



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Rosen College of Hospitality Management
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NEWS RELEASE

Three UCF Colleges Receive \$4.5M in Funding for Collaborative Research on Infectious Disease and Travel Health Initiative

The goal is to help businesses recover from vulnerabilities and prepare for the potential of another pandemic

Orlando, FL (July 19, 2022) — University of Central Florida's [Rosen College of Hospitality Management](#), [College of Medicine](#) and [College of Engineering and Computer Science](#) have received \$4.5 million dollars in funding for a research initiative aimed at mitigating the damage caused to hospitality, travel, and small businesses by health crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The funding for the collaborative research project comes from the UCF Strategic Investment Program, supporting President Alexander N. Cartwright's vision that UCF will become a "University for the Future" as a top public institution and the world's leading public metropolitan research university

The Infectious Disease and Travel Health Initiative has three major areas of focus:

- To provide an advance warning system through its data collection methods.
- To bring travelers and those who serve them closer to science, bridging the gap between basic science and behavioral science.
- To create a resource for small to medium-sized businesses in tourist areas to help them manage future health crisis situations that may arise.

The primary investigator on the initiative, Professor Robertico Croes, focuses his research on tourism economics, human development, poverty, and tourism management with a special interest in small and developing economies.

Croes says the Infectious Disease and Travel Health initiative is critical given travelling's economic impact on the world and its ability to alleviate poverty and elevate human development.

"We began this project in the early days of the pandemic," Croes says. "Health crises like this are not an anomaly, they are becoming more and more frequent. Sometimes they are isolated to one area of the globe, but as we saw with COVID, they can devastate entire segments of the economy and small businesses often can't recover as they don't have the resources that large corporations have in order to mitigate a crisis."

Griffith Parks, a collaborator on the initiative and professor and director of the [Burnett School of Biomedical Sciences](#) at UCF's College of Medicine, says he is enthusiastic about the project.

"We are thrilled to have the support from the university on this important and unique initiative," Parks says. "We aspire to build an initiative that will draw in faculty and students from other colleges, not just the three currently involved, such as nursing and health professions, who have an interest in population health, travel and tourism and in infectious diseases. Most importantly, a goal of the initiative is to have a strong impact on our Central Florida communities by creating connections that will help to improve and support the health of our tourism workforce and industries."

Pandemics can have devastating consequences for regions where tourism and travel are the economic lifeblood. According to Visit Florida it's estimated the local economy in Central Florida took a \$40 billion hit from lower rates of travel during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taj Azarian, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the Burnett School of Biomedical Sciences who investigates the emergence and spread of bacterial infectious diseases is collaborating on the project.

"Florida is a major tourist destination, as well as an international corridor to the United States. Further, its recent history has been marked by several notable public health events, as such, Florida is an ideal location to focus translational infectious disease research." Said Azarian. "Here, or initiative will serve to strengthen business continuity, improve health and safety of travelers, and establish a sentinel network for early detection of emerging threats."

Rosen College Associate Dean and Professor Alan Fyall, a collaborator on the initiative, says the work could have a global impact.

"The pandemic has woken the world up to the fragility and vulnerability of the global tourism industry," Fyall says. "The time is thus ripe to bring together an internationally recognized and highly experienced interdisciplinary team to develop new science-based solutions and strategies to build future economic and social strength for Central Florida and beyond."

The initiative's collaborators also includes Dr. Kenneth Alexander, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Nemours Children's Hospital, Florida, who says this is crucial work for future generations.

"It is important that Nemours Children's Hospital joins in this initiative with UCF for two reasons," Alexander says. "First, many of our tourist guests here in Florida are children. Second, many in our tourism labor force are raising families. Therefore, the health of children is central to the success of our tourism industry."

The Infectious Disease and Travel Health Initiative research project received funding in the Academic Excellence Category of the UCF Strategic Investment Program. The funding will help in hiring research faculty who can secure additional funding for the project; establishing new courses and a Travel & Health track of study within the Master of Public Health degree program; and developing partnerships within the hospitality, healthcare, and science industries. Current UCF faculty from several disciplines are engaged with the initiative.

"The interdisciplinary nature of the project and the involvement of engineering and nanoscience will have a tremendous impact on combatting future infectious disease and travel health," says Sudipta Seal, chair of the [Materials Science and Engineering Department](#) in the College of Engineering and Computer Science and co-principal investigator on the grant.

Seal's statement was echoed by project collaborator Jane Gibson, a professor of pathology at UCF's College of Medicine.

"We are excited to harness the collective expertise at UCF to support the health and well-being of our tourist industry colleagues, visitors and community," Gibson says.

The Infectious Disease and Travel Health Initiative is ongoing with work on the initiative starting this summer.

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To learn more about the UCF Strategic Investment Program and the Infectious Diseases and Travel Health Initiative visit <https://provost.ucf.edu/sip-awards/>