

Fairleigh Dickinson University

In The News

The following media coverage about Fairleigh Dickinson University appeared recently. For more information, contact the FDU Office of Communications, Dickinson Hall, Metropolitan Campus, (201) 692-7337.

NJBIZ

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FDU joins forces with Bell Works on innovative partnership

Under the program, Fairleigh Dickinson University will have a physical presence at the ‘metroburbs’

Matthew Fazelpoor

Two leading New Jersey entities – Fairleigh Dickinson University and Bell Works New Jersey in Holmdel – launched a new higher education and workforce collaboration. “One of the things we’ve realized is that there’s a tremendous need for us an institution, and others like us as well, to really focus ourselves and identify the places where we feel we can provide students a great experience, a direct linkage to opportunities for their future, and to begin defining ourselves and in some cases, focusing ourselves on addressing that need,” FDU President Michael Avaltroni told NJBIZ.

He said the school is attempting to do just that with out-of-the-box partnerships, such as this new one with Bell Works, allowing FDU to become part of a greater ecosystem — especially at a challenging time for higher education institutions.

Avaltroni said that being involved with Bell Works was something that interested FDU early on, noting the property’s concept of being a self-contained “metroburbs” – a downtown in an area that did not have one.

“And it intrigued me because it addressed one of the things that I feel is critically important, and probably more so by the day,” Avaltroni explained. “As we’re seeing the evolution of every industry with greater technology immersion and others – which is that people still seek community. They still seek the

opportunity to learn with and from one another. And it’s sort of dovetailed, in many respects, with the journey we have seen in higher education that’s been an ongoing struggle – which is that people have continued to say that the future is in fully online education.”

The FDU president said that online education will continue to have its place and will continue to grow. “But I think that there’s a missing component,” Avaltroni explained. “One of the things that was intriguing when we started the conversations with the leadership at Bell Works is how closely we aligned, in many cases, in the belief that the workforce of the future, the workplace of the future, the education of the future wasn’t maligned to being only in the online space. That, in fact, there were opportunities to do this in a way where you took advantage of community. So, it seemed like the perfect alignment for us to think about a higher education experience that wasn’t fully online. There are online

components. There are components of asynchronous learning to the things we will be delivering there at Bell Works.”

A place to gather

Avaltroni stressed that the hallmark of this program – unlike a traditionally fully online program – is the ability to gather.

“To kind of meet the students physically where they are by actually gathering on their time and on their turf – if you will,” he said. “It’s really a delivery of on-site, community-based education in alignment with essentially the landlord or the community partner to support us to be able to build resources for the community that they serve. So, it was a really exciting dovetail of so many commonalities between our shared vision – but also between where we both believe the future of work and the future of education are headed, which is not to be fully remote; not to be fully online – but to rather be fully immersive.”



Bell Works New Jersey in Holmdel, from Inspired by Somerset Development, is a 1.6 million-square-foot self-contained “metroburbs” – a downtown in an area that did not have one. – PROVIDED BY INSPIRED BY SOMERSET DESIGN

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Under the program, FDU will have a physical presence at Bell Works. The arrangement will provide optionality and flexibility to students by offering them programs that are not beholden to ordinary classes on one campus. The program will be open to Holmdel and the surrounding communities.

In addition, an MBA program is being established with the cohort slated to work within Bell Works and FDU's annual scholarship benefit gala will take place at the metrohub. The FDU Silberman Symposium took place in May at Bell Works as well, including a panel on the future of education and workforce that featured Avaltroni and Ralph Zucker. The latter is the visionary behind Bell Works who serves as founder and CEO of Inspired by Somerset Development.

"One of our pilot programs will be the MBA and they will gather likely one time per week – usually right at the close of business day," Avaltroni explained. "So, it allows them to come off work and to end up establishing a 5:00 p.m. – or thereabout – and start their coursework with an instructor that we've embedded essentially there to visit that campus one day per week. And then it will allow us ultimately to run the program so it's cohort-based. So that over the course of probably two-and-a-half or so years – the students would complete their MBA degree if they stayed full-time."

Avaltroni also noted that shorter programming, such as a certified financial planner course, will be more streamlined but allow for the synergies between the different programs this partnership will yield.

Putting the pieces in place

Zucker told NJBIZ it has been interesting to see all of the puzzle pieces come together at Bell Works as well as on this collaboration. He noted that education was a key piece of the puzzle for the metrohub's vision. "We always said that education is something that has to happen here – and we have it in various forms," Zucker explained. "But higher education – we've never had. But it was something that we had a theoretical 'spot' for early on. So, FDU approached us and said – we're trying to adapt education to the new realities of the world.' Everything that's going on at Bell Works, the workplace, and in life, in general – it's that because of technology – way more than because of the pandemic – the barriers between your work, your education, your life, your play, everything, have come down because everything is so amorphous and transparent. It sort of bleeds into each other. Education's maybe the last bastion to recognize that we're not go-



Campus offers flexible workspace at Bell Works in Holmdel. – PROVIDED BY INSPIRED BY SOMERSET

ing educate people solely in Ivy League towers – but we're going to bring it out to the real world."

Zucker said Avaltroni and FDU recognized that. "And he came to us and said – 'I can't think of a better place to bring our recognition that the next phase of education is going happen where life happens at a Bell Works,'" Zucker recounted. "That was an early conversation. And I got to tell you – Michael is a breath of fresh air."

The two leaders instantly hit it off and began rowing in the same direction on this initiative, which they have left open-ended. They want it to evolve and grow as things move along. "There's a memorandum of understanding more than a lease or anything else," said Zucker. "We're just allowing them to utilize spaces that are available."

That also leads to mixed uses of space at Bell Works, aligning with its philosophy. "We believe not just in mixing the uses – but mixing the users of the same thing," Zucker continued. "You have a conference room that's leased out to businesses. But when it's not leased out, it's available to help higher education and those type of things. So, that really talks about just another level of mixing and blending everything together."

"I think we've left it open-ended because we didn't put terms or bounds," Avaltroni explained. "We actually believe that it can expand."

Growth potential

Avaltroni, a Monmouth County resident who lives near Bell Works, pointed to an even larger vision – referencing University of Central Florida and its UCF Connect program, which bonds the institution to surrounding communities.

"One of the things we started to actually do is have conversations with some of the mayors and township officials to potentially open up opportunities to create sort of a satellite center," said Avaltroni. "It basically embeds people on these campuses at certain times to go after things like career advising and career development, alumni services, and others."

He believes there is the opportunity to grow into the township – to build

partnerships either with the K-12 districts, or in some cases, even with just the townships proper. "And then also leveraging our alumni networks in those areas, we probably have the opportunity to really grow the partnership even more robust to possibly even over the course of time, having a more full-time presence there," said Avaltroni. "Essentially a satellite office or something else for career services."

Zucker echoed that sentiment about the potential evolution and growth of the partnership.

"We would hope that it would lead to some type of permanent FDU presence at Bell Works," said Zucker. "A permanent presence would be pretty great. I think, also, that FDU can benefit – a lot of companies are here, over 100 companies doing everything from all types of research, design, hospitality, marketing. You have an entire ecosystem of every type of research and business – whether its AI or automotive technology, cutting-edge fragrance research being done here."

And to that end, Zucker said there are ample opportunities to tailor programming to serve businesses that are onsite while offering FDU students next-generation training. Zucker notes that the businesses themselves can serve as incubators, as well.

"So, the sky's the limit. We're taking a university like FDU and putting them into the middle of hundreds of businesses that are thriving and cross-pollinating," said Zucker. "That's another level. They can actually not just be isolated and learn in theory – but they can learn in practice. And it'll benefit the businesses and benefit the students."

Avaltroni describes the partnership and that opportunity as a thrill for FDU.

"It helps us to really build an identity around being less beholden to the campus as the only place where the institution exists," said Avaltroni. "We feel this is almost a statement point to say that Bell Works is kind of a launching point for us to think about community-based education in a very different realm than I think it's been considered before."