

STATE OF THE ARTS

TRANSFORMING HOW WE ENGAGE WITH ART AND ENTERTAINMENT

- | With tools like Unreal Engine, UNCG faculty and students are stretching
- | the boundaries of creativity and innovation and developing
- | cutting-edge production techniques, augmented performances, and
- | new media experiences.

UNC Greensboro has long been a destination for arts students. Now it's also a portal into virtual arts careers in the gaming, media, and technology industries.

Innovate UNCG – the university incubator for entrepreneurship – is helping lay the groundwork for tech-forward growth in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, or CVPA.

“To have a viable career as an artist in the 21st century, you need a broad and dynamic skillset,” says one of Innovate UNCG’s leaders Dr. John Borchert. “UNCG is a place to learn and create things in an advanced technological space.”

Getting Animated

Inside the Gatewood Studio Arts Building, a state-of-the-art studio provides animators with equipment for 2D, 3D, and interactive projects. The new lab, part of the BFA Studio Arts Animation Concentration, gives students an industry-standard workspace.

The animation concentration, just two years old, has 35 students and adds about 10 students each semester. As the program grew, faculty pushed for a dedicated lab.

“Everything we have now is what you would experience at an animation or game studio,” says School of Art Associate Director Heather Holian. The Disney and Pixar scholar, along with professors Dan Hale and Rodgers Dameron, is expanding the program and facilities to meet growing demand.

That includes bringing in advanced game and animation software like Unreal Engine and the high-performance PCs it requires. “These computers are absolute workhorses,” says animation undergraduate Finley Lewis.

This spring, Innovate UNCG also installed an LED Volume wall in the Department of Media Studies to train students in the latest video techniques. The top-of-the-line virtual production technology located in Carmichael Building is 3D, animated, and interactive – the game engine powering it moves the background with actors’ movements. The technology is used in everything from local news to Disney productions such as The Mandalorian.

“Animators and digital designers develop virtual environments to display on the curved screen of linked LED panels – which can be 50 by 20 feet in the movie industry,” explains Borchert. “With tracking technology, when actors in front of the wall move, the scene moves, casting real lighting on the actors and making it seem like they are moving in the virtual space.”

Holian envisions UNCG as a destination school for animation. “We provide a top-notch education. Our students deserve and are getting access to this industry.”



“Animation is everywhere – in film, gaming, medical fields, and beyond,” Hale says. “There is profound interest, and our classes are full – with waitlists.”

Innovative Partnerships

This winter CVPA launched an Innovate UNCG Impact through Innovation – ITI – Hub to foster innovation and entrepreneurship within artistic disciplines.

Four faculty fellows from each of the college’s departments – art, music, dance, and theatre – are building a business and entrepreneurship skills course, for launch this fall.

“If we are training students in the arts, we need to give them business skills as well. Otherwise, we’re sending them out unprepared,” says Hannah Grannemann, associate professor of arts administration and CVPA ITI Faculty Fellow. “Artists can’t get their work seen and sold in the world without entrepreneurial skills and confidence.”

The CVPA hub joins recently established ITI hubs in the School of Education and the School of Health and Human Sciences. The goal: an interdisciplinary network of innovators across campus.

“Every discipline has its own set of priorities and curriculum,” says Borchert. “The newest hub is designed to create platforms unique to the ambitions of CVPA students.”

The hubs also bring innovators across campus together to explore strategies for scaling ideas. The aim is for all disciplines to consider entrepreneurship and social innovation as they work to address challenges in their fields.

UNCG has also become one of just 36 U.S. universities with an Unreal Academic Partnership with Epic Games. The Cary-based company developed the Unreal Engine 3D computer graphics tool and Fortnite, one of the world’s most popular video games.

Faculty in UNCG’s Unreal Fellows program will integrate the tech into teaching and research, leveling up interactive and simulation media at UNCG. “Uses for engines like Unreal began in the gaming industry but extend far beyond that now,” Borchert says. “Now we’re looking at biotechnology, aviation, and more.”

by Alice Touchette and Terri Relos

IMPROVING THE NC MENTAL HEALTH LANDSCAPE

UNCG leads peer support, other programs to improve North Carolina mental health

Anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions are becoming more common among N.C. children, creating painful challenges for them and their families.

How do they find a therapist and support their child? For many families, there’s no clear roadmap after a child receives a diagnosis or experiences a crisis.

UNCG is leading efforts to change that – implementing the state’s plan to expand peer support as well as provide other critical services – and contributing to the national understanding of best practices.

“The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) recently released a strategic plan, and peer support is a focus of how they want to move forward,” says Willow Burgess-Johnson, a licensed clinical social worker with the UNCG Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships (CYFCP). “It’s becoming integrated into North Carolina’s vision for the mental health care system.”

Peer support specialists are trained community members who’ve often had experiences similar to those of the people they’re helping. They provide a sympathetic ear and guidance for families and children navigating the mental health system. UNCG’s work is putting North Carolina on the map as a leader in this promising new approach.

Two CYFCP programs – UNCG’s NC Youth and Family Voices Amplified and NC Healthy Transitions – are training



and integrating youth and family peer support specialists into programs across the state.

With \$4 million in new funding from DHHS, NC Voices Amplified will train 40 new certified family peer specialists. It’s also working with the National Federation of Families on best practices for peer support and will collect data to measure the impact of family peer support.

Some of these youth peer support specialists may plug into NC Healthy Transitions, which supports 16- to 25-year-olds who have mental health conditions as they transition to adulthood, providing counseling, vocational support, and more. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration recently awarded NC Healthy Transitions \$3.75 million to bring the pilot program to Burke, Catawba, and Iredell counties, in collaboration with Children’s Hope Alliance.

“I’ve worked in mental health for a little over two decades now, and there have been many days where I felt discouraged – there’s always more need than there are resources,” Burgess-Johnson says (above with Family Training Coordinator Frederick Douglas). “But this area feels exciting, creative, and innovative. It feels hopeful to me.”

by Rachel Damiani