

A Decade of Progress: Lessons Learned in Developing the UCO Downtown

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Abstract

For over a decade, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) has been engaged in defining its role within the Oklahoma City (OKC) Metropolitan Area. By 2013, an enhanced physical presence developed for UCO within OKC itself, including the creation of the Academy of Contemporary Music and the CHK|Central Boathouse. Afterwards, and in accordance with UCO's strategic plan, Vision 2020, the Brookings Institution and the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce explored links between OKC and workforce development needs, in parallel with planning for an Innovation District. Emerging from that planning is UCO Downtown, a flexible urban learning facility on the border of OKC's Business District and the recently designated Innovation District. An upcoming renovation of offices and business incubators will provide additional space for the growth of UCO Downtown, as well as serving as home to Customized Education, a non-degree credit program serving metropolitan businesses. With substantial enrollment increases during the first three cycles of enrollment, programs have begun to anchor themselves into the OKC Downtown. The convergence of UCO Downtown with recent recommendations by the Brookings Institution forms the basis for UCO's goal of serving OKC's workforce (especially in STEM) as well as the broader OKC community (Arts, Business, Education, Government, etc.). The purpose of this paper is to describe a case study for the introduction of a learning facility in an urban environment (Oklahoma City) and to reflect on important lessons drawn from that experience. We hope this article will benefit others with similar objectives in their own institutional strategic plans.

Keywords: Innovation districts; strategic planning; urban learning facility

Introduction

Researchers have amply well documented the relationship between colleges and universities to the economic development of state economies for Oklahoma. Workforce data show that there are 100 critical occupations that will produce 33,000 jobs by 2025 in Oklahoma and the majority of those (72%) require some post-secondary education and nearly two-thirds (65%) require an associate, bachelors, masters, doctorate or professional degree (OOWD, 2017). The vast majority of these professions (engineers, nurses, software developers, etc.) are compatible with if not directly linked to metropolitan areas. Thus, the role of the accessible, public university is paramount. Indeed, the top 100 metropolitan areas cover only 12% of the land area of the United States but contain two-thirds of its population and generate 75% of its GDP (Katz and Bradley, 2013). Public colleges and universities therefore have an important role in the metropolitan and urban environments throughout the country, and the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area is no exception.

The University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) is a public university of between 16,000 and 17,000 students of which approximately 70 percent originate from the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area (UCO Factbook, 2017). UCO's origin was as a territorial normal school (founded in 1890) with a

role that extended across the territory in teacher preparation (Loughlin & Burke, 2007). Over the years, the mission and niche of UCO has evolved with the growth of Oklahoma City and surrounding environs to produce a much broader array of degree programs, including masters and professional degrees outside of teacher preparation. Through time, given its close proximity to Oklahoma City (OKC), UCO is now widely recognized as the public metropolitan university for OKC as recently stated on social media by Mayor Mick Cornett: “With the ACM@UCO in Bricktown, downtown classes at the Carnegie Building, and the UCO Boathouse in the Boathouse District, UCO has a substantial OKC footprint” (Cornett, 2017).

This article will demonstrate how, given a strategic commitment to being a metropolitan university, the University of Central Oklahoma created a successful learning center (UCO Downtown) in the heart of Oklahoma City. We will describe the process that led to the physical creation of the center as well as local, regional, and national policies that influenced it. Our hope is that this case study will benefit those wishing to create similar outcomes for their metropolitan planning initiatives.

The First Steps

The Academy of Contemporary Music (ACM) began enrolling students in the fall of 2009. The program occupies a former 25,000 square foot warehouse building in the now attractive entertainment district known as Bricktown. The program provides Associates and/or Bachelors degree options, and its curriculum focuses on contemporary music performance, production and technologies. ACM currently enrolls several hundred students and has shown marked resiliency during the recent economic downturn in Oklahoma (UCO Factbook, 2017). For UCO, ACM represents the first attempt to bring a niche program, relevant to an urban environment, to downtown Oklahoma City. An in-resident CEO manages the program independently of the main campus, but adheres to the academic guidelines of the College of Fine Arts and Design. ACM also operates a nearby Performance Lab that is used for live performances of faculty, students, staff, and guest performers.

The Central/CHK Boathouse opened in the spring of 2015 and serves the UCO Women’s rowing team as well as serving as a venue for live music, art exhibitions, and conferences. The facility was funded entirely by private sources and generates annual income (through rental fees for events) to offset maintenance costs. The Boathouse is adjacent to the Oklahoma River and a part of the Boathouse District that serves as a new and attractive community aquatics center for the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area as well for competitive rowing teams that use the river because of its unique geometry. While no courses or academic programs are offered at the Boathouse, the facility has become a popular location to host visiting delegations and for planning retreats as well as a setting for fundraising events.

After the culmination of the Vision 2020 planning process in the spring of 2013, and a Division of Academic Affairs planning process in the following fall semester of 2013, the need to create a physical connection to Oklahoma City emerged as a key priority. Several investigatory expeditions began in order to locate an appropriate and affordable teaching space within Oklahoma City. Ultimately, the historical Carnegie Metropolitan Library building was designated for housing this teaching effort, as described in a later section. A plan took shape to support the design and construction of a teaching facility there. Critical to this effort was collaboration with the Center for

e-Learning and Connected Environments (CeCE), the key organization on the UCO campus that provides professional expertise in learning design to faculty and staff members.

Vision 2020 and the Commitment to the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area

In 2011, with the arrival of a new president, Dr. Don Betz, UCO had its first institution-wide planning process (inclusive of all faculty and staff) since 2007 and produced four strategic themes: (1) Transformative Learning; (2) Student Success; (3) Value; and (4) Place. Below, we describe these themes and their relevance to our strategic planning process.

Transformative Learning. Transformative Learning (TL) activities on our campus include important emphases that are relevant to UCO's role in the Metropolitan Area, including Civic Engagement and Service Learning, among others (Barthell et al., 2010). These activities even operate to support the career aspirations of our students through an e-portfolio system, known as the Student Transformative Learning Record or STLR, which records contributions of our students in all areas of TL (Barthell et al., 2014). The last of these themes, Place, affirmed the intertwining roles of history and locale with an explicit connection to the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area.

Student Success. TL activities on the UCO campus conform well with High-Impact Educational Practices that are known to promote student success (Kuh, 2008, Cunliff & Hughes, 2011). In 2014, UCO established an Office of High-Impact Practices to promote further this connection between students and these important learning experiences (Springer et al., 2018). Combined with the opportunities presented by the STLR system (Barthell et al., 2010), student opportunities may reach well beyond their undergraduate years and into their later careers.

Value. Vision 2020 also emphasizes the value of an education at UCO and the ability for students to achieve access to that education on our campus. Access includes a commitment to diversity and inclusion as well as finding mechanisms for making that education accessible to students from challenging socio-economic backgrounds. Key to this commitment is an understanding of the role of widening the "band width" of students entering college for the first time (Verschelden, 2018).

Place. UCO's roots as a teaching institution inform its sense of being student-centered. As a metropolitan university with a commitment to the people in and around the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area, its commitment must manifest in both physical and cultural terms. This includes the case study described in this article, as well as examples of outreach to community members in Oklahoma City itself that have been a critical part of our strategic planning process by helping to realize the community connections elucidated through the Vision 2020 planning process. For example, UCO began a formal collaboration with the Greater Oklahoma City Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in 2014. UCO is currently represented by one member of the Chamber's Board of Directors and at least one staff member (Director of Community Outreach) is housed part-time at the Chamber's headquarters. UCO's Division of Student Affairs conducts student recruitment there in the evenings, as well as outreach events that support the Hispanic Community. UCO works closely with the Chamber in both staff and faculty leadership development, including through the Latino Leadership OKC program.

The Innovation District

Simultaneous with the development of UCO Downtown, discussions within the UCO President's Cabinet began to focus on broader patterns associated with successful collaborations among universities and other elements of urban communities. Indeed, in an era of declining state support for public universities, the importance of localized (municipal and community) support in strengthening the role of universities has become an even more important aspect of strategic planning and institutional investment patterns. UCO has therefore begun a reconceptualization of its role to align its resources and programming with community assets and needs to increase its regional relevance for the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area. Key to that role is an enhanced footprint within Oklahoma City itself.

In their book *Metropolitan Revolution*, published in 2013, coauthors Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley stated, "Innovation Districts cluster and connect leading-edge anchor institutions and cutting edge innovation firms with supporting and spin-off companies, business incubators, mixed-use housing, office and retail, and twenty-first century amenities and transport." Bruce Katz visited the UCO campus in February of 2015 as an invited speaker for the celebration of UCO's 125th anniversary. During that time, he visited with members of senior leadership at UCO and the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce and proposed that the ideal location for an Innovation District (ID) would be along an area bisected by Interstate 235 (I-235). The eastern side of the area is composed of universities, research foundations, and numerous business enterprises attractive to entrepreneurs. On the western side of I-235 is an area that is replete with restaurants and coffee shops that are in close proximity to museums, theatres, and performance halls on the western side of I-235 in a section of Oklahoma City known as Automobile Alley.

In the following fall of 2015, Oklahoma City and Philadelphia were the only two of dozens of candidate cities to gain admission in the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Initiative on Innovation and Placemaking. The Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce then entered into a contract with the Brookings Institution to recommend an exact area for the District, conduct an economic ecosystem audit of the proposed location, and recommend steps for implementing the ID. Brookings has already delivered its recommended area for the ID and it encompasses 843 acres, bisected by Interstate 235 (I-235) as described above. This represents only 0.2% of the area of Oklahoma City but it accounts for 4.7% of its jobs. A research park dominates the area to the east of I-235. The park is composed of private and state-funded institutions, which, for the most part, advance economic interests in biomedical research and the health industry. (The number of jobs in the ID that are STEM-related is 28%, compared to only 16% of those in Oklahoma City as a whole.) The area to the west of I-235 concentrates most of the residents of the innovation district. As noted above, the area serves as a magnet for entertainment and dining opportunities for people throughout the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area.

UCO has been a participant in all segments of planning for the Oklahoma City ID. A teaching facility, UCO Downtown (in the former Carnegie Metropolitan Library building), developed as the ID was still in its planning infancy. UCO Downtown aligns with UCO's Vision 2020 as UCO's first attempt to bring core programs (especially graduate programs) into the downtown Oklahoma City environment. Indeed, planning for the facility occurred during the Fall 2013 Academic Affairs Retreat while senior leadership (deans and cabinet members) were reading the newly published *Metropolitan Revolution* by Katz and Bradley (2013). UCO Downtown took its first students during

the spring semester of 2015. Additional programs have developed since the emergence of the ID in Oklahoma City include those associated with the Office of Customized Education. Initiated in the downtown area in 2016, in a building about three blocks from UCO Downtown, Customized Education exists to integrate business and entrepreneurial activities created in the ID with UCO programs that can contribute to such entrepreneurship. Still nascent, Customized Education will soon be housing businesses that are collaborating with UCO on innovative projects with promise as metropolitan business partners.

UCO Downtown: The Journey

In search of UCO's next foray into the heart of the Oklahoma City metropolitan area, the Deans and President's Cabinet had numerous Friday afternoon excursions to downtown Oklahoma City, trudging through unfinished and dark spaces in buildings it appeared we would be able to afford to rent. After more than a year of searching, we found "the right place at the right price" in the Carnegie Centre, the former home of Oklahoma City's Metropolitan Library from 1901 until 2004. The building had been vacant since 2004 when the new downtown library opened as part of the original Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) plan, a capital improvement program funded by a temporary sales tax.

While her initial plans for the empty building had been an extensive reconfiguration and conversion into upscale condominiums, developer Judy Hatfield held on to the Carnegie Centre during the 2008 economic downturn and waited for better times. Utilizing tax credits for the historic building and Tax Increment Financing (TIF) investment opportunity, she was able to re-open the Carnegie Centre in 2014 with commercial spaces on the ground floor and 19 apartments on the upper floors (Lackmeyer, 2014).

Stepping into an elevator with a display of vintage book binders still lining its walls, reminiscent of the former use of the building, visitors descend one floor to get a view of the space that was leased in the newly renovated Carnegie Centre in July 2014. While at first glimpse one previously saw only a dark and cold basement with no plumbing and devoid of HVAC and lighting fixtures (see Figure 1), President Don Betz agreed that the empty shell of a space allowed us to imagine new possibilities. Consistent with President Betz's frequent characterization of the university community as being "idealist[s] without illusions," we weighed the risks versus rewards and became the signature tenant the landlord was seeking to grow momentum for the property. "UCO Downtown" (see Figure 2) had found a home in a signature multi-use building in a well-established area of the central business district.



Figure 1. First view of the lower level of the Carnegie Centre



Figure 2. Carnegie Center, home of the UCO Downtown teaching facility

Once we decided to lease the space, we set in motion our plans to open for classes in time for January (2015) classes. After quick concept-to-architectural drawings, in October of 2014, the walls started going up to define the space. By November, the HVAC and sheetrock were in place, and December saw a frenzied final month of construction to completion (see Figures 3 and 4). After a test run in early January with a one-week Intersession class, the building was ready for a silent opening for the spring 2015 semester.



Figure 3. Construction as the walls begin to define the space



Figure 4. Construction as the HVAC goes in

The UCO Downtown teaching facility was designed to be different: a space appropriate for an urban setting location with a layout that maximizes flexibility and collaboration. It was to have six classrooms with flexible furniture sufficiently adjustable so that a given room could be quickly set up to accommodate a multitude of requests. It could accommodate a yoga class at the beginning of the day, a corporate retreat during the daytime hours, a community lunch-and-learn over the lunch hour, and reset for credit-bearing classes in the evening (see Figures 5–7).



Figure 5. UCO Downtown classroom sample configuration



Figure 6. UCO Downtown classroom sample configuration



Figure 7. UCO Downtown classroom set for an evening event

Planners installed collaborative-learning spaces throughout the teaching facility. Space is available for students to work independently or in groups and provides a convenient location for students to gather before and after classes (see Figures 8–10). With an excellent restaurant directly across the street from the facility, downtown workers may arrive early, have dinner, and then prepare for class.

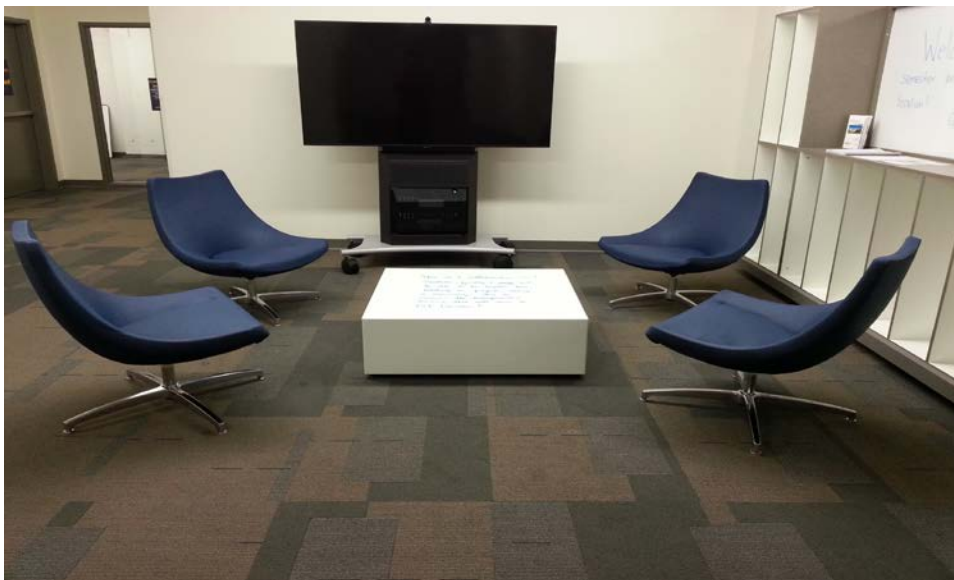


Figure 8. Collaborative space with “whiteboard” tables



Figure 9. Collaborative space for individual or group work



Figure 10. Areas for students to study before and after classes

One of the most unique and customer-focused approaches of the facility is the “techceptionist.” These student employees, trained to handle all of the technology needs of the facility, serve as the first point of contact and reception for the space. UCO Downtown classrooms are equipped with the most up-to-date technology of any UCO facility, including interactive video capability for distance learning. With a goal “to do everything but teach,” techceptionists handle all technology concerns, in order to create an environment that is conducive to learning and assure the overall teaching experience is a pleasant one for faculty.

students studying Biology, Creative Studies, English, Forensic Science, Funeral Service, History, Mathematics, Political Science, and Spanish in the downtown facility. As expected, most (78.52%) of those enrolled had addresses within the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area, with nearly half (48.99%) of these from cities outside of Edmond.

Despite this setback, UCO Downtown exceeded the goal of an annual enrollment of 300 during the first year with ninety-one enrolled in summer 2015 and two-hundred and sixty-nine enrolled in fall 2015, totaling five hundred and fifteen (see Figure 12). The spring 2016 semester was a critical period because the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) conducted a site visit and UCO Downtown was approved to offer full programs at the facility. Up until that point, no more than 50% of the coursework for any program could be offered. Additionally, we received SEVP approval during the same semester. UCO also launched its first advertising campaign for UCO Downtown.

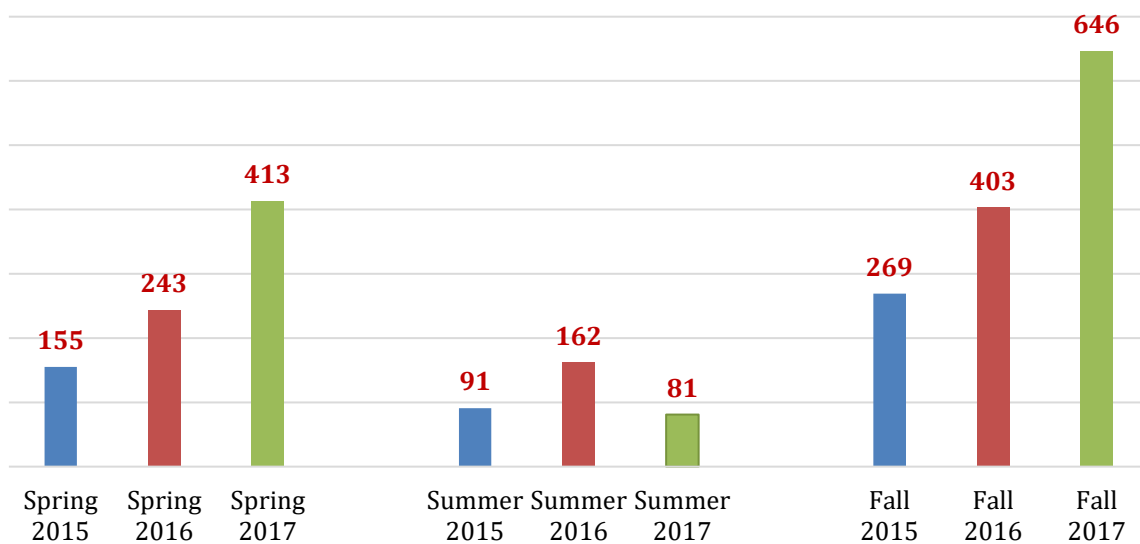


Figure 12. UCO Downtown Enrollment History by Semester

As we near completion of three full cycles of UCO Downtown enrollment, we are currently offering courses in the following graduate programs: Adult Education, Educational Administration, the Master’s in Public Administration (MPA), the Master’s in Business Analytics (MSBA) and the Professional Science Master’s (PSM). The latter two programs are new and are expected to be attractive to the OKC workforce. Moreover, the Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) program has relocated entirely from the main campus in Edmond to OKC. Undergraduate classes are offered in Biology, Criminal Justice, English, Funeral Service, Leadership, Mathematics, and Spanish.

Next Steps: One Santa Fe Plaza

While the primary purpose of UCO Downtown is to provide space for credit-bearing classes, UCO Customized Education provides oversight of the facility and maximizes the space usage with non-credit programming in all possible off-hours. UCO Downtown utilizes the facility for certificates, courses, contract partnerships, and conference management programming within the OKC metro business community, even hosting a small business incubator in a neighboring facility (One Santa Fe

Plaza). UCO Downtown space is also available to rent to businesses and organizations on occasion, making the facility a community favorite for events and retreats.

As of the spring 2018 semester, the UCO Downtown facility will no longer be able to keep pace with the classroom demands during peak times (evening hours). Plans are currently taking shape to renovate newly available space in One Santa Fe Plaza, to include five additional classrooms. UCO is already leasing office space there, for UCO Customized Education. While only touchdown space, in the form of cubicles, now accommodates faculty teaching at UCO Downtown, faculty offices will be available in One Santa Fe Plaza.

Located three blocks away from UCO Downtown, One Santa Fe Plaza (see Figure 13) will continue to house Customized Education, The Catbird Seat small business incubator. Furthermore, it will provide conference and classroom space for increased programming (e.g., for the MBA) and a more permanent setting for student services and faculty offices. Moreover, this next chapter of our metropolitan expansion will be a “STEMcubator,” a laboratory space for holding biology and engineering laboratories, and interdisciplinary collaborative research space for faculty, students, and community partnerships (see Figure 14).



Figure 13. One Santa Fe Plaza

UCO Continuing Education was able to secure \$1,000,000 in TIF funding for the planned remodel of UCO rental space within One Santa Fe Plaza, a good indicator of Oklahoma City’s confidence in UCO’s viability as a long-term partner to the Downtown and Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area.



Figure 14. Future home of the UCO “STEMcubator”

Lessons Learned

The creation of UCO Downtown was a multifaceted process that took years to accomplish. It happened in the context of a decade of previous campus development and after a specific planning initiative (Vision 2020) that included “Place” as a strategic theme. We benefited greatly from the foresight of our predecessors (presidents, vice presidents, faculty, and staff members). However, during our involvement, we encountered several experiences that are important to review. Below, we share some of those lessons.

Creating institutional momentum. While the details of UCO Downtown emerged from an academic planning process, this experience belongs in the broader context of a decade of university-level planning, including the current university strategic plan, Vision 2020. Shared governance among university constituents is an essential element in building momentum toward a successful UCO Downtown. In addition to planning with the six university deans, this included unsolicited visits to the university’s Faculty Senate in order to articulate the need for the project and why it was an appropriate investment in the future of the institution.

Key collaborators. Given the entrepreneurial nature of creating UCO Downtown, both in its design and planning, we needed partners on and off the UCO campus who could relate to a new, metropolitan-based approach to learning. Key among these partners was the Center for e-Learning and Customized Education (which later evolved into the Center for e-Learning and Connected Environments with Customized Education settling in downtown Oklahoma City). This group immediately grasped the special needs of the facility, including the nature of the learning space (with an ability to physically rearrange learning components on short notice) and the availability of skilled learning technology facilitators (“techceptionists”). These collaborators included a local real estate agent and civic leader, dedicated staff members, and faculty pioneers with a desire to explore a new form of urban education.

Communication with key stakeholders. Even after the construction of the teaching facility that formed the physical basis for UCO Downtown, communication with academic policy makers was essential to development of the learning environment of our metropolitan-based students. Federal input (e.g., Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS) was required to accommodate international students. We notified our regional accreditation body (Higher Learning Commission) of our intent to teach in the facility and obtained a visit by an accreditation liaison. Both the Regional University System of Oklahoma (RUSO) and Oklahoma State Regents of Higher Education (OSRHE) also provided critical input into the planning process. Forgetting the role of key stakeholders like these can have disastrous consequences for any academic planning process that includes off-site teaching locales.

Conclusion

Given the continued and substantial decline in federal and state funding for higher education, the special role that metropolitan universities play, in providing education that supports the economic momentum of the states they serve, is increasingly important. The role of universities in metropolitan Innovation Districts illustrates a modern view of universities as being integral to regional economies that support global outcomes. This paper chronicled the journey of one metropolitan institution, the University of Central Oklahoma, to enhance its physical presence in the downtown metropolitan area (Oklahoma City), including the establishment of a downtown teaching facility. Indeed, UCO has been actively engaged in formalizing its role within the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area for over a decade. UCO Downtown, a teaching and community service extension of the UCO main campus in Edmond, has now brought curriculum previously found only on the UCO campus into the heart of Oklahoma City. The multi-year process that led to its development has yielded several lessons we hope will benefit the reader. Key among these is to ensure that you engage in a concerted and collaborative strategic planning process and that you are aware of all relevant accreditation and federal guidelines that may affect that planning process.

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