

A Hospitality Program Like No Other: A Brief History of UCF's Rosen College of Hospitality Management

By Tim Bottorff, Head Librarian, UCF Rosen College Library



As the program celebrates twenty years at the Rosen campus and forty years since its founding, it is time to reflect upon the school's amazing journey from obscurity to world-renowned hospitality program...

With more than 3,000 students taking classes on a unique and state-of-the-art campus, in the heart of Orlando's hospitality and tourism corridor, with distinguished faculty and experienced industry executives, the Rosen College of Hospitality Management is already considered one of the finest hospitality programs in the world. And surely the future portends even greater success for the University of Central Florida's (UCF) unique branch campus. But, as with any great enterprise, in order to fully appreciate current and future accomplishments one must first begin to understand the history and evolution of the program.

When the Rosen School of Hospitality Management (as it was then called) opened its doors on January 5, 2004, one could easily predict a bright future. The Rosen School had become a reality due in large part to the generosity of local hotelier Harris Rosen, who donated the initial \$18 million in money and land that jumpstarted the construction of the new campus. Soon, many other central Florida hospitality companies — including Walt Disney World, Darden Restaurants, the Universal Orlando Foundation, Sea World, Marriott, and the Central Florida Hotel & Lodging Association — were also contributing funds to the project.

By the time the new campus opened at the beginning of the Spring 2004 semester — a Mediterranean-inspired, resort-style facility with 18 classrooms, a world-class library, a

200-seat dining room and bar, a stunning beer and wine laboratory, two spacious teaching kitchens, a 400-seat auditorium, and wireless Internet access throughout campus — it was clear that Rosen was unlike any other hospitality program.

In reality, however, the establishment of the Rosen campus was the culmination of a much longer journey for those involved with UCF's efforts to educate future hospitality leaders.

The Early Years

Dr. Abraham Pizam was involved almost from the beginning and would become a key figure in the program's eventual success. The hospitality program that Dr. Pizam helped to begin was an outgrowth of the Dick Pope Sr. Institute for Tourism Studies, which had been



Dr. Abraham Pizam, 1980s

established in 1979 in the College of Business Administration in honor of Dick Pope Sr., the owner of Cypress Gardens and one of the pioneers of Florida's tourism business. The Institute worked with the central Florida hospitality industry to conduct market research and to produce reports related to the area's lodging and restaurant sectors. When Dr. Pizam came to the Institute in 1983, he later recalled, "there was nothing here, except the institute, an interim director, and a secretary. But I talked to the industry a lot... and became convinced there was tremendous potential."

In addition to Dr. Pizam, the program's first faculty members were Mr. Robert Ashley, Dr. Venkat Chandrasekar, and Dr. Audrey McCool, who were soon joined by Dr. Beshid Farsad and Dr. Ady Milman. These original faculty members could be regarded as the true founders of UCF's hospitality program, laying the foundation for later success by crafting the first degree and curriculum within the College of Business, as well

as by navigating through subsequent changes in administrative structure and degree requirements as the program evolved.

There were some lean times in those first few years, but program administrators and faculty members persevered. Throughout its first decade, UCF's hospitality program endeavored to recruit more students, to fund its programs and facilities, and to set itself apart from other hospitality programs. The program had difficulty finding a permanent home in the university, moving from the College of Business Administration, to an independent status under the purview of the Provost, to the College of Health and Professional Studies (later called the College of Health and Public Affairs), and then back to the College of Business in the early 1990s. The program finally achieved status as an autonomous School in July 2000 and then was elevated to the status of a full College in May 2004, shortly after the opening of the Rosen campus.

As Dr. Pizam had foreseen, establishing connections with local industry professionals lead to several synergistic initiatives over the years. For example, in 1986, the Central Florida Hotel-Motel Association (CFHMA) pledged \$20,000 per year for five years to help start a professorship in convention and meeting planning. These funds were soon augmented by a \$50,000 grant from the Board of Regents.

In the mid-1980s, students interested in the food service industry worked at the cafeteria, preparing student meals, because the university lacked lab kitchen facilities. Dr. Pizam mentioned the program's financial woes and lack of kitchen facilities in a 1987 *Orlando Sentinel* article. A week later, the newspaper reported that an "anonymous local hotelier" had promptly donated \$10,000 worth of kitchen equipment to the program. By 1990, the program was able to open its own 2,000 square foot kitchen and 1,000 square foot dining room.



Professor Robert Ashley with students, 1980s

The Dick Pope Institute was also very active in the 1980s and early 1990s, doing research for local and international industry professionals and producing *Tourism Barometer*, a newsletter with central Florida hotel occupancy rates and other tourism statistics.

By the early 1990s, the program was also beginning to mature and to take on a higher profile. A \$600,000 donation from General Mills Inc. (then the operator of Red Lobster and Olive Garden restaurants), along with a \$420,000 grant from the state, led to an endowed chair in Restaurant Management (now called the Darden Eminent Scholar in Restaurant Management). By this time, specialized tracks existed not only in Food Service Management, but also in Lodging Management, Conference & Convention Management, and Tourism & Travel Administration.

There were some constants through the years. Hands-on industry experience was stressed from the beginning, and students were variously required to complete between 500 and 1,360 hours of paid employment in the industry during the course of getting their degrees. In addition to Dr. Pizam, professors such as Dr. Ady Milman have remained part of the program since the 1980s and have played a significant role in shaping the character of the program.

By 1992, the program had returned to the College of Business Administration, and shortly thereafter Dr. Robert Ford took over as chair of the program. Dr. Ford's appointment, and the return to the College of Business, signaled a philosophical shift towards a more management-based curriculum. For the next several years the program continued to grow and mature, and by the late-1990s UCF was graduating nearly 100 hospitality students annually.

Nonetheless, expectations for the program were growing even faster, as Orlando's tourism industry continued to expand. A 1998 *Orlando Sentinel* article referred bluntly to UCF's "less-than-stellar hospitality program" and mentioned that many industry professionals in the area felt that the program was underperforming and that university administrators were not supportive enough. The article also mentioned that the Dick Pope Institute was by this time "virtually unused," primarily because much of its state funding had been taken away in the early 1990s.

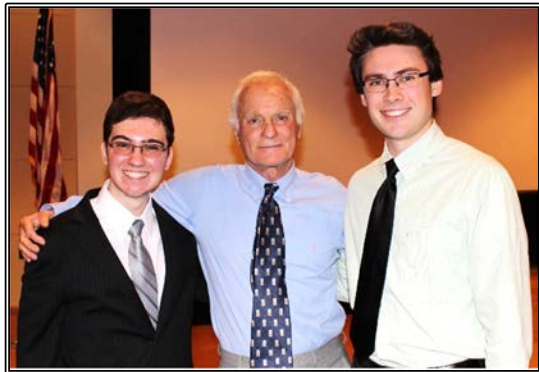
Whether by chance, or as a result of some of the harsh criticism being leveled at it, the program's fortunes soon began to change for the better.

Rise to Prominence

Over the next few years, UCF's relatively small hospitality program suddenly expanded into one of the largest and most important programs in the nation. Among the keys to its meteoric rise were outside funding, university support, and strong leadership and vision from talented administrators and faculty members.

First, the law firm Baker & Hostetler and the American Resort Development Association donated \$250,000 to build a timeshare program, and soon new specialized tracks were added in Vacation Ownership Resort Management and Theme Park & Attraction Management, specialized courses of study that exist in only a few other programs.

Then, as early as 1998, Harris Rosen began publicly talking about donating \$10 million for the purpose of establishing a world-class hospitality management program. By late 2000, Mr. Rosen's donation was formalized: \$10 million in cash and 25 acres of valuable land for the new campus to be built on. The land would eventually be valued at approximately \$8 million, making the total donation worth approximately \$18 million. Mr. Rosen also donated an additional \$1.1 million for scholarships.



*Mr. Harris Rosen with UCF Rosen College students
Matthew Temmer & Frank Hamedl, 2017*

Tangelo Park Pilot Program, a partnership wherein Mr. Rosen funds preschool and college education for children in Orlando's Tangelo Park area, a predominantly African American, working class neighborhood. Mr. Rosen was also well known for providing exceptional benefits to the employees at his hotel properties.

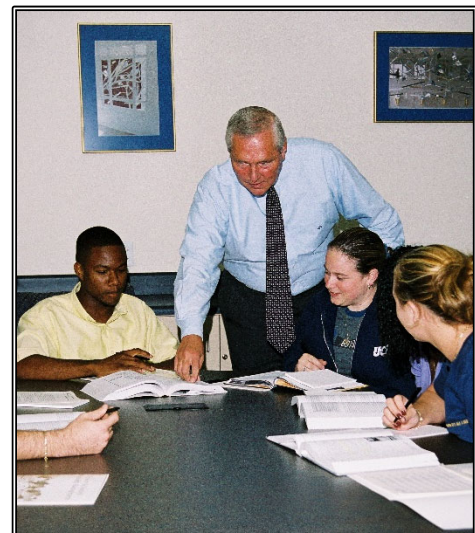
The scope of Mr. Rosen’s gift was beyond anything the hospitality program had ever received — in fact, at the time, it was the largest donation the university had ever received — and it inspired many other constituencies to join the effort. The state ultimately provided \$18 million in matching grant money, and along the way many other local hospitality entities provided substantial funding, including: the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau (\$5 million); Darden Restaurants (\$2 million); Walt Disney World Company (\$2 million); the Universal Orlando Foundation (\$1 million); Anheuser-Busch Foundation/Sea World (\$500,000); the J. Willard & Alice S. Marriott Foundation (\$100,000); the American Resort Development Association International Foundation (\$100,000); Hospitality Financial & Technology Professionals (\$100,000); and the Central Florida Hotel & Lodging Association (\$50,000).

University administrators, who at times in the past had seemed uncertain how to develop the hospitality program, now moved quickly to increase its stature. In 2000, the program was elevated to the status of a full school outside the College of Business, reporting directly to the Vice Provost, and thus came to be called the Rosen School of Hospitality Management. Dr. Pizam, who had been hired to establish UCF’s original hospitality program, was fittingly appointed Interim Dean of the new School, a post he would eventually fill permanently.

Administrators and faculty sought to recruit more students in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in anticipation of a heightened profile for the program, and enrollment rose rapidly in this era: by 2000 there were approximately 300 hospitality majors at UCF; by 2003, there were more than 800 majors; and by the time the new campus opened in 2004, the number of hospitality majors topped 1000.

Faculty members also worked hard in the late 1990s and early 2000s to revamp and improve the curriculum. The program replaced many general business requirements with more hospitality-focused class offerings. The program’s restaurant management offerings also matured during this period: the Center for Multi-Unit Restaurant Management (which focused on providing executive education opportunities to restaurant industry professionals) was created under the directorship of Dr. Christopher Muller in 1999, and a standalone Restaurant Management undergraduate degree was approved in 2002.

Among the key faculty members who helped elevate UCF’s hospitality program to the next level were Mr. Robert Ashley, Dr. Deborah Breiter, Dr. Bill Fisher, Dr. Stephen LeBruto, Dr. Ady Milman, Dr. Christopher Muller, Dr. Abraham Pizam, and Dr. Randall Upchurch. Building on the work of their predecessors, these and other faculty



Dr. Bill Fisher and students, early 2000s

members helped update the curriculum, design the new campus, and establish a solid financial and operational infrastructure for the growing program. These faculty — as well as previous and subsequent professors in the program — will also be remembered for their contributions in the classroom by the countless students they influenced, many of whom are now working in positions of leadership in the hospitality industry.

The Campus Comes to Life

Finally, in the fall of 2002, following various efforts for securing appropriate land for the project, ground was broken at the site of the new campus, on Universal Boulevard, near International Drive and the Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau. Program administrators and faculty members foresaw that locating the new school in the heart of Orlando’s tourism and attraction area would provide students with almost unlimited internship and job opportunities: over 70 million tourists visit central Florida each year, and most of their activity takes place within just a few miles of the Rosen campus location.



Rosen Campus conceptual drawing, early 2000s

The resort-style Rosen campus — designed in a U-shape to suggest a friendly “open arms” hospitality philosophy — opened in January 2004 to wide-eyed students, staff, faculty, and media. With wireless coverage throughout, and with 159,000 square feet of facilities ranging from classrooms to labs to a library and much more, the campus impressed nearly everyone who came. The following May, the Rosen School was elevated to the status of a full College within the University. The small hospitality program that had moved around from college to college, with uncertain funding and stature, was now the beautiful Rosen College of Hospitality Management, with more than 1,000 students, approximately 20 full-time faculty, dozens of staff members, and a rapidly growing reputation.

Additional services and milestones soon followed, including a shuttle to transport students between the Rosen campus and the main UCF campus, additional hospitality and general education course offerings, the opening of two apartment-style dormitories, and partnerships with other hospitality programs around the world. A thriving events and catering division began hosting many meetings and special events, introducing more community and industry members to the campus and the program. The campus’s specialized library acquired many new resources and became a United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) depository (one of only seven libraries in the United



*Dr. Asli Tasci & Mr. Schuyler Kerby
in the Rosen Library, 2015*

States to have such a distinction), and within a few years the Rosen Library's hospitality collection was already among the best in the nation.

With a myriad of resources and support services in place, hospitality students could now live at and take their entire coursework on a campus devoted to their specialized field of study, in the middle of one of America's most popular tourist destinations — something no other hospitality program could match.

Student activities and engagement in the campus also increased year by year. Registered student organizations quickly sprung up, including Club Managers of America, Future Theme Park Leaders Association, Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association, National Society of Minorities in Hospitality, and more. Rosen Life, the Rosen arm of UCF's Student Government Association, also provides services and regular events on the Rosen campus.

A Program Like No Other

Not surprisingly, Rosen's reputation grew quickly in the years following the opening of the new campus, as did its enrollment: by 2008 UCF was enrolling more than 2,500 hospitality majors, establishing it as one of the largest hospitality programs in the nation. By 2016, enrollment regularly exceeded 3,000.

In the years since the opening of the Rosen campus, the program has only increased its status as a leader in hospitality management education. A unique Bachelor of Science undergraduate degree in Event Management was approved in 2006. The Event degree was the first four-year program of its kind in the nation and is now among the most popular majors at the College. A non-degree Event Management Certificate was later added, reaching out to industry executives and further solidifying the College as a leader in the field of event management.

In 2012, the program reached another milestone with the establishment of a Ph.D. in Hospitality Management. A Ph.D. program in Hospitality Education had been offered in conjunction with the UCF College of Education for several years prior; however, with the establishment of the full program in 2012, UCF officially became the first academic

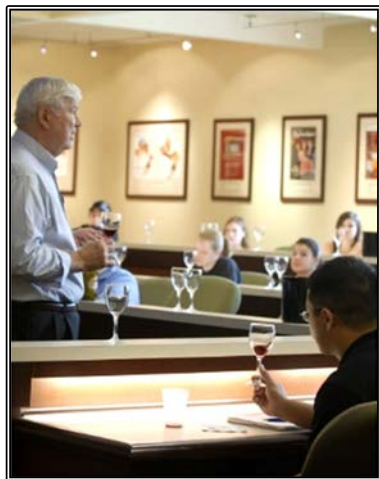


UCF Rosen College campus

institution in the state of Florida to offer a standalone doctoral program in Hospitality Management.

A partnership with the United States Tennis Association (USTA) led to the establishment of a Professional Tennis Management track within the Hospitality Management degree program in 2016. The degree and partnership strikes a synergy with USTA's recently-constructed tennis complex in nearby Lake Nona.

Yet another new landmark degree was added in 2016, with the establishment of a Bachelor of Science in Entertainment Management. The new degree, a partnership between the Rosen College and the College of Arts & Humanities, was made possible through a \$5 million donation from Gregory Elias, a Curaçao-born lawyer and businessman. The gift was the largest received by the College since the Rosen campus was built in the early 2000s. The new degree is designed to educate students in the business side of the entertainment industry and got off to a fast start, with more than 400 students enrolled by 2018.



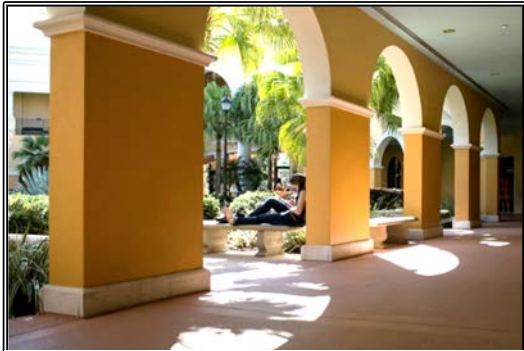
Dr. Frank Juge teaching students in the Anheuser-Busch Beer & Wine Lab, c. 2010

Rosen College faculty members are also highly regarded as researchers and consultants, producing dozens of scholarly articles, books, and other publications each year. A 2009 study found, for instance, that UCF ranks among the top-10 most prolific universities in publishing in the most highly-regarded hospitality and tourism journals. In addition, the Dick Pope Sr. Institute for Tourism Studies has reestablished its position as a leader in producing research and disseminating information, especially in the last several years under the leadership of Dr. Robertico Croes, Dr. Tadayuki Hara, and Dr. Abraham Pizam, and supported by more than forty other Rosen faculty members. Recent white papers released by the Institute have focused on the economic impact of tourism, destination marketing strategies, hotel pricing strategies, music festivals, research into the link between happiness and tourism, and more.

The program has increased its global reach in the last five years as well, establishing exchange or study abroad programs with 20 different universities in Australia, Austria, China, France, South Korea, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Most summers since 2010 the College has welcomed students from Kyung Hee University in Seoul, South Korea, for a month-long Hospitality & Tourism Industry Seminar program. At that time the College also began offering undergraduate and graduate certificates in Hospitality Management to participants in Walt Disney World's International College Program. Through these and other such programs, students from all over the globe have been exposed to Rosen's unique curricula, facilities, and faculty.

Since the establishment of the Rosen campus, the program has also increased its partnerships with and service to the local hospitality industry. In 2007, the College established the Central Florida Hospitality Hall of Fame to honor outstanding community

leaders for their service and commitment to the central Florida hospitality industry. Individuals are inducted into the Hall of Fame at an annual event.



UCF Rosen College campus

In 2017, the College announced a \$1.5 million gift from the J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation, in support of enhancements to the foodservice labs and other spaces.

The College has also enhanced or begun partnerships with the American Resort Development Association (ARDA), Central Florida Hotel & Lodging Association (CFHLA), Cicerone beer certification program, Dave & Buster's, First Watch Restaurants, Hospitality Financial & Technology Professionals (HFTP), Hotel

Technology Next Generation (HTNG), Premier Beverage Company, and many others, resulting in even more grants, internships, scholarships, and learning opportunities for Rosen students. In addition, Career Fair events are held on campus twice a year, connecting Rosen students with hospitality-industry employers and executives; the fall 2023 event was the largest to date, with nearly 1,200 students and over 230 employers in attendance. Due to these and other initiatives, Rosen College students have very high job placement rates upon graduation.

With all of these recent initiatives and accolades, it is no surprise that the Rosen College of Hospitality Management quickly became regarded as one of the top hospitality programs in the world. In 2017, *CEOWORLD Magazine* ranked the Rosen College of Hospitality number 2 on its list of the top 50 hospitality and hotel management schools in the world. To arrive at its ranking, the magazine evaluated programs on several factors and relied heavily upon peer ranking from scholars in over 50 countries.

Growth in Research and Degrees

In August 2018, the College came under the leadership of Dr. Youcheng Wang, who took over the reins from the program's founding Dean, Dr. Abraham Pizam. Having been a faculty member in the program since 2003, Dr. Wang had already been a part of and appreciated the College's rich legacy. In his new role as the second Dean of the College, Dr. Wang sought to build on past successes and to take the program in new directions.



Dr. Youcheng Wang

Early in his tenure, Dean Wang and the Rosen administrative team were faced with the COVID-19 global pandemic, starting in March 2020. Like the rest of UCF, the

Rosen College initially transitioned to fully online learning, before gradually restarting hybrid and face-to-face activities later in the year. The hospitality industry suffered significant disruptions during the first two years of the pandemic, including the loss of many jobs and the closing of many businesses. However, Rosen College adapted and persevered where possible, including offering the Career Fair in a virtual format. Over time, the industry began to recover, and activities at Rosen College similarly rebounded.

Indeed, despite the challenges faced during the pandemic, during the five years of Dean Wang's tenure, the College continued to increase its research profile, launching the *Rosen Research Review*, a unique, semiannual magazine that highlights research published by Rosen faculty in an appealing format, and introducing a journal article incentive program, in which faculty are rewarded for publishing in top hospitality and tourism journals. As a result of these and other initiatives, the College has been ranked number 1 in the nation (and top five in the world) for several years, according to the Shanghai Ranking's Global Ranking of Academic Subjects.

Dean Wang's tenure was also notable for an expansion in curricular offerings. Between 2018 and 2023, the College added undergraduate degrees in Senior Living Management (later rebranded Lifestyle Community Management), and Theme Park & Attraction Management, as well as master's degrees in Travel Technology & Analytics and Event Leadership.



Dr. Cynthia Mejia

In addition, as of 2024, the College offers 7 undergraduate certificates and 5 graduate certificates, in areas such as Beverage Management, Entertainment Management, Hospitality Information Technology, Managing Sporting Events, Professional Tennis Management, and more.

In late 2023, Dr. Wang stepped down as Dean of the College, and Dr. Cynthia Mejia was appointed interim Dean.

Dean Mejia brings a wealth of industry experience, as well as more than a decade of experience as a faculty member at the Rosen College, to the role. Dean Mejia looks forward to leading the College into the future, while simultaneously celebrating the past, including the 40th anniversary of the founding of the program and the 20th anniversary of the University Boulevard campus.

The Future of Hospitality Management Education

The Rosen College campus now bustles with more than 3,000 future hospitality leaders, taking courses in one of six undergraduate degrees and four graduate degrees, with a renowned faculty composed of both distinguished academics and successful industry executives. Its location in the heart of Orlando's tourism corridor has led to many

synergistic partnerships with community and industry organizations, and Rosen College graduates have benefitted from both exceptional education opportunities and real-world industry experience and connections.

What will the next twenty — let alone forty — years bring? Only time will tell, of course, but more innovations are rumored to be in the works, including additions and improvements to the campus, additional degree programs, and additional overseas partnerships. If the past is any indication, chances are good that the Rosen College will continue to lead the way into the future of hospitality management education.



UCF Rosen College campus

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