

Florida Virtual School and UCF Team Up for First-of-Its-Kind Program

By Zenaida Gonzalez Kotala *Jan. 13, 2009*



Photo: Jacque Brund

UCF students Jessica Farrell, Oscar Cueto and Josephine Givens are among the first six students in Florida who will be interning with Florida Virtual School.

The University of Central Florida and Florida Virtual School made history today when they announced a groundbreaking program that promises to enrich student education.

For the first time, college students will train to become educators by interning with teachers at the Florida Virtual School (FLVS). In the 2007-2008 school year, the virtual school served more than 63,000 students in grades six through 12, harnessing the power of the Internet.

Six UCF education majors will be immersed in the virtual school environment and gain experience teaching online. During the internship, they will work closely with FLVS teachers, providing direct instruction via webinars and meeting with middle- or high-school students and their families via conference calls. The interns also will interact with other online teachers and teaching teams at FLVS and grade student work.

The tech-savvy UCF students selected for the internship will be able to complete it from home -- in a bathrobe and bunny slippers if they wish.

“We’re a forward-thinking institution,” said Michael Hynes, chair of the Teaching and Learning Principles department at the College of Education. “We want to be thinking ahead of where the education industry is now. This program will give our students an edge, because they will not only know how to teach a traditional class, they will know how to do it virtually.”

The UCF-FLVS partnership addresses a growing shift in education from traditional learning environments where students and teachers are located in a classroom to a blended model that uses technology to deliver the learning experience to any location. With the K-12 online learning market growing at a rate of 30 percent annually, the pilot program is a significant first step to ensuring teachers are properly trained and equipped to effectively teach in the online world.

“We are delighted to have this opportunity to work with UCF,” said Julie Young, president and CEO of FLVS. “Modern communication tools are rapidly changing the face of teaching and learning. By giving new teachers the opportunity to experience the online learning environment, we will help the education system at large continue to meet the needs of our students by creating dynamic learning opportunities for all students.”

The UCF students will work with the FLVS teachers for seven weeks. Then they will spend seven weeks in traditional classrooms in Central Florida. After each period, they will be evaluated.

The students, all “digital natives” who volunteered to be in the pilot program, say they expect to learn as much if not more from the online platform. Wearing pajamas is just a perk.

“This opportunity will do more for me because it will challenge me to be creative to ensure I’m reaching students,” said UCF student Josephine Givens of Shalimar, Fla. “It’s one thing to be in a classroom where you can see a student react. It’s another to be online. I think it will keep me on my toes.”

Teachers at FLVS are equally eager to work with the interns.

“Every day I see first hand how modern communication tools are changing the way students learn and communicate,” said FLVS teacher Stephen McPherson. “Teaching in an online learning environment provides an opportunity to use these tools to prepare students for their next steps. I look forward to sharing my knowledge and best practices about teaching online with these aspiring teachers.”

Hynes said that other UCF students would continue with traditional “bricks-and- mortar” internships – one of the last elements before students graduate with teaching degrees. But the success of the pilot program could result in a larger “virtual” internship component. He said students who complete the virtual program likely will have an edge.

“Florida Virtual School leaders will know they can hire UCF education graduates who can jump in and get the virtual teaching done without missing a beat,” Hynes said.

UCF Stands For Opportunity: The University of Central Florida is a metropolitan research university that ranks as the 6th largest in the nation with more than 50,000 students. UCF's first classes were offered in 1968. The university offers impressive academic and research environments that power the region's economic development. UCF's culture of opportunity is driven by our diversity, Orlando environment, history of entrepreneurship and our youth, relevance and energy. For more information, visit www.news.ucf.edu.

Florida Virtual School: Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is an established leader in developing and providing virtual K-12 education solutions to students throughout the country. A nationally recognized e-Learning model, FLVS founded in 1997 and was the country's first, state-wide Internet-based public high school. Today, FLVS provides flexible learning options for all students, including more than 80 courses for middle and high school students. FLVS is governed by an independent educational entity with a gubernatorial appointed board and is the only public school where funding is tied directly to student performance. Additional information can be found at www.flvs.net.

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