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Grand Canyon University inching closer to possible Mesa or Gilbert campus

Location decision expected within 30 to 60 days

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Posted: Thursday, June 20, 2013 12:14 pm

By Aaron Rop, Special to Tribune | 0 comments



Photo courtesy AZBillboard.com

For Valley residents driving along the Santan Loop 202 freeway — specifically those heading eastbound toward Chandler and Gilbert — there's a large billboard that comes into view approaching the Loop 101 interchange.

"Phoenix is now a DI College town," it says, referencing Grand Canyon University's rise to NCAA Division I status this upcoming school year.

But what some of those drivers — many of them presumably East Valley residents — may not know is that they could have an opportunity to join the team.

Grand Canyon University

Drivers heading eastbound on the Santan Loop 202 freeway may notice this billboard, situated between Interstate 10 and the Loop 101, referencing Grand Canyon University's move to NCAA Division I status for athletics this fall. Grand Canyon officials say they're close to deciding on a spot for a satellite campus, likely in either Mesa or Gilbert. [Photo courtesy AZBillboard.com]

Phoenix-based GCU was hoping to start construction this summer on an East Valley satellite campus to open in the fall, but the university had to delay plans and is hoping to reach a decision in the next 30 to 60 days.

Right now the focus is on Mesa and Gilbert for a new location, and "there isn't a need to rush" said William Jenkins, vice president for the Office of Communications and Public Affairs at GCU.

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The current goal for the university is to open one building in 2015 and open a new building about every two years to match enrollment.

Jenkins said enrollment is the main determinate of how quickly the process will take, but GCU is looking at completing the project in 4-5 years with four new buildings total.

GCU is already in the middle of renovating its 115 acre main campus' student union building and two of its student dormitories. By comparison, Arizona State University's Tempe campus is about 700 acres.

"We currently have 6,500 students attending our Phoenix campus, and our goal is to grow this campus to 15,000 students by the fall of 2015," said president and CEO Brian Mueller in the university's 2012 annual report.

Jenkins said GCU is hoping that a potential East Valley campus will add an additional 5,000-7,000 students.

The project was announced at the end of 2012 and other cities in Arizona were considered, as well as locales outside Arizona like Albuquerque, NM and Las Vegas.

Instead of accelerating growth for its Phoenix campus or online program, which is about 85 percent of enrollment according to GCU's annual report, Jenkins said university leadership wanted to take a look at other opportunities for student growth.

"More students want to commute than live on campus."

Keith Blanchard, deputy director for the Arizona State Board for Private Postsecondary Education, said the board hasn't received an application from GCU to add a new campus, but that it will likely receive one for approval when a location is decided.

According to the Maricopa Community Colleges transfer student data for the 2011-2012 academic year, there were 3,676 undergraduates who transferred 12 or more credits from a Maricopa Community College to GCU.

Limse Thor, coordinator of enrollment services at Mesa Community College, said he thinks if GCU were to choose Mesa as a new campus location it would be a plus for MCC.

Thor said MCC has a great partnership with ASU already, but it is developing stronger relations with other universities to transfer students. ASU having to compete a little harder for MCC's students is the only potential fallout he can foresee if GCU were to plant a campus.

"They'll do what they can to get our students after freshman, sophomore year," Thor said. He added students willing to transfer could make themselves more marketable for scholarships.

Skip Derra, media relations officer for ASU, said at ASU, "we see ourselves as a completely different institution (than GCU)."

Cathy Chlarsen, director of marketing, PR and communications for Chandler-Gilbert Community College, provided statistics showing that in spring 2012, there were 20 CGCC students from fall 2011 that attended GCU between Jan. 1 and the end of May that same year. In comparison, there were 624 CGCC transfers to ASU in that same time period.

Chlarsen said if GCU were to choose the Gilbert and Chandler area, it would be a positive for the community and CGCC's students because they would have more opportunity.

GCU was founded in 1949 as a non-profit liberal arts college, and was purchased by investors in Feb. 2004 and turned into a for-profit, private Christian university.

As of Dec. 31, 2012 it had approximately 52,300 enrolled students across all platforms.

Aaron, a senior studying journalism at Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, is an intern for the East Valley Tribune. Contact him at (480) 898-6514 or tribintern@evtrib.com.

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