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NCSA plans digital future Design center aims for national status

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The N.C. School of the Arts, which has backed off consideration of a visual-arts program in Charlotte, is collaborating with local universities to plan a digital-design center in the Piedmont Triad Research Park.

The concept is called the Center for Design Innovation. The center would provide specialized training in an area that is a natural extension of the School of Filmmaking and the School of Design and Production, said Chancellor Wade Hobgood of NCSA.

The school is working with Winston-Salem State University and Forsyth Technical Community College to create a curriculum for the center. Once that's established - and money becomes available - supporters say they hope that the center will expand and be recognized nationally as part of the National Design Institute.

The institute would be a collaboration among local colleges as well as the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, N.C. A&T State University and Guilford Technical Community College.

"Winston-Salem has two grand opportunities to distinguish itself as leaders in biotechnology and digital design," Hobgood said.

The project is in the beginning stages and will rely heavily on \$13 million requested by Sen. Linda Garrou, D-Forsyth, in a bill being reviewed by the N.C. Senate Appropriations Committee.

The bill also includes \$5.4 million for WSSU to acquire land and space in the research park for labs and offices for its Department of Life Sciences.

Garrou filed the bill only a week ago and said she is not overly optimistic that legislators will consider it this year.

"I wanted to plant the seed," she said.

"I didn't know whether I could get it done this session or not, but I wanted to get people aware of the need in our community."

The School of the Arts last year was considering establishing a visual-arts program in Charlotte but its board of directors tabled the idea after local leaders asked the school to consider Winston-Salem for the expansion.

AngelouEconomics, the consulting firm hired to recommend economic-development strategies for eight counties in Northwest North Carolina, had identified the arts as a major engine for growth and ranked both digital design and biotechnology high in potential.

Since then, faculty members from the School of Filmmaking and the School of Design and Production have been using a \$10,000 grant from the Greater Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce to study design centers across the country before formalizing their plans.

Digital design is the process of using computers to design products. Such local companies as Out of Our Minds Animation Studios Inc. and Point Dx Inc., a diagnostic radiology-reporting company, are already using the technology. Digital imaging is used in films and could apply to biotechnology-design services or be used to create new drugs and software programs.

"Digital design means something different to each institution," Hobgood said. "We need to figure out what our niche will be."

Forsyth Tech is looking at whether it could incorporate graphic and commercial art, architecture and construction design, and medical imaging and processing into the design center, said Gary Green, the president of Forsyth Tech.

Winston-Salem State's involvement in the center could be in information technology, computer science and software development, Chancellor Harold Martin said.

Two of the most challenging aspects of the collaboration will be framing the role of each institution to identify what they have to offer and then finding resources to move the concept forward, Martin said.

In addition to asking for state money, research-park officials and a committee of the Winston-Salem Alliance are lobbying for two grants from the U.S. Economic Development Administration that would pay for roads, utilities, and water and sewer lines in the research park.

One application is for \$2 million for a building and job-creation project involving Wake Forest University Health Sciences, said Mayor Allen Joines, the president of the Alliance, a nonprofit organization that focuses on economic development.

The second grant application, which is not yet complete, is for the design institute.

"This is a huge undertaking," Joines said. "We need dollars from the state, federal and local level."

Hobgood says he is confident that the financial support will be found to make the ideas work.

Joines said that officials with the U.S. Department of Commerce are very interested in the design piece and collaboration going on.

"We are hopeful that the EDA will help us carry that out," he said.