

New Campus Still Faces Obstacles

After being postponed for a year, UC Merced hopes to open in fall 2005

By William Trombley
Senior Editor

MERCED, CALIFORNIA

MARIA PALLAVACINI SMILED with pleasure as she showed her visitor a newly arrived, \$950,000 mass spectrometer that she and her research team at the University of California, Merced, will use in their work on cancer cells.

In addition to her administrative duties as dean of the School of Natural Sciences, Pallavacini expects to continue the cancer research that she carried on at UC San Francisco for 12 years before coming to Merced. The new machine, purchased partly with state funds and partly with Pallavacini's federal research grants, will make that possible.

Because of California's financial crisis—the worst in state history—some critics have proposed that Merced, the tenth campus in the UC system, should be postponed or even cancelled. State support for the University of California's budget has been cut by about \$520 million in the last four years and freshman enrollment has been capped for the first time at both UC and the 23-campus California State University system.

But the arrival of the mass spectrometer, and other expensive research equipment, is a strong sign that, for better or worse, UC Merced is likely to open in fall 2005. It would be the first major new U.S. research university of the 21st century.

The first buildings are rising on a former golf course two miles northeast of the city of Merced, 100 miles south of Sacramento, in the heavily agricultural San Joaquin Valley. Twenty-four faculty members have been hired so far. A staff of more than 200 is working at the temporary campus, housed in buildings that once were part of Castle Air Force Base. The state has invested more than \$300 million in the campus to date—about \$70 million in operating funds, the rest in construction contracts that are financed by general obligation bonds.

"We have passed the point of no return," said Peter Berck, professor of agricultural and resource economics at UC Berkeley and chairman of a university-wide faculty task force that has been overseeing the birth of the new campus.

But obstacles remain.

Because the UC Board of Regents chose to locate the campus in an area of environmentally sensitive vernal pools, several federal and state agencies must approve campus plans to expand from the present 200-acre golf course location to a 910-acre site that one day might accommodate as many as 25,000 students. A 1,240-acre "university community," with eventual housing for 30,000 people, is to be built on university land adjacent to the campus.

Photos by Rod Searcey for CrossTalk



The first buildings are rising at UC Merced, where Carol Tomlinson-Keasey has been chancellor since 1999.

After the winter rains, vernal pools are alive with several varieties of fairy shrimp—microscopic creatures that float on their backs, waving their 11 pairs of delicate legs in the air to filter bacteria, algae and protozoa. The shrimp are an important part of the diet of migratory waterfowl and local animals. Several of these species are endangered, which means the university must obtain a "clean water" permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has jurisdiction over U.S. wetlands, including these vernal pools.

It will take the Corps of Engineers, and the state and federal agencies that advise them, at least another year to decide whether or not to issue the permit, said Nancy Haley, chief of the Corps' San Joaquin regulatory office. "They're taking a risk" by building the first structures on the golf course land, Haley said, because the rest of the campus might have to be located elsewhere.

Without the permit, "we'd have to go back to the drawing board and develop a new campus plan," said Bob Smith, the Merced County planner who is working with the university

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María Pallavacini, a cancer researcher at UC San Francisco for 18 years, will continue her work at UC Merced, where she is dean of the School of Natural Sciences.

on the project.

UC's strategy appears to be to start as many buildings as it can, and hire as many people as possible, as soon as possible, hoping the campus would be seen as too far along to be stopped. Lindsay Desrochers, vice chancellor for administration, said the university decided to go ahead without the key permit because "it was the only way to get this thing started."

Although UC Merced has strong support from local politicians and business leaders, there is less enthusiasm for the project in the state legislature, especially among Democrats.

During last year's budget discussions, Senate President Pro Tem John Burton called the proposed campus the "biggest boondoggle ever." State Senator Jack Scott, chairman of the Senate higher education budget subcommittee, has expressed doubts about proceeding with the campus in the face of a huge state budget deficit.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger included \$20 million in operating budget support for UC Merced (\$10 million less than the campus requested) in his proposed 2004-05 budget. Although the legislature might nibble away at this request, most of it is likely to be approved, and the campus will at last open in fall 2005, with 1,000 students—600 first-time freshmen, 300 community college transfers and 100 graduate students.

The advance guard will be a group of about 25 graduate students who will arrive this fall, to pursue advanced degrees in environmental sciences, molecular science and engineering, and quantitative and systems biology.

The first undergraduate students will find an academic program heavily slanted toward science and engineering.

Sixteen of the first 24 faculty hires are in these fields. "We have invested early in science and engineering," said Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost David B. Ashley, former dean of the engineering school at Ohio State. "We think this is an important capability for this campus."

Campus officials had hoped to have 100 faculty on hand when the first students arrived, but budget cuts, last year and this, have reduced that number to 60. "We think we can make that work," Ashley said. However, Chancellor Carol Tomlinson-Keasey warned, "I will not open with less than 60."

At first, there will be six undergraduate majors and six areas of concentration for graduate students—again, mostly in science and engineering.

Some faculty prospects were bothered by "all this uncertainty about the budget," Ashley said. "It's taken a lot of hard work, but in the end we've made some outstanding hires." He noted that the new faculty members are bringing along more than \$7.6 million in research grants.

Jeff Wright, dean of the School of Engineering, said "some of the more junior people were a bit gun shy," about accepting job offers, especially after the campus opening was postponed from this year to next, "but the more senior people know that things like budget crises come and go."

"Most of the people we're interested in haven't asked questions about the budget," said Kenji Hakuta, dean of the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts. "They're committed to the adventure of starting a new campus." But he added, "Until we have students here, we're on pins and needles... Once the students are here, we'll all feel better."

Dean Pallavacini of the School of Natural Sciences hopes to build cooperative programs among the sciences and also with the School of Engineering. "Everyone understands you can't work alone anymore," she said, but it is hard to get rid of "academic silos" on an established campus. "There aren't many places where scientists, humanists and engineers work together—we hope this will be one."

In biology, "mapping the genome has changed instruction in fundamental ways," the dean said. "We have to find ways to train students to be at the cutting edge of this new biology."

There will be undergraduate majors in Earth Systems Biology and Human Biology, and the first graduate program will be in Quantitative and Systems Biology. Pallavacini also hopes students will work on local problems, like the high incidence of asthma in the San Joaquin Valley, especially among Hispanics.

She talks to local groups about current issues in science

During last year's budget discussions, Senate President Pro Tem John Burton called the proposed UC Merced campus the "biggest boondoggle ever."

and encourages her new faculty members to do the same. “Our community has got to know what we’re about,” Pallavacini said. “We can’t be isolated, we can’t be seen as an Ivory Tower.”

Dean Wright of the engineering school also hopes to involve students in “hands-on problem solving.”

“One of the problems in engineering education is a low retention rate,” said Wright, who was associate dean of engineering at Purdue University before coming to UC Merced. “Even the good schools retain only about half of the students who start out to be engineers.” Wright believes this is because the first two years are filled with classes like calculus and physics, and students “don’t see the connections” between this classroom work and the real world.

With a program he calls “service learning,” the dean hopes students “right from the start will be getting their hands dirty,” working on practical engineering problems, along with the required course work. For example, students might build information systems for United Way agencies that cannot afford to hire engineers.

“I want them to understand that engineering is a lot more than solving equations,” Wright said.

Dean Hakuta of the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts—“breathed a sigh of relief” when the campus opening was delayed a year.

Newly-arrived from Stanford University, where he spent 14 years as an experimental psychologist and professor of education, Hakuta faced the task of hiring faculty and establishing academic programs in a few short months. “I don’t know how I could have opened (this year) without compromising quality and making some really bad decisions,” he said.

Then came the news that the campus debut would be postponed for a year. Now Hakuta has time to plan for two broad undergraduate majors—World Cultures and Social and Behavioral Sciences—and graduate work in history and perhaps one other field. He also hopes to start a World Cultures Institute and an undergraduate major in business management.

Historian Gregg Herken, who has written books about nuclear history and the Cold War, decided to accept an offer from UC Merced because “it’s something new and exciting and different.” For the last 15 years Herken was Senior Historian and Curator of Military Space at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum, in Washington, D.C.

A 1969 graduate of UC Santa Cruz, Herken hopes the interdisciplinary spirit which characterized that campus in its early years can be repeated at Merced, though he suspects “that kind of cooperation will break down as we grow larger,” just as it has at Santa Cruz.

Provost Ashley said a fourth academic unit—a school of management—will be added soon, because of strong student interest in that field.

The Sierra Nevada Research Institute, based on the campus, will “work on the environmental problems of this region,” said Director Samuel J. Traina, who came to UC Merced from Ohio State. These include water

problems, climate change and the pressures exerted on San Joaquin Valley agriculture by increasing urbanization.

Traina said the institute expects to operate a field station in Yosemite National Park, 80 miles away, in conjunction with the National Park Service.

But all of these academic plans and aspirations are at the mercy of budget discussions now under way in Sacramento.

Despite recent passage of a \$15 billion bond issue, California still faces a budget deficit of at least \$14 billion, which Governor Schwarzenegger hopes to reduce or eliminate without raising taxes. That means big cuts in many state programs, including higher education.

The 2004-05 Schwarzenegger budget proposes cuts of nine percent for the California State University system, 7.9 percent for the University of California, and a slight increase for the state’s 109 community colleges. Tuition would be increased substantially in all three segments. Student financial aid would be reduced and funding would be eliminated for “outreach” programs, which seek to recruit low-income and minority students and prepare them for admission to UC or Cal State.

Schwarzenegger also wants freshman enrollment at both UC and Cal State to be reduced by ten percent, with 7,000 students diverted to community colleges instead.

In the face of such stringent measures, does it make sense to open UC Merced? Some think not.

Supporters of the new campus argue that it will provide an economic lift to one of the poorest areas in the state.



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Governor Schwarzenegger's budget proposes cuts of nine percent for the California State University system, 7.9 percent for the University of California.

"Many Democrats are asking, 'Why are we doing this when we can't support the existing campuses adequately?'" said a legislative staff member who is close to the budget talks but did not want to be identified.

"The state doesn't need new research facilities, it needs more seats for undergraduates," said a California State University official, who also asked for anonymity.

Some have suggested that the Merced campus opening should be postponed for at least another year, and a few have proposed that it be abandoned altogether. Naturally, University of California administrators disagree.

"We've put so much money into it, it makes no sense not to go ahead and open," said Lawrence C. Hershman, UC vice president for budget. "We've spent hundreds of millions

of dollars on buildings and faculty and equipment, and it just makes no sense to stop the project or mothball it."

Hershman said UC expects 66,000 additional students (in addition to the 208,000 now enrolled) by the year 2010 and that plans call for UC Merced to take 5,000 of those. "It would be stupid for the state to mothball this campus... and then put up buildings on other campuses to accommodate the enrollment increase," he said.

"Promises were made to these people (in the San Joaquin Valley), going back to the '60s, that there would be a UC campus, and it never happened," Hershman added. "Now we're finally delivering on the promise... It's the right thing to do."

Chancellor Tomlinson-Keasey argues that the San Joaquin Valley is "terribly underserved" by public higher education. In the 11-county area around Merced, only a "pathetically low" 14.2 percent of the population has college degrees, she said. Only 4.6 percent hold graduate or professional degrees. More than 30 percent of San Joaquin Valley adults do not have a high school diploma.

UPDATE

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University of California, Merced

SINCE 1994, most recently in the spring 2004 issue, *National CrossTalk* has reported on problems that have plagued the University of California's newest campus, near the San Joaquin Valley city of Merced. Now some of those problems appear to be headed toward resolution.

Enrollment has picked up; some environmental issues have been resolved; and heated political opposition to the campus (the majority leader of the California State Senate once called it "the biggest boondoggle ever") has cooled.

An attitude of inevitability has settled in among critics of the campus. "It is what it is," said a one-time opponent. "Now, how are we going to help it succeed?"

Many of the environmental problems were created when the UC Board of Regents decided to locate the new campus in an area of vernal pools several miles east of downtown Merced. The pools, dry most of the year, come alive after the winter rains and are home to two endangered species—fairy shrimp and the California Tiger Salamander.

This required the campus to seek a "clean water" permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has jurisdiction over U.S. wetlands, as well as approval from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which protects endangered species.

For several contentious years the university stuck to its plan to build a 910-acre campus, with a large adjacent "University Community" of housing for 31,000 people, as well as retail stores and a performing arts center, despite clear signs that this would not be acceptable to the federal agencies.

But late in 2006 the university changed course and began more constructive talks with the federal agencies and with environmental organizations that were opposed to the campus-University Community plan.

"Eighteen months ago we decided to take a fresh look, a good businesslike look," said Associate Chancellor Janet Young in a 2008

interview. "We began fresh exchanges with the agencies" and with environmental critics. Chancellor Sung-Mo (Steve) Kang, who took office in early 2007, gave his enthusiastic support to the new approach.

The result was a new plan that reduced the campus "footprint" from 910 to 810 acres and moved it slightly, to avoid some of the wetlands areas. In March 2008, the plan was submitted to the Corps of Engineers, which said it would take at least a year to review the proposal.

The groups continue to meet regularly. "I am cautiously optimistic," said Carol Witham, a leading environmental critic of the original plan.

There are still plans for the University Community, next door to the campus, although in spring 2008, a large number of homes that were built on speculation in and around Merced stood empty, and the foreclosure rate was one of the highest in the nation.

"We think the market will correct," Young said.

In Fall 2007, enrollment was 1,871 (1,750 undergraduates and 121 graduate students). This was well short of the expected 2,600, the state Legislative Analyst's Office reported. The original target of 5,000 students by 2010 clearly will not be met.

"That was a very aggressive plan," Kang said. "No other new (UC) campus has done that."

Applications have increased as the existence of the Merced campus has become better known and as other UC general campuses have become more selective.

A main selling point for the Merced campus was that it would serve California's Central Valley (from Redding in the north to Bakersfield in the south), which sends fewer students to the University of California than do other regions of the state. About one-third of the current students come from the valley, where the campus recruits energetically at high schools with heavy Hispanic and other minority enrollments.

"We think that's very good," said Jane Lawrence, vice chancellor for student affairs. "No UC campus is regional. We are

“One of the reasons the campus came here was to try to make a difference with low-income, especially Hispanic students,” said Director of Admissions Encarnacion Ruiz.

In fall 2002, the last year for which figures are available, only 1,414 out of almost 41,000 high school graduates in the 11 counties enrolled at a UC campus, according to the California Postsecondary Education Commission. About half of those who qualify for admission to UC do not apply, Ruiz said. Of those who are admitted, half do not enroll.

“This really is a cultural thing,” Tomlinson-Keasey said. “For some, cost is a barrier, but for many families, they just don’t want their children to go away to college,” even if the campus is not very far away.

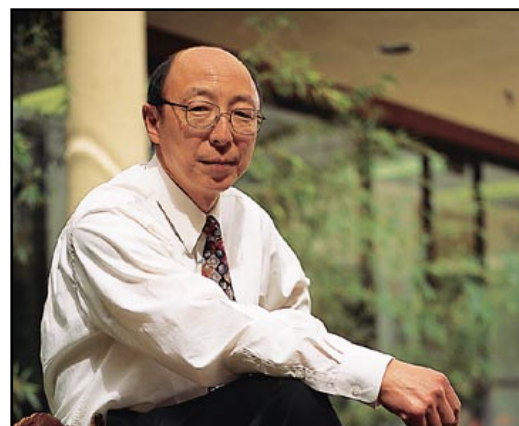
Benjamin T. Duran, president of Merced College, the local two-year community college, agreed. “If you’re a non-English-speaking parent, and your son or daughter comes to you and says, ‘Dad, I’ve been accepted at Berkeley,’ you’re probably going to say, ‘no, I don’t think so,’” Duran said.

Duran grew up in Merced, one of eight children of farm worker parents and the first in his family to attend college.

In the 1980s he was superintendent of a high school district where most of the students were Hispanic.

“I was frustrated,” he said. “I had some really talented students who didn’t even apply” to the University of California. A few went to nearby Fresno State or Stanislaus State and did well, but many did not go to college at all. Duran believes the presence of a research campus like UC Merced will lift the aspirations of many such students.

Chancellor Tomlinson-Keasey hopes that one-third to one-half of UC Merced undergraduates will come from the



Kenji Hakuta came to UC Merced as dean of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, after 14 years at Stanford University.

meeting the needs of the whole state.”

Applications have increased as the existence of the Merced campus has become better known and as other UC general campuses have reached capacity and have become more selective. (In fall 2007, UCLA admitted only 23.6 percent of 43,724 freshman applicants, UC Berkeley 24.7 percent of 36,083 applicants; but UC Merced admitted 79.6 percent of the 8,114 who applied.)

For fall 2008, UC Merced received more than 10,000 applications from first-year students. Freshman enrollment was 925, exceeding the 700 that had been planned, and the total enrollment was 2,718.

The campus opened during a time of chronic state budget deficits and curtailment of California’s postsecondary education spending. There were sharp reductions in the 2005-06 academic year, with another series of cuts scheduled for 2008-09.

“Our operations are very, very sensitive to fluctuations in the budget,” Chancellor Kang said. “It determines how many students we can take, how many faculty we can hire, how much classroom and lab space we will have.”

In the 2007-08 academic year UC Merced employed about 100 full-time faculty members, 78 lecturers and a staff of about 580. The campus budget for that year was about \$100 million. Of that, \$40 million came from the state, including \$14 million in “startup” money that will phase out in 2011-12. Student fees (the University of California quaintly refuses to use the term “tuition”) generated another \$13 million.

In addition to operating funds, the campus has received about \$300

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million from the state for buildings and equipment, according to the Legislative Analyst’s Office.

Because the state budget included no money for enrollment growth in 2008-09, other UC campuses agreed to contribute \$6 million to pay for new students at UC Merced—an unprecedented step, UC statewide officials said.

Despite the budget problems, the UC Board of Regents has authorized planning for a medical school at UC Merced. “The need is great in the Central Valley,” said Keith Alley, provost and executive vice president, but “planning will take the better part of a decade.”

Undergraduates enjoy many small classes. The student-faculty ratio is 15 to one, smaller than other UC general campuses. There is a heavy emphasis on science and engineering. Half of the undergraduates, and 40 percent of the graduate students, are enrolled in those subjects.

The campus awarded its first doctorate in 2008.

“Where we’re really hurting is in terms of space, especially research space,” said Shawn Kantor, professor of economics and chairman of the academic senate. “We aren’t being funded as a new campus should be,” he said. “There are many things we’d like to do, but the money isn’t there.”

There are three main academic buildings on the campus, with a fourth scheduled to open in early 2010. Some faculty and administrative staff (including Chancellor Kang’s microchip research group) are housed at the former Castle Air Force Base, about six miles north of Merced.

Faculty members also complain about a lack of staff support and about a heavy faculty workload.

“There are not enough senior faculty here, so junior faculty have to bear a disproportionate burden,” said Gregg Herken, professor of history, who was one of the first faculty members hired. “They have to teach their classes, do their research, serve on committees, even recruit new faculty,” all while doing enough original work to gain tenure.

But Herken retains “tempered enthusiasm” for UC Merced’s accomplishments to date. “I was a student at UC Santa Cruz when that campus was new,” he said. “Things were ragged at the edges in the early years, but now things have settled down. I’m sure the same will be true here.”

—William Trombley

San Joaquin Valley, but some doubt that goal can be met. They point out that many small high schools in the area do not offer the kind of instruction, especially in mathematics and science, that would prepare students for the university.

UC Merced has mounted a large-scale “outreach” effort, sending teams to area high schools to make sure students take the courses needed to be eligible for UC. They also help students and their families with financial aid forms, loan applications and other paperwork.

They have even organized visits to other UC campuses, to show parents the campus medical facilities and police station, in an effort to reassure them that their sons and daughters would be safe. They call these groups “Unwilling Parents of Willing Students.”

These efforts have met with some success, even before UC Merced opens. The number of students admitted to UC campuses from 18 targeted high schools has increased from 293 in fall 2000 to 415 last fall, said Jorge Aguilar, director of the Center for Educational Partnerships at UC Merced.

“If it hadn’t been for them (the UC Merced recruiters), I probably wouldn’t have taken the right classes and probably wouldn’t have gotten in,” said Alicia Quintero, from the small town of Caruthers, south of Fresno. Alicia is now a sophomore at UC Riverside, with a 3.4 grade point average, and is thinking about a teaching career.

But the UC Merced program lost \$1.2 million as a result of last year’s budget crisis, and the 2004-05 Schwarzenegger budget proposes to eliminate all outreach efforts in both the UC and Cal State systems.

“That was not a rational decision,” said Allen Carden, executive director of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, which includes 24 two- and four-year schools in the area.

Supporters of the new campus argue that it will provide an economic lift to one of the poorest areas in the state and will help to diversify an economy that has been heavily

dependent on agriculture alone.

“There will be economic spin-offs from the research that is done at UC Merced,” said Carol Whiteside, president of the Great Valley Center, a public policy support group. “And this will be an indication of the region’s emergence as a comprehensive economy, not one just devoted to ‘the farm.’”

Whiteside also said the campus “will provide a visible connection between kids in this area and a research education and atmosphere, something that’s simply not available now.”

These, then, are the arguments the University of



Benjamin Duran, president of the local community college, thinks the UC Merced campus will lift educational aspirations in the area.

California is making as budget talks continue in the state capital: The Merced campus would help to relieve UC’s enrollment crunch, it would provide more opportunity for San Joaquin Valley students, and it would boost the area economy.

The main counter-arguments are that the state, which already has nine research-oriented UC campuses, cannot afford another at this time of financial emergency, and the money would be better spent providing additional space for undergraduates at the less costly California State University and the community colleges.

Sacramento budget watchers say the outcome will not be determined until negotiations conclude, probably in late spring or early summer. In the meantime, UC Merced officials continue to plan and hope, aware that they are only small players in the Great Budget Game.

“There are a lot of people with an interest in the outcome,” Vice Chancellor Lindsay Desrochers said. “We’re just a chit in the game.” ♦

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