

## MEETING OF MINDS

### COLLEGES

#### EDUCATION

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SARASOTA — The catchy name is “C4,” the clunky one is the “Consortium of Colleges on the Creative Coast.”

But whatever the label, the idea is for four local colleges to join forces and transform the North Tamiami Trail area into a vibrant college center.

New College of Florida, Ringling College of Art & Design, the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee and State College of Florida announced Tuesday they would form the consortium.

The alliance will allow the four local colleges’ nearly 20,000 students to take courses at any of the group’s institutions for credits that will count at their home campus, allow the schools to coordinate emergency services and help officials secure mutual business partnerships. The four colleges also will join to brand North Tamiami Trail in Sarasota and part of southwest Manatee County as an education destination.

Larry Thompson, president of Ringling College of Art & Design, said the partnership has been in the works for years. It could see the local colleges partner to create events, student housing and transportation options, he said.

“There are even discussions of a central student union somewhere” on the North Trail, Thompson said. “There

**SEE COLLEGES, A6**



**Ringling College students Kelly Denski and Rachel Tomis work on pieces for their painting class last spring in Sarasota's Five Points Park.** HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE / 2015 / RACHEL S. O'HARA



**Dr. Matt Thomas, left, works with students Nathan Hadsell and Allyssa Fatic as they quantify protein in a biotechnology class at State College of Florida in September.** HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE / 2015 / DAN WAGNER

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are major possibilities that can arise from this. You name it — anything we do now has the possibility of being done jointly, together.”

Dozens of such college combinations exist across the nation and allow schools to pool resources such as technology, to offer more course options and to save money by combining some services.

The concept is common in the Northeast, but Florida and the Southeast have few such collectives. Those that have been formed involve community colleges, historically black universities, private colleges and schools with specific education goals, such as training students for manufacturing jobs.

Other affiliations focus on specific education programs or aspects of operating schools, such as the Florida College System Risk Management Consortium.

That means the C4 consortium will be among the first of its kind in the Southeast, said Laurey Stryker, C4 initiative manager and former president of USF Sarasota-Manatee.

Stryker's position and other aspects of the collaboration are funded by three of Sarasota's largest philanthropies: the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County and the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation.

“It is a mix of institutions that are complementary and different. I think the opportunities are going to be unique to this region,” Stryker said.

“I think the open minds these presidents have offer a real opportunity to have the sum of the parts be much greater than any one institution in the area.”

## College neighborhood

College leaders have long sought a way to increase the visibility and prominence of Sarasota's local higher education institutions and to revamp North Tamiami Trail, which is dotted by closed storefronts, rundown motels and hotels now used as affordable housing.

Community and college leaders tried to infuse education and arts-related developments into the area through the 2006 Innovation41 initiative before that project sputtered and became another casualty of the Great Recession.

College leaders were still interested in the idea, but, as Thompson said, "we're not developers."

After Innovation41, a new wave of college leaders seemed eager to unite.

New College President Donal O'Shea was once dean of Mount Holyoke College, part of the 50-year-old Five College Consortium in western Massachusetts.

When he came to New College in 2012, he and Teri Hansen, formerly with the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, encouraged leaders from the colleges to meet regularly. About three years ago, the foundation sponsored a retreat for the four colleges' presidents and provosts, leading to more meetings.

Eventually, the Consortium of Colleges on the Creative Coast was born.

Among the hallmarks will be the ability for students at each of the schools to take courses at any of the other local universities, a process known as cross-registering. Ringling College, New College, USFSM and SCF piloted cross-registration, with a handful of students during the spring and fall semesters of 2015.

There are still some kinks to work out, but Stryker hopes to have crossregistration available to most students by this fall. Students will still have to complete prerequisites to take upper level courses at other institutions, and placement is only available if there is room in a class.

Students cannot enroll in one institution and expect to earn a degree at another through cross-registration.

But, for example, a Ringling College student majoring in computer animation could theoretically earn a computer programmer certificate from SCF at no additional cost through cross registration.

O'Shea's experience at Mount Holyoke College within the Five College Consortium has some parallels at New College.

"But here there's even more opportunity because we're each so different. It's easier to cooperate with schools with different missions," O'Shea said.

"And unlike in western Massachusetts, there are more research facilities here like Mote Marine, and there are so many other businesses in the area."

Kevin Kennedy, a spokesman for the Five College Consortium, said no money changes hands when students cross-register at colleges there.

The same will be true of the C4 agreement.

That will disproportionately affect Ringling College, the only private school in the local group. One class

credit there can cost about \$1,500 — more than \$1,000 in excess of the per-credit cost for Florida residents at New College (\$192.10), USFSM (\$185.92) and SCF (\$112.08).

“Financially, yes, it would be a loss of money,” Thompson said. “But if you look at it from cash circumstances, it’s not a huge loss to the institution provided there is space available in a class.”

The cost per-credit difference, he said, “makes it difficult, but I’m a huge believer in the concept of what this is about and we’ll make it happen any way we can.”

Students at Ringling could go to USFSM or New College to take foreign language courses, which are not taught at the arts school, among other sub-jects, Thompson said.

He said the new consortium is a way to finally put Sarasota on the map as a major education destination. For too long, people have brushed off the local colleges.

“People don’t look at it in a holistic way. Everyone sees institutions separately, and institutions have seen each other separately,” Thompson said. “But when we really look and work through this, we have a new term like a multi-verisity.”

### **A multi-versity?**

“It’s like having a major research institution here when you look at number of students and separate campus missions,” Thompson said.

“We want to fill up North Trail to be much more of a college haven — amenities for young people, students, new graduates and so forth, so that it becomes a hip scene on 41.”

There’s no blueprint for what the C4 colleges are doing, said Carol Probstfeld, president of SCF.

“That’s what makes it fun,” she said. “There’s nothing more energizing than navigating uncharted waters.”

Florida State University’s Ringling campus for the arts and Eckerd College in St. Petersburg will participate in some aspects of the resource sharing, but not yet in the cross-registration of students for classes.

But Kelly Kirschner, vice president and dean of executive and continuing education at Eckerd College, said that could change in the future, especially through partnerships with Eckerd’s well-known marine science program and local research facilities such as Mote Marine.





**Professor Pat McDonald, left, talks with Matthew Stevenson about his thesis in 2014 at New College of Florida. HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE / 2014 / RACHEL S. O'HARA**



**University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee graduates participate in spring commencement exercises at the Bradenton Area Convention Center in Palmetto in 2014. Under a planned consortium between four local colleges, students could take classes at other schools for credit at their home campus. For example, USFSM could offer language courses to students at Ringling College of Art & Design. HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE / 2014 / CASEY BROOKE LAWSON**