for UF-IFAS-CALS off-campus programs also carry a partial research or extension appointment. Manageable but relevant assignments for this part of their appointment must be defined very early in their appointment. Certainly annual evaluations for off-campus teaching faculty must reflect the unique nature of the assignments and the challenges they face.

When a teaching program is added to the mission of an REC, it is too often treated as an "add on" rather than an "integrated in" part of the Center. The burden of the teaching program cannot be carried only by the "teaching" faculty (those who have a teaching appointment). Established REC faculty must participate in and support the expanded mission. If the newly hired teaching faculty are relatively junior, it is especially important that senior faculty at the REC offer assistance in launching teaching, research or extension programs. Finally, colleagues in the relevant campus-based departments must "buy in" to the off-campus teaching programs. They too must be prepared to support program development and professional growth of their off-campus colleagues.

**6. Build adaptable educational capability.** As noted above, enrollment in off-campus teaching

programs can be more volatile from year to year than that on-campus. As a consequence, the capacity built into off-campus programs must also be applicable to offerings other than traditional degree oriented education. To every extent possible, off-campus educational capacity should be useful for short courses, certificate programs or to compliment other majors at the four-year partner institution. For example, the Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center (FLREC) offers five certificate programs, including Gardening in Florida, Aquatic Plant Management, and Lawn and Ornamental Pest Management. Each certificate requires from 11 to 15 semester hour credits in specified academic courses. More specific information regarding the FLREC's academic and certificate programs can be accessed at <http://www.ftld.ufl.edu>.

**7. Remember, equivalent is more important than identical.** Universities may be inclined to build off-campus degree programs that are identical to those on-campus. It is neither possible nor necessary to do so. The focus should be on building equivalently strong programs. They should take advantage of unique characteristics or capabilities of the off-campus location or partners. Three of our programs are at coastal sites. Environmentally related course work should focus attention on issues unique to coastal zones. Our programs in Ft. Pierce and Plant City are very near major fruit packing facilities. Agribusiness management courses can and should use the special challenges of managing fresh fruit packing in case studies or experiential learning.

**8. Organize the students.** As a means of creating a sense that the students are truly part of the larger university, they should be encouraged to create student clubs and organizations. Some form of organized communication with off-campus faculty and administrators gives students the sense they have a stake in, and some influence on, their educational experience. Graduates of off-campus programs should enjoy all alumni opportunities and benefits. We have found that sponsoring regional alumni events, in conjunction with the off-campus programs, have proved very successful. Because many are mature and established in their communities, they can become effective advocates for the University and its programs.

**9. Provide faculty the resources needed to initiate programs.** It is important to provide faculty the resources they need to establish and implement their programs. We have learned that it is better to postpone hiring faculty and accumulate salary savings to fund needed startup packages, equipment, supplies, and infrastructure. Then, when a faculty member is hired, the funds are available to fully launch their program. For example, at the Hillsborough Community College Plant City program which began in 2002, we are using salary savings to construct a greenhouse, renovate laboratories and offices, improved the distance education

infrastructure, design and install a teaching/demonstration garden, and provide specific startup funds for faculty.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Through more than ten years of experience we have learned a great deal about establishing and adjusting off-campus degree programs. We believe doing so is entirely consistent with the educational accessibility embedded in our land-grant tradition. They serve the needs of students whose circumstances may exclude them from campus-based programs and they often improve the utilization of off-campus facilities and faculty. We continue to learn as our programs mature; however, we've shared a few observations and recommendations with those who may be considering off-campus expansion.

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