Villanova creates high-tech learning center at Navy Yard

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Villanova University's College of Engineering is opening a high-tech learning center at the Philadelphia Navy Yard to offer graduate courses to the growing work force there and the large number of engineers within a short ride of it.

"The Navy Yard is becoming the engineering technology hub of Philadelphia," said Sean O'Donnell, the college's director of distance education.

The center consists of a 40-seat classroom, a 10-seat collaboration area and a control center spread over 1,400 square feet of space in a 25,700-square-foot building run by Philadelphia Technology Park LLC. Much of the building is taken up by a 12,000-square-foot data center and a few other rooms of equipment and people to serve it, but PTP also is leasing space to tenants it thinks can boost the ongoing efforts to make the Navy Yard a tech hub.

The College of Engineering plans to offer graduate programs, distance-learning courses and executive, professional and corporate learning programs at the center. It also intends to use it for graduate recruitment efforts and science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, education outreach programs for K-12 students and teachers.
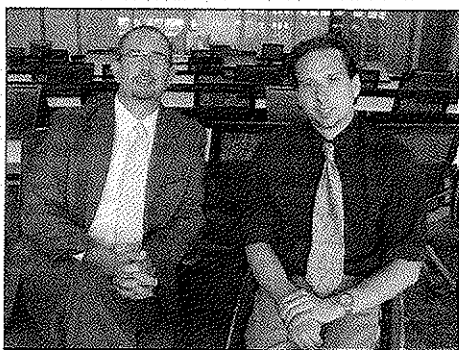
Corey Blanton (left) and Sean O'Donnell at Villanova's Navy Yard learning center.

The center is an outgrowth of a program the college has had at The Navy Yard that offers graduate classes to workers at the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Carderock Division — Ship Systems Engineering Station there. Those classes, however, are only available to Navy workers. With the center, the college hopes to reach engineers at The Boeing Co.'s plant in Ridley, L-3 Communications Corp.'s facility in Camden and Lockheed Martin Corp.'s operations at Moorestown, N.J., as well as Comcast Corp.'s headquarters in Center City.

"There are 300 engineers a year being hired within 10 miles of this facility," O'Donnell said.

Villanova's College of Engineering won't have the market for graduate courses to itself in the Navy Yard. The Pennsylvania State University Great Valley School of Graduate Professional Studies has been offering a systems engineering program there for at least five years and a software engineering program there for close to three years, said Jim Nemes, its interim director of academic affairs.

"For the type of programs we offer, that's a particularly good location for us," he said.

Unlike Penn State Great Valley's Navy Yard courses, the courses Villanova's College of Engineering will offer at its center will be accessible to distance learners as well as students on the premises.

"Students can participate live anywhere they are as long as they have a laptop computer," said Alfonso Ortega, the school's associate dean for graduate studies and research.

In addition to taking advantage of the Navy Yard's proximity to I-95 to attract area professionals to the center, the college wants to take advantage of its accessibility to Philadelphia International Airport to attract executives from other regions to the center.

Ortega said the college is one of the few in the country that offers a master's degree in sustainable engineering and it is taking advantage of that to develop an executive sustainable engineering program that it hopes to begin offering in a year.

"Villanova basically supports a very strong regional Northeast market but I don't think there's any reason that we can't broadcast and recruit nationally for programs like this," he said.

Villanova represents a prized tenant to PTP, which opened its data center last fall after signing an $11 million 12-year lease on the building at 4775 League Island Blvd.

Liberty Property Trust began work on the building for the Philadelphia Stock Exchange, but while it was under construction, the Philadelphia Stock Exchange was bought by the NASDAQ OMX Group and decided not to occupy it.

PTP President Corey Blanton said the data center is the only one built from the ground up in the area; all the others are in buildings that predate the centers' existence.

Blanton expects the data center will be about half occupied by the end of the month and doesn't think PTP, which is owned by Enterprise Technology Parks LLC of Baltimore, will have any problems filling it up and expanding beyond it.

"We can build another building just like this right behind this and that's our plan to do that," he said. ▪