

Is bigger better? UCF's growth worries education leaders

by Denise-Marie Ordway, Orlando Sentinel 4:02 p.m. EST, September 8, 2012

UCF professor Charles Negy teaches 448 students in his general psychology class on Thursday, September 6, 2012. UCF is the second-largest public university by enrollment. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda, Orlando Sentinel / Sep 08, 2012)

The [University of Central Florida](#)¹ prides itself on being the nation's second-largest public university by enrollment.

But is that really a good thing?

UCF finance professor Stanley D. Smith isn't convinced. The rapid growth at UCF spanning more than a decade, he says, has hurt students.

He's among the faculty members who say class sizes, in some cases, have nearly doubled and instructional quality has suffered.

In 2010-11, UCF's student-faculty ratio was 31-to-1 — the highest in Florida's public-university system.

Nationally, UCF had the fourth-highest student-faculty ratio of all public universities in fall 2010, the most recent period for which data were available from the National Center for Education Statistics.

By comparison, the national average was 18-to-1.

University administrators, however, argue there are lots of benefits to being big.

UCF offers more than 200 majors. Its research programs have attracted national recognition and top-notch faculty.

And as the university has expanded during its nearly 50 years, so has its impact on the [Orlando](#)² area economy, drawing hundreds of thousands of people to Central Florida each year while spurring new growth in [Lake Nona](#)³'s Medical City with its College of Medicine.

Yet, just as UCF celebrated passing the 60,000-student mark last week, other schools already had started holding the line on student population. Concerns about student-faculty ratios prompted [Florida International University](#)⁴ in [Miami](#)⁵ and the [University of South Florida](#)⁶ in [Tampa](#)⁷ to limit enrollment.

Several years ago, the [University of Florida](#)⁸ did the same with its freshman class.

Some members of the Board of Governors, which oversees the State University System, have expressed concern about UCF's growth. And the system's chancellor, [Frank Brogan](#)⁹, said he has had "good discussions" with UCF President [John Hitt](#)¹⁰ on the issue.

But Hitt and his administration stand by their mission: to ensure that a wide variety of students have access to higher education.

It's a mission they embrace at a time when state and national lawmakers are pushing for more college graduates, especially in the so-called STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

"We don't grow simply for the sake of growing — we grow to meet that goal," said Hitt's second-in-command, Provost Tony Waldrop.

UCF is producing more graduates, too. From 2005-06 to 2010-11, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded went up 32 percent while the number of students earning graduate degrees jumped 25 percent, according to UCF. The school expects to give out 12,200 bachelor's degrees this school year.

Critics, however, aren't convinced that volume is necessarily a strong indication of quality.

Robert Schwartz, a scholar at [Florida State University](#)¹¹ who specializes in higher education, likened large public universities such as UCF to Walmart.



Prestigious schools such as Harvard, Princeton and Stanford can stay small and take in only the brightest students, he said, because they are private institutions with huge endowments.

UCF and other public universities, however, must respond to the demands of taxpayers and lawmakers, who often see size as a more efficient use of public money.

"Like Walmart, the more the better becomes a key issue," Schwartz said. "So UCF is fulfilling a business plan that more is better, and 60,000 students is viewed positively from that perspective."

Smith, the finance professor, said UCF is more like a cereal company selling the same product but putting less and less in the box.

When he started at UCF 16 years ago, Smith points out, he had about 40 to 45 students in each of his classes. In recent years, that has grown to 60 to 75 students.

The average undergraduate class size at UCF grew from 44 students to 51 from 2007 to 2011, according to the university.

Smith worries larger classes mean students will not develop skills needed for the workplace. He used to require students to do an extensive individual project and present it in class — an assignment meant to mimic the kind of situation students might encounter working for a bank or large company.

Today, Smith requires a simpler project and has ditched the presentations because they would eat into too much instructional time.

Elsewhere at the university, faculty members described how individual projects have been replaced by group work. Multiple-choice tests are more popular these days because they take much less time to grade than essays and other exams requiring written answers.

UCF [psychology](#)¹² professor Charles Negy said he's trying to make the best of the situation. In this semester's general-psychology course, he's teaching an auditorium of 448 students. His cross-cultural psychology class has 310 students

But Negy, known for his high energy, said he likes large classes. He runs them much like a TV-talk-show host as he moves throughout the room, interacting with students.

He acknowledged that students in such a large class don't have much opportunity to develop their writing and presentation skills. But he engages them in other ways by provoking vigorous debate and challenging students to back up their opinions with evidence.

"You have to have certain skills to manage the crowd and to keep their attention, to keep them focused, to keep them engaged," Negy said.

At a recent Board of Governors meeting, former Chairwoman Ava Parker challenged Hitt over the growth issue.

During a series of questions, Parker suggested that community colleges are now providing some of the same services to students as UCF by expanding their degree programs. Meanwhile, she asked, is it a good idea for UCF to keep growing amid ongoing financial difficulties?

Hitt acknowledged that he was concerned with the high student-faculty ratio but stressed that UCF remains among the university system's better-performing schools.

"We monitor indicators of quality and, so far, they have not told us that quality is suffering because of size," he said.

He did predict that the system's uncertain financial future — especially in the area of construction funding — will eventually force UCF to limit growth.

Meanwhile, students such as Patrick Thumm and Andrew Pellerin, two freshmen from [Broward County](#)¹³, picked UCF specifically because of its size.

The high-school chums both wanted to be around lots of people their age. They were wowed by UCF's array of clubs and organizations as well as its state-of-the-art student facilities, including its 150,000-square-foot fitness center, complete with a rock-climbing wall.

Though their engineering class has several hundred students, Thumm, 18, said he considers it his own responsibility to seek any one-on-one time he needs with a professor.

"You can't just expect them to come to you," he said. "That's high school. You have to look out for your own problems."