

# The University of Central Florida Knights of Distinction Program: Supporting Undergraduate Student Academic and Career Success

Dr. Rocío Tonos-Barlucea<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Quynh Dang<sup>2</sup> & Shelby Melfi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Student Learning and Academic Success, University of Central Florida, Orlando, United States

<sup>2</sup> Experiential Learning, University of Central Florida, Orlando, United States

Correspondence: Shelby Melfi, Experiential Learning, University of Central Florida, Orlando, United States.

E-mail: Shelby.Melfi@ucf.edu

Received: May 27, 2022

Accepted: August 30, 2022

Online Published: September 14, 2022

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v11n5p145

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v11n5p145>

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the Knights of Distinction, a co-curricular program that encourages undergraduate students to plan, connect, and reflect in the pursuit of their academic and professional goals. Knights of Distinction is a program within the Office of Experiential Learning at the University of Central Florida. Its purpose is to help students make connections between theory and practice and that they possess valuable skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, time-management, and communication that employers and graduate schools prize. This program is intended to help students connect with resources through high-impact practices that support student learning and academic success. The program encourages metacognition, reflection, and integrative learning through the creation of an e-Portfolio which showcases their skills and goals as well as their relevant academic and extracurricular experiences. Most current data show that students positively articulate the benefits of the program as they advance in their professional careers.

**Keywords:** high-impact practices, experiential learning, e-portfolio, integrative learning, metacognition, student success

## 1. Introduction

This article aims to share how the UCF Office of Experiential Learning (EL) and the Knights of Distinction program (KoD) support undergraduate students' academic and career success. Furthermore, we intend to promote Knights of Distinction as a program that fosters student success through their active engagement in high-impact practices (HIPs). This program could serve as a model for other higher education programs seeking to put high-impact learning at the core of their curricula.

The University of Central Florida (UCF), a model for higher education in the 21st century and a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), offers academic support to students through a wide variety of instructional methods, educational services, and resources to help them accelerate their learning and succeed in their academic journey. Academic support programs at UCF provide assistance to address undergraduate students' academic needs and learning goals and offer a wide range of learning opportunities to enhance their academic experiences and engage in high-impact practices (HIP). HIP opportunities blend what students learn in the classroom with real-world experiences and are extremely beneficial in having an impact on student success (Ryan & Grotrian, 2016).

Considering the rich diversity amongst the student population at UCF and the extensive range of degrees and programs, it is essential to showcase and further discuss academic support programs which help increase academic achievement. UCF hosts numerous student support programs for diverse groups of students. Nonetheless, only one of the UCF's co-curricular programs elicits self-reflection, promotes student engagement in high-impact learning, and requires participants to showcase their work and achievements through the design and publication of a digital portfolio: the Knights of Distinction Program. This program is part of the Office of Experiential Learning (EL) at UCF, which serves to connect students to high-impact practices and opportunities such as service-learning, internships, co-ops, and Knights of Distinction in preparation for graduate school or starting a career. EL serves over 7,000 UCF students and works closely with other departments such as UCF Global, UCF Abroad, and UCF Undergraduate Research.

## 2. Experiential Learning Description and Mission

The University of Central Florida's Office of Experiential Learning (EL) collaborates with faculty and staff from colleges and other units across campus as well as with UCF's extensive network of corporate and community partners to provide UCF students with internships and other experiential learning opportunities. Students can get paid experience and receive credit, including major credit for many programs. EL brings experience-seekers and talent seekers together through bi-annual internship fairs, and networking events designed to make sure students Know More and Do More, so they can Be More. EL also works with faculty to support the development of service-learning courses, assists with connecting students to awesome community organizations and delivers opportunities within the Knights of Distinction program.

In support of HIP, the mission of the EL office at UCF is to develop and sustain quality experiential learning opportunities through an inclusive environment that promotes collaboration between students, faculty, community, and employer partners. The program supports students as they make theory-to-practice connections that enhance their academic learning and facilitate the development of skills and abilities necessary to contribute to the global community. EL is a central department that connects students with resources and opportunities with employers and community partners to gain hands-on experience.

## 3. History of the Program

The KoD program takes learning beyond the classroom and fosters student engagement in high-impact practices while supporting university-wide initiatives to advance undergraduate education. The program was initiated in 2015, serving a pilot group of 12 students. It was designed and developed by a steering committee from the formerly UCF's Office of Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) in the search for creating meaningful connections between majors, academic work, and co-curricular experiences.

Dr. Anna Jones, former Director of the QEP office at UCF, Lindsay Rushworth, first program assistant and coordinator for KoD, and Brooks Pingston, Academic Support Coordinator, were some of the QEP staff members who participated in the initial stages of the development of the program which now serves over 350 students as an essential component of the Office of Experiential Learning (EL) at UCF. Dr. Anna Jones, Lindsay Rushworth, and Brooks Pingston, along with Dr. Kimberly Schneider, Dr. Stacey Malaret, and other UCF's staff members and graduate assistants, were all instrumental in the design, creation, and launching of the program.

QEP is a component of the UCF accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Its efforts involve developing and executing a university-wide initiative seeking to improve student learning outcomes. The QEP team developed *What's Next: Integrative Learning for Professional and Civic Preparation*, an initiative that, as stated on the QEP website, had the mission to prepare UCF graduates for the next steps of their professional and civic lives through integrative learning opportunities. As described by the Division of Student Learning and Academic Success (n.d.), integrative learning is essential for students to construct their own meaning of academic and co-curricular involvement, applying and adapting their newfound knowledge to new experiences both personally and professionally.

*What's Next* sought to help students *plan* for their future post-graduation: to set goals and develop a skill-set necessary to reach those goals. This initiative encouraged students to *connect* their classroom knowledge and skills to real-world contexts and, thereby, develop the ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one context to another. Finally, this initiative promoted opportunities for students to *reflect* on their experiences, communicate their knowledge and experiences, and develop the ability to advocate for themselves in their lives beyond UCF successfully. This is how the KoD program was established.

## 4. High-Impact Practices

Through their participation and engagement in high-impact practices, students gain practical skills in communication, collaboration, and critical thinking as well as develop intellectually (Kuh & Geary Schneider, 2008) while interacting with staff and peers who share common interests. KoD fosters student involvement in active learning practices such as internships, co-ops, service learning, capstone courses, learning communities, undergraduate research, and study abroad to foster the integration of knowledge and skills. This relationship between knowledge and skills is described as the interrelation between theory and practice in the education field.

As described on the UCF'S High-Impact Practices hub, as retrieved from <https://academicsuccess.ucf.edu/hip/for-faculty-and-staff/>, students who engage in the UCF defined high-impact practices devote time and effort to purposeful tasks that deepen their commitment to their activities and academic program, interact with faculty about substantive matters, experience diversity, and inclusion through interactions with people with diverse characteristics than themselves, and receive frequent constructive feedback about their performance. Moreover, they connect what they are learning in different settings and receive tools and ethical grounding to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition.

Since Knights of Distinction provides a framework to help students connect the dots between what they learn in the classroom and their experiences beyond the classroom, the program's transition from QEP to the Office of Experiential Learning (EL) in the summer of 2020 was a natural fit.

## 5. Program Description

The Knights of Distinction program is an essential component of EL at UCF. KoD is designed to help students expand their knowledge inside and outside the classroom. It aims to support each student in discovering their individual pathway to excellence, setting goals for their future after graduation, and developing the means to reach those goals. Students who earn the Knight of Distinction designation demonstrate that they can make connections between theory and practice and that they possess valuable skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, time-management, and communication that employers and graduate school admission boards prize. KoD recognizes students' academic accomplishments and their professional and civic achievements in the world beyond the classroom.

As a co-curricular program, KoD encourages students to *plan*, *connect*, and *reflect* in the pursuit of their goals. Students *plan* by working with advisors and mentors to identify goals and create individual learning pathways that will help them assess their progress along the way. It is an ongoing process of discovery and honest self-assessment that continues throughout their undergraduate work at UCF as they gain experience. Furthermore, KoD offers resources for planning within students' Pegasus Path program. Pegasus Path is an interactive degree-planning tool that allows students to plan their courses, co-curricular, and important tasks. The program's requirements are actively embedded within students' Pegasus Path, allowing them to track their progress from orientation to graduation.

Students *connect* by engaging in meaningful, high-impact experiences both in and beyond the classroom. Students pay attention to the connections between their different experiences and to how the skills and knowledge they learn in one place are transferable to new contexts. Additionally, students can receive support from the Student Learning and Academic Success PeerKnights Coaching Program, which allows students to receive support from a peer coach on how to connect to goal-based experiences. PeerKnights help students connect to study abroad, undergraduate research, internships, and other high-impact learning opportunities. These connections result in students developing well-rounded resumes, curriculum vitae, and ePortfolios to showcase to employers and graduate schools.

Students *reflect* critically on their experiences and use this reflection to envision a future self. Students not only assess the knowledge they have gained but also determine how these experiences cohesively fit together and align with skills students have developed and strengthened. The reflection process results in students identifying hard and soft skills that they can articulate in graduate school and job interviews (Stefano et al., 2014).

The planning, connecting, and reflecting process supports integrative learning. KoD participants connect their experiences in and outside of the classroom as they engage in meaningful activities that will allow them to reach their goals and advance in the pursuit of their academic distinction.

### 5.1 The Five Milestones

The *Plan-Connect-Reflect* process is designed to allow students to build their own personalized pathways to distinction. Students engage in varied activities, also known as Milestone Activities, to fulfill the program's requisites and achieve the KoD designation. These activities allow students to accumulate points to meet the program's 200-point requirement in the following five milestones (Figure 1), which are the central pillars of the program.



Figure 1. The five Knights of Distinction Milestones.

Students utilize a Milestone Activities Inventory to track and honestly reflect on their arduous work and track their progress toward the 200-point requirement. Students are provided with a resource list of over 100 possible academic and co-curricular activities to engage in the five milestones. This list continues to grow as the KoD program develops new methods of connecting students to opportunities. Students are required to submit evidence of their engagement in such activities. For this reason, the inventory is not just a log of activities and experiences but also proof of their achievements as members of the program.

The program's five milestones are pieces of integrated learning. Students engage in different activities based on their goals and career pathways to earn Milestone Points. Each activity promotes the engagement of students in varied curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, as described below.

Milestone 1 focuses on student planning and self-assessment. Students engage in activities that help them set goals and develop realistic strategies to reach those goals. The learning outcomes for this milestone are to gain the ability to articulate professional, civic, and personal goals, create a realistic plan to achieve goals, and engage in self-assessments that help students identify their strengths, weaknesses, and progress toward their goals.

Milestone 2 encourages students to engage in citizenship activities. Citizenship encourages students to build personal and professional relationships by contributing to the UCF community and beyond. Students can choose focused activities that will provide development opportunities in their field of study or seek out a broader range of experiences to continue formulating their long-term goals. The skills and abilities that are developed within citizenship, such as communication, collaboration, and accountability, are often transferable in a variety of contexts.

Milestone 3 focuses on leadership skills. This milestone helps students develop a portfolio of experiences in which they can take the initiative and foster their skills and the skills of others. Students learn to think strategically, communicate effectively, and act decisively. Students demonstrate leadership in a variety of ways, including serving in officer positions for student organizations, planning events, mentoring peers, taking on a supervisory role at work, and presenting their research or creative work. Students need more time and support to gain leadership experience and proactively seek opportunities and work toward them from their first year until they graduate.

Milestone 4 focuses on high-impact learning experiences. High-impact experiences improve student success, retention, and graduation rates. This milestone offers students the opportunity to develop the capacity for self-directed learning, to think critically, and to acquire knowledge that can be transferred to new contexts. As an example, several students experience high-impact learning in capstone courses, internships, and senior design projects. UCF also offers opportunities for undergraduate research, internships, study abroad, and electives that contain high-impact components such as research-intensive or service-learning projects.

Milestone 5 centers on responsibilities that extend beyond the college environment and demonstrate a positive impact on the community beyond UCF. Particularly, students can focus on gaining personal and professional development via internships, community service, and part- or full-time employment. This milestone encourages students to develop their resume or curriculum vitae, offering resources such as resume workshops. Overall, the ability to adapt and apply academic knowledge in professional settings is the focus of this category, and students articulate how these experiences contribute to one's self-identity and growth.

### 5.2 Milestone Reflections

Reflection is an essential component of the KoD program that promotes metacognition, allowing students to critically analyze the experiences they collected and documented in their Milestone Activity Inventory. Students write five Milestone Reflections, one per milestone category. These reflections allow students to critically analyze the experiences they have engaged in throughout their college career and identify skills they have developed. Students also articulate what they learned from their various experiences, creating a narrative of their personal and professional goals, which will be useful in job and graduate school applications. Reflection serves as an important metacognitive tool that encourages abstract comprehension, introspective analysis of skills, and the formation of connections between skills and academic experiences (Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

For example, a Knights of Distinction student described in a reflection on their human resources internship experience for Milestone 5 that they learned a great deal about “the capability that data holds and how an enterprise can utilize data to achieve business outcomes.” The student also critically analyzed and described skills they developed, such as reporting and analytics, to “make informed strategic decisions in any role [they] take on.” The student identified areas they could apply these newfound skills, such as addressing turnover and performance management, to perform better in future roles that require “problem-solving and creative skills to recognize and implement solutions.”

### 5.3 ePortfolio

The culminating project in the Knights of Distinction program is an ePortfolio. The KoD ePortfolios are personal websites that the students create to highlight their skills, experiences, and learning as undergraduate students. Intentional learning is fostered in the creation of students’ ePortfolios, as students strategically and purposefully learn how to showcase their skills and experience to an intended audience. Students learn how to apply learned design and technological skills in the development of their ePortfolio as well. KoD students must include diverse artifacts in their ePortfolios and contextualize them for a particular audience, such as future employers or graduate schools. The artifacts included in ePortfolios are the supporting materials that expand upon what students include in their resumes and curriculum vitae. Examples of artifacts may include pictures, videos, presentations, design projects, creative or scholarly work, and more. Creating an ePortfolio is a valuable professional and educational experience because it gives students the opportunity to tie their experiences together, create work for a real audience, highlight their skills, and prepare for job interviews or graduate school.

A Knights of Distinction member described the ePortfolio as allowing them to intertwine their experiences that, ultimately, were connected to each other and molded the student into who they are today. The student chose “every image, button, and font carefully to communicate [their] personality” and had the goal of making their website “intertwined in order to show that all of [their] experiences are ultimately connected to each other.” Before the student created their ePortfolio, they felt that their “academic and extracurricular experiences were fragmented in [their] brain.” However, the student learned to see the “cohesiveness among all the events, activities, jobs, and research projects [they] had participated in.”

At UCF, ePortfolios continue to expand in prevalence among courses in undergraduate programs and across campuses. For example, Legal Studies, Health Sciences, LEAD Scholars, Capstone courses, and Biomedical Sciences at UCF utilize ePortfolios as launching tools for students in their programs. KoD can also support students’ ePortfolio academic projects in these contexts.

## 6. Student Population

Because of the far-reaching benefits of integrative learning, the KoD program wants to encourage growth opportunities for the diverse student population at UCF and provide economic mobility opportunities to students in professions with entry-level pay or engaging in unpaid internships. As referenced in Table 1, Knights of Distinction Undergraduate Students Demographic Data Percentage, most of the KoD students are in the 18-24 age range, and the program serves students from different racial groups, including underrepresented, first-generation, and non-traditional students, based on our most recent student survey.

Table 1. Knights of Distinction Undergraduate Students' Demographic Data

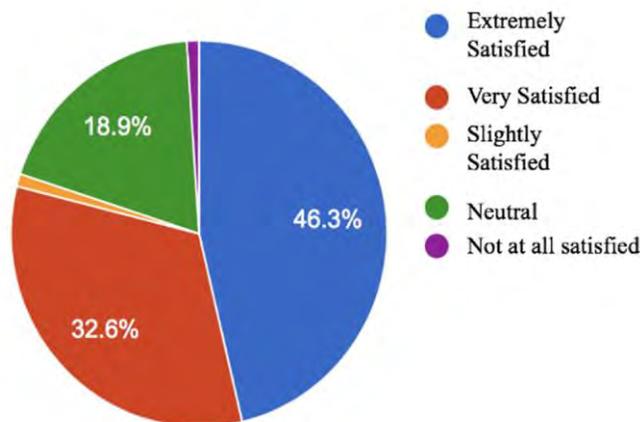
Knights of Distinction Undergraduate Students Demographic Data		
Demographic Data	Category	Percentage (%)
Age Groups	18 to 24	90
	25 to 34	7
	45 to 54	3
Ethnicity	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	40
	Not Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	60
Race	White	60
	Black or African American	18
	Asian	18
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.3
	Multiracial	2
	Other	1.7
Special Classification of Students	Underrepresented Students	46
	First Generation	33
	Non-Traditional Students	11
	No Special Classification	10

As referenced in Table 1, Knights of Distinction Undergraduate Students Demographic Data Percentage, most of the KoD students are in the 18-24 age range, and the program serves students from different racial groups, including underrepresented (Note 1), first-generation (Note 2), and non-traditional students (Note 3), based on our most recent student survey.

**7. Student Perception**

From the internal program assessment, it was learned that 78.9% of the program participants who responded to the question related to student satisfaction with the program’s requirements were very satisfied or extremely satisfied, as shown below in Graphic 1: Student Satisfaction on Program Requirement. This elevated level of satisfaction with program requirements demonstrates the program’s capacity to offer a rigorous and comprehensive pathway for distinction throughout pertinent activities and requirements, which help keep students stay on track as they progress in the program. The program provides a wide range of resources to satisfy the needs of the participants, considering the participants’ feedback and experiences.

Although the percentage of dissatisfied students is less than 1.0%, methods to address student dissatisfaction include the semesterly evaluation of quantitative and qualitative program survey data. The feedback provided by each student allows the Knights of Distinction program to provide individualized support in areas where students might be struggling to meet the program requirements. These supports include one-on-one advising, activity resubmission and revision opportunities, and communication that provides students with individualized resources to help them academically, personally, and professionally.



Graphic 1. Student Satisfaction with Program Requirements

Student Perception Survey data reflects that KoD one-on-one advising and ePortfolio workshops were the resources selected by students as providing the most benefit to their KoD program success. Student success is the program's number one priority, therefore, providing advice and workshops to help students make progress toward their goals is one of the main focuses of the Knights of Distinction program. The program's most current data shows that students can articulate the benefits of KoD as they advance in their professional careers. Students who have graduated from UCF with the KoD academic distinction have expressed the values and the benefits of being part of this co-curricular program. Students highlight that Knights of Distinction is a great resource for networking, developing leadership skills, displaying experiences and achievements, and self-reflecting, all of the program's core objectives.

### **8. Pathways for Professionalism**

The student perspective about the program effectiveness, the rate of students graduating with distinction, and the current student enrollment in the Knights of Distinction program is tangible proof of the program effectiveness in fostering academic learning and student success. Since spring 2018, over 170 undergraduate students have earned the Knights of Distinction designation. These students, all from diverse backgrounds and areas of study, not only earned an academic distinction and an enthralling medallion to wear at graduation but also demonstrated to have developed professional skills through their engagement in high-impact practices, commitment to their own professional endeavors, and innate desire to advance in their careers.

The KoD program seeks to continue creating program awareness and supporting more students in the pursuit of their academic and professional goals. Additionally, these supports should serve to improve the retention rate of students from their freshman to sophomore year as well as increase the four-year graduation rate among the undergraduate student population. Since this program supports students in an individualized manner and considers the student's needs and areas of interest, its concept will continue to change and expand as the student enrollment continues to grow and as the population being served becomes even more diverse. Creating different pathways for professionalism and serving a wider range of students are organizational goals that the KoD leadership has taken on.

The work of creating different pathways for professionalism through student support programs has started. There is no doubt that KoD has grown over the past seven years and supported a wide range of students with diverse backgrounds and academic interests. It is in the EL and KoD work plans to serve more students and to support the university's efforts to create and sustain a learning environment that enables students to thrive academically, professionally, and civically.

### **9. Invitation to Collaborate**

In conclusion, based on student learning outcomes, we know that high-impact practice programs, such as Knights of Distinction, lead to student success and the development of practical skills in communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. Knights of Distinction encourages active learning and involvement in purposeful tasks that provide exposure to diverse experiences, high-quality feedback, and metacognitive learning. Students learn the relationship between theory and practice as they seek opportunities in pursuit of their goals.

The UCF Office of Experiential Learning invites students, faculty, and staff to connect with the Knights of Distinction program. It is the department's goal to support more undergraduate students through the growth of the program and provide resources to faculty and staff working with the student population. Of these services, Knights of Distinction offers in-person and virtual workshops to support student success.

To connect with the Knights of Distinction team, students, faculty, and staff are encouraged to contact [knightsofdistinction@ucf.edu](mailto:knightsofdistinction@ucf.edu) or visit the program's website to learn more information. Partnerships, applications to the program, and collaborations are all welcome!

### **References**

- High-Impact Practices Hub. (n.d.) *What are high-impact educational practices?* University of Central Florida. Retrieved February 26, 2022 from <https://academicsuccess.ucf.edu/hip/for-faculty-and-staff/>.
- Kuh, G., & Geary Schneider, C. (2008). High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter. *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, 10–11.
- Ryan, K., & Grotrian-Ryan, S. (2016). Fostering Grit and the Growth Mindset through High-Impact Practices. *Educational Research: Theory & Practice*, 28(2).
- Stefano, D., et al. (2014). *Learning by Thinking: How Reflection Aids Performance*.

University of Central Florida. (n.d.) *What's next: integrative learning for professional and civic preparation*. Division of Student Learning and Academic Success. Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <https://undergrad.ucf.edu/whatsnext/about/qep/>

Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning. (n.d.) *Encouraging metacognition in the classroom*. Yale University. Retrieved March 23, 2022 from <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/MetacognitioninClassrooms#:~:text=In%20higher%20education%2C%20metacognition%20is,through%20reflection%20and%20abstract%20comprehension>

### Notes

Note 1. Underrepresented Students - This number includes transfer student, LGBTQ+, racial/ethnic minorities, and low-income household.

Note 2. First Generation Students - Students whose parents did not complete a four-year college degree.

Note 3. Non-Traditional Students - Students over 25 years of age, have dependents, married, single parent, or working full-time while enrolled

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).