Anthony Westbury: Keiser University looking west for more room | Gallery

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At the moment, Keiser University students are spread across Port St. Lucie, with campuses on U.S. 1 and in St. Lucie West.

That could all change in a couple of years, if the private not-for-profit school is successful in buying the former Digital Domain building in Tradition. If that happens, the school will unite its existing 50,000-square-foot campus on U.S. 1 north of Port St. Lucie Boulevard and the 40,000-square-foot College of Golf in St. Lucie West — with room to spare.

Keiser’s was one of five bids for the Digital Domain building presented to the Port St. Lucie City Council at a special meeting Aug. 1. The city eventually elected to go through a more formal request for proposals process to rank the bidders. Finding a winner may take several more months.

Keiser specializes in offering hands-on instruction and small class sizes, according to Jane Quattrochi, dean of academics. Classes are also geared toward older students — the average age is 28 — who hold down jobs. Classes are available either in morning blocks from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., or evenings from 6 to 10 p.m. to accommodate student preferences.

Iraqi war veteran Jason McMichelux is one such older student. He was working Monday on preserving fingerprints on a wineglass in the forensics investigation lab.

Keiser students wear color-coded shirts, according to their academic discipline. So, while McMichelux had on a dark red polo shirt, his peers in dietetics and nutrition were all clad in pea-green scrubs.

The U.S. 1 campus, housed in a former Winn Dixie grocery store, contains lots of small classroom and lab spaces. The video games lab (mid-green polos) is close to the radiology techs (teal green scrubs) who work near the surgical tech students in light blue.

I ran into the “green people” (dietetics) on break. Jordan Cleckler of Port St. Lucie, fit Keiser’s mature student profile at age 31. He was originally looking to complete a traditional nursing program, but said he realized the employment potential of his new field.

I’m pleased to report the dietetics students were eating very healthy lunches — raw broccoli, carrot sticks, salads or whole-wheat pasta.

Not so much over at the Keiser University College of Golf & Sport Management in St. Lucie West.
There Aki Sata of Japan, was embracing American cuisine with a Pop Tart from a vending machine while he took a break in the indoor practice area.

There’s a nine-hole putting green, and an array of high-tech simulators that record and allow instructors to analyze golf swings, or allow students to play virtually a variety of golf courses all over the world.

The College of Golf is very popular with foreign students, vice president John McMurry said, pointing to a wall of 14 flags from different countries. The proximity of the PGA courses and Keiser’s use of PGA master professional instructors are a draw, Sata said.

Keiser, founded in Fort Lauderdale in 1977, has been on the Treasure Coast for about 16 years. There are 15 U.S. campuses and two Overseas (Shanghai, China and Nicaragua), Arthur Keiser, the institution’s founder, told me in a telephone interview.

The school is definitely in expansion mode.

Along with the Digital Domain proposal, Keiser described another campus planned in Palm Beach Gardens within the next four or five years. That campus will be much more like a traditional university setting, Keiser said, with younger students and a more collegiate atmosphere. There will be dormitories (which could house about 100 Chinese students who now live in West Palm Beach apartments) and — maybe — more sports teams.

While College of Golf teams are very successful, don’t expect Keiser to emulate Florida Atlantic University with a full football program anytime soon, Keiser said.

The university uses an accelerated learning model that crams teaching time into smaller blocks than traditional U.S. colleges. Keiser students can graduate with a bachelor’s degree inside three years instead of four. Keiser programs range from associates degrees through postdoctoral programs.

We’ll have to wait several more months for the Port St. Lucie City Council to make a decision. Yet the proximity to the Tradition Center for Excellence biotech and the new Tradition Medical Center would make Keiser a good fit. Keiser’s No. 1 location factor is visibility; the Digital Domain site certainly offers that in spades.

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