

Fuchs' signature deal: Cornell's 'new campus for new age'

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NEW YORK — There is not much activity going on behind the green chain-link fence surrounding the construction site on Roosevelt Island, just some yellow heavy equipment moving around the rubble of the partially demolished Goldwater Specialty Hospital.

Over the next three years, the first phase of a new Cornell University campus devoted to multidisciplinary scholarship, entrepreneurialism and technological research and development will rise from that rubble, a place for carefully selected graduate students to study the intersection between science and commerce, create new products and help grow the city's economy.

More than any other initiative Kent Fuchs has launched, Cornell NYC Tech is seen as his signature achievement, a \$2.1 billion, 2-million-square foot project that will be built out over the next 30 years and redefine Cornell's reputation and stature nationally and globally.

"The New York City tech campus is clearly the seminal event over this period of time," said Robert S. Harrison, a Cornell trustee and CEO of the Clinton Global Initiative. "The role Kent played was central. He dedicated the resources to creating the proposal. He was in the lead on those decisions."

Fuchs was also part of the negotiating team that secured a \$350 million gift from alumnus Charles Feeney. He also helped secure another \$133 million to fund the Jacobs Technion-Cornell Institute.

The NYC campus is a transformative project that comes two or three times in a university's lifetime, Harrison said, the other being the creation of Cornell's medical school in 1898.

"If this works and we can commercialize technology by creating new companies and transform the industry in New York, this will serve as model for what other cities will want to do," Harrison said.

The project illustrates the kind of complex, big ticket project Fuchs could bring to the University of Florida when he steps in as president Jan. 1, and one that impressed the UF board of trustees when it chose him over three other finalists.

"The breadth of UF is a very good fit for Kent," said Mike Kotlikoff, dean of veterinary medicine at Cornell. "He is a world class engineer and will be a terrific supporter of technological innovation and discovery that needs to occur at a top flight university truly of Florida's aspiration to be a world class university."

"You're getting someone who's accomplished great things in the world like the Cornell New York City Tech campus," said John Siliciano, senior vice provost for academic affairs. "But what you are really getting is a unique set of attributes that enabled him to achieve these things."

Those attributes — an egoless, warm, and genuine personality, an uncompromising integrity, and a determination to win — are what enabled Fuchs to assemble a team of senior leaders and faculty into coming up with a winning proposal, Siliciano said.

"His leadership was all over Cornell Tech," said Kent Kleinman, dean of the college of architecture, art and planning at Cornell and a member of Cornell Tech's executive committee.

Cornell Tech is a very visible, experimental campus, Kleinman said, an entrepreneurial space where students will be encouraged to take their ideas and commercialize them, start their own companies and apply their scientific knowledge in ways that help the economy.

Currently occupying three floors of the Google headquarters in Chelsea, Cornell Tech has 100 students and 15 faculty. They will move when the first phase of the Roosevelt Island campus opens in 2017.

"Kent's interest as we progressed through this process was how to present Cornell to the community," said Andrew Winters, director of capital development for Cornell NYC Tech. "Kent and the team in Ithaca are very sensitive to that, and that Cornell is seen as a good guy, and responsive to the community."

Winning the contest wasn't easy. Some 28 colleges and universities responded to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's invitation in 2010 to come up with a proposal for a new tech-centric campus to be built in New York. Only 16 entered proposals in the second stage.

Fuchs assembled a team of four senior administrators to tackle the contest, said Lance Collins, dean of the College of Engineering. "He quickly called a meeting of the four of us and said we have to go after this," Collins said.

Stanford University was considered the front-runner, Kotlikoff said.

"We started behind. Stanford had the lock, and Cornell and Columbia (University) were competing for second place," Kotlikoff said. "Kent just went there and cleaned their clock."

Fuchs never wavered in his belief that Cornell was destined to win, Collins said.

"It looked like a shoo-in for Stanford but through sheer diligence and cleverness we won," Siliciano said. "We landed this thing that was unprecedented."

One of the strengths of Cornell's proposal was its partnership with Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology, Collins said.

Technion had a history of creating products in Israel that helped transform its economy, he said, while Cornell has a reputation for its academic scholarship.

It's much easier to try new things than when you have a sprawling institution with thousands of faculty and students.

"Cornell Tech allows us to experiment, bring industry in at a deeper level than anything we've experienced," Collins said. "This is an economic development goal, not pure scholarship but about engagement and making things accelerate in the commercialization of technology in New York."

Cornell's participation in the contest drew some criticism from faculty and students. "A lot of the original negotiations and the proposal were done in secret, with deans of various colleges and some faculty representation," Dean of Faculty Joe Burns said. "But for the most part people were blind-sided."

Burns said he understood the need for some of those discussions to be conducted confidentially because of their complex financial and legal nature.

There were some concerns that the university was selling its soul to Corporate America and New York City, he said. Some factions from the humanities side at Cornell were afraid of corporatizing Cornell, the influence of outside dollars and becoming a vocational technical college, Burns said, and that it was moving away from academics toward marketing and advertising.

Also the association with Technion raised concerns among a small camp of faculty and students who alleged Technion was responsible for creating weapons used to support the Israeli occupation of Gaza and other Palestinian settlements.

Those discussions are good, Burns said. Just a couple of months ago, a forum discussion focused on what involvement faculty should have in forging future international agreements. Besides its relationship with Technion, Cornell is the first American university to launch a medical school abroad, in Qatar. Cornell also has stations in other parts of the Middle East and Asia.

"I believe in engagement with universities around the world," Fuchs said. "Saudi Arabia. Qatar. Israel. If we're going to have an influence, it's going to be through education."

Fuchs has a particular relationship with China. "I was just there reviewing a program and have been there many times," he said. "Most of my graduate students that I had when I was supervising Ph.D. students were from Asia — Taiwan and mainland China. A number of them are faculty back in China, so it's a set of external relationships I have developed through them."

He said he's fascinated by the rapid transformation taking place in China through its economy. Beijing looks nothing like it did 10 years ago, he said, and a large middle class has risen.

It was during a trip to Shanghai that Cornell President David Skorton couldn't attend that Fuchs met and forged the relationship with Technion's president, Peretz Lavie.

Together, they worked on the negotiations that led to the merger of their two proposals and the partnership that created the Jacobs Technion-Cornell Institute, a private, not-for-profit organization at the center of Cornell Tech's innovative curriculum.

The institution was a way to create a quick-moving, flexible synergy between Cornell and Technion that could act outside of the bureaucracies of both institutions, said Adam Shwartz, director of the Jacobs Institute.

"We needed to create an administrative or organizational structure to do things more quickly and flexibly than Cornell as a huge institution was able to do," Shwartz said.

The Cornell Tech curriculum is designed around three inter-disciplinary hubs, rather than traditional disciplines. Those hubs are Connectivity Media, Healthier Life and Built Environment. The three hubs embrace psychological and social sciences, digital media, data mining and analysis, health care technology, building, infrastructure and urban planning among other things.

"Our thought was if we want to help we should produce a different kind of graduate," Shwartz said. "Second, there is so much to do in the city, let's choose areas where the city is strong but digitally not very well developed, using skills in the digital world to strengthen that."

Cornell Tech encourages experimentation on campus, where traditional academic boundaries disappear in the pursuit of "domains of economic needs" or hubs, not

disciplines, for the city, Schwartz said. Whatever students develop is owned by the Jacobs Institute, he said, but they have the right to use that technology however they want.

That entrepreneurial, experimental nature is most apparent in the Runway post-doctoral program, he said. It is a one-year program focused on taking a student's idea and developing it into a product and a startup company. Entrepreneurs, investors, lawyers and other business professionals come to the campus to talk to the students, he said.

"Kent's role was to make the people at Cornell comfortable with the idea that this place moves at a faster pace and that's OK," Shwartz said.

Dan Huttenlocher, dean and vice provost of Cornell Tech, said all of the curriculum is focused on the digital world.

"This is a new campus for a new age," Huttenlocher said. It isn't a trade school, nor is it purely a research institute. It is designed to get academics out of its Ivory Tower.

"Here, we are trying to bridge the deep fundamentals," he said. "Everything on campus is a bridge between fundamental research and its applications, getting research out of the lab and into the world."

It's also transforming Cornell's reputation, he said. "We are viewed as being very bold, creating a digital campus."