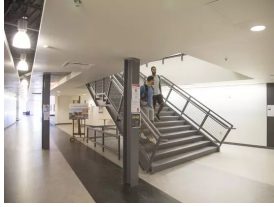


What is the state of higher education in Mesa, Gilbert?

Jessica Boehm, The Republic | azcentral.com Published 6:03 a.m. MT March 20, 2017 | Updated 3 hours ago



(Photo: Nick Oza/The Republic)

Education — especially higher education — is a lucrative business.

It's a business that the East Valley has tried to lure into its cities for years, and with good reason: College campuses historically usher in waves of development in surrounding areas. And perhaps more importantly, companies with high-paying jobs like to locate in areas with skilled workers.

"An educated workforce leads to quality jobs. It builds wealth and creates a healthier economy," Mesa Economic Development Director Bill Jabjiniak said.

But last year delivered some untimely blows to the East Valley's quest for expansive higher-education opportunities.

- In May, Saint Xavier University, a Chicago-area-based Catholic school, announced it would leave Gilbert less than a year after it moved into a \$37-million, taxpayer-funded building.
- A few months later, Mesa voters rejected a sales-tax increase that would have provided funding for a plan championed by Mayor John Giles to bring an Arizona State University campus to the city's downtown.

Other East Valley ventures into higher education have seen mixed results. Mesa attracted five private, liberal arts universities in 2012. Two have since left, one (Wilkes University) recently announced it would move entirely online, and the two others have experienced sizable success.

MORE: [Wilkes University in Mesa ending in-person classes \(/story/news/local/mesa/2017/03/09/wilkes-university-ending-face-to-face-classes-mesa-transitioning-online-only/98876260/\)](http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/mesa/2017/03/09/wilkes-university-ending-face-to-face-classes-mesa-transitioning-online-only/98876260/)

The programs that have experienced the most success have one thing in common: They've gone after programs or experiences largely untapped by the state's gigantic public universities.

From increased attention on religion to new, career-technical education offerings, here's a look at how these East Valley institutions have survived in an increasingly competitive market:

Benedictine University: 'A great success story'

When Benedictine University, a Catholic school from Illinois, agreed to bring a campus to Mesa, university leaders told Mesa officials they hoped to have 500 students in five years, Jabjiniak said.

"They actually accomplished it in four," he said. "They've been a great success story."

Currently in its fourth year, the Mesa campus offers about a dozen on-campus undergraduate degrees and a handful of graduate programs, most notably its Master of Business Administration offering.

Unlike many satellite campuses, Benedictine University President Michael Brophy said the school decided to focus on the "underserved undergraduate population" in the Valley instead of online or adult programs.

"If you look at Phoenix in particular, you really have to acknowledge that between ASU, University of Phoenix and Grand Canyon University, Phoenix is an epicenter for adult and online education. You just have to embrace that idea. We really can't rush into that market focused on that population because of who is already there," Brophy said.

Brophy noted that Benedictine is one of a limited number of Catholic universities in the Southwest, which allowed the school to market its programs to students who wish to incorporate religion and community into their education.



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Additionally, the Mesa campus is part of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics' California Pacific Conference and boasts 13 sports teams, which has allowed the school to recruit student athletes from nearly 30 states, Brophy said.

"Although there are great, large public universities in Arizona, they, of course, have a limited number of seats on their (sports) rosters. There's a lot of pent-up demand for athletics in Arizona, and we're meeting it head on," he said.

Brophy said the Mesa campus expects to grow to 1,000 students in the next five years.

The rapid growth, although welcomed by Mesa, begs a question: Where will the school grow?

"That's a nice problem to have," Mayor John Giles said.

The university currently leases its main building, the 65,000 square-foot, former Southside Hospital building, from the city, and its residence hall inside the renovated Alhambra Hotel from a private developer.

MORE: [This 123-year-old hotel could be your dorm \(/story/news/local/mesa/2017/02/13/renovated-mesa-alhambra-hotel-opens-doors-students/97745814/\)](/story/news/local/mesa/2017/02/13/renovated-mesa-alhambra-hotel-opens-doors-students/97745814/)

According to officials, the city is negotiating a deal that would give the university credits toward its rent payments if the school renovates the rest of its main building for additional class space. Currently, only about two-thirds of the building is usable space, Jabjiniak said.

That deal has yet to come before the Mesa City Council.

"We like what (Benedictine's) doing in terms of growth and would like to see that continue," Jabjiniak said.

Brophy confirmed that the school is negotiating a long-term plan for growth with the city.

"We intend to make Mesa proud," he said. "Based on all leading indicators ... it looks to me to be a long and prosperous relationship."

Upper Iowa: Decision to 'recalibrate' leads to success

When Upper Iowa came to Mesa in 2012, it offered a handful of programs for mostly adult or non-traditional students.

But one program — nursing — quickly rose to the top. So school leaders decided to adjust to meet the "unmet educational need of the community," spokesman Andrew Wenthe said.

"It is our core offering in the Mesa area now just because we determined that that was the major or area of interest," he said.

Adjusting was nothing new for Upper Iowa University, which operates 25 locations in the United States, Wenthe said.

The Mesa campus' most successful program is a concurrent-enrollment program with the Maricopa Community College System, Wenthe said. Students can earn their associate degree in applied science in nursing at MCC while working toward their bachelor of science in nursing degree from Upper Iowa.

Stephanie Tippin, assistant professor of nursing at the Mesa campus, said about 90 students are in the concurrent-enrollment program now, and the university expects an additional 30 to 40 students twice a year.

"There is a very high need in nursing nationally to move nurses to the baccalaureate level," Tippin said.

Mesa Community College: City's 'legacy institution'



Mesa Community College will have college advisers at each Mesa public high school. (Photo: The Republic)

Mesa Community College is one of the longest-standing higher-education institutions in the East Valley.

Through the decades, MCC and the entire Maricopa Community College system have expanded their offerings to work with new institutions in the Valley.

"We see Mesa Community College as an integral part of the success of the East Valley and Maricopa County as a whole," interim president Sasan Poureetezadi said.

Poureetezadi said many MCC students begin at the school and then transfer to a university in the state, whether it be ASU or one of the smaller universities, such as Benedictine or Upper Iowa.

But community college provides another important role, he said. Many of the larger institutions in the Valley don't focus on technical skills in the same way that MCC offers career-technical education.

"There are many different pathways for students," he said. "There are a lot of opportunities for employment for students with different skill sets or interests."

Earlier this month, Mesa Community College announced that it would station a full-time college adviser at each Mesa public high school to assist students preparing for college.

"It's about increasing the number of students that transition from high school to college and giving them an opportunity," Pouretezadi said. "It's about giving back to the community. We really want to provide opportunities for our young people and the city of Mesa."

Giles commended the critical role Mesa Community College plays in the city.

"It's a legacy institution in Mesa. And it's a perfect fit for the needs of our community," he said.

What's next for Gilbert?



Gilbert is looking for a new tenant for the four-story, \$37 million building that housed Saint Xavier. (Photo: The Republic)

Last year's news that Saint Xavier would leave Gilbert because of budget issues was a low blow for the town, which had worked with the university for years to develop what it thought would be a long-term relationship.

Taxpayers funded the four-story, \$37-million university building in the town's Heritage District. In January, the school agreed to pay the town around \$4 million for breaking its 15-year lease.

Gilbert officials said they are on the hunt for a new education institution to rent the building.

Economic Development Director Dan Henderson said the town has held meeting with more than a dozen learning institutions nationwide and with all major universities and colleges in Arizona.

Henderson said his "knee-jerk reaction" is to find a major tenant as soon as possible — but the "pragmatic" approach is to find a long-term occupier that will integrate seamlessly with the town's current core industries, such as health care and aerospace, which could take some time.

Meantime, community partners can rent portions of the building for things such as coding camps, he said.

"That building is an amenity for the community," Henderson said.

Could ASU still come to downtown Mesa?



Giles announced an ambitious plan to bring an ASU campus to downtown Mesa at his State of the City address in 2016.

Once the excitement of the announcement wore off, the question quickly became how to fund the venture.

In November, the city asked Mesa voters to hike their sales tax to fund the campus, along with other things such as public safety. Mesa voters told the city, "no."

MORE: [Mesa will keep trying for ASU campus downtown \(/story/news/local/mesa/2016/12/01/mayor-mesa-keep-trying-arizona-state-university-campus-downtown/94557210/\)](http://www.azc.cc/story/news/local/mesa/2016/12/01/mayor-mesa-keep-trying-arizona-state-university-campus-downtown/94557210/)

Giles said he remains committed to bringing an ASU campus to the city's downtown, even if it must come in phases. ASU already operates its Polytechnic campus in east Mesa.

"We have not stopped talking with them — there are meetings happening right now," Giles said. "It's still a really good idea."

In a statement, the ASU said it "looks forward to our continued partnership with the city of Mesa, expanding our community and social impact and serving the citizens of Mesa through our Polytechnic campus ... ASU is always committed to exploring new ideas with partners like the city of Mesa, and we look forward to further discussions with the community."

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