

Frank Cunha III '19 MBA

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Success by Design

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Even the most casual visitor to Montclair State is likely to be impressed by what they see. With its stunning views and Spanish mission styling, the campus nods to the past while providing a vision of, and for, the future.

This is by design. Just ask Frank Cunha III, AIA, NCARB '19 MBA, who for 14 years was a member of the University facilities team behind the University's dramatic expansion.

First working as a consultant, Cunha was hired as a project manager in 2007 and progressed to become director of Architecture: Capital Planning & Project Management in 2018. During his career, Cunha oversaw a selection of facility construction and improvement projects that have become hallmarks of Montclair State's transformation from state college to R2 Doctoral University – High Research Activity.

“I saw an opportunity to do something special at Montclair State,” he says, recalling his first meeting with then President Susan A. Cole. “She had a vision for what the campus could be.”

The projects Cunha managed include construction of Francis A. Sinatra Hall, the Center for Environmental and Life Sciences, the School of Nursing and the John J. Cali School of Music.

At the start of every new construction initiative, Cunha found inspiration in the past. “The most amazing part for me was doing the archival studies,” he says. “Even the earliest yearbooks pointed to the campus buildings with pride.”

“In response to this, I have always worked to be respectful of the University's architectural history,” he continues, “but I also strive to meet 21st-century priorities. All of the new building projects are sustainable and are designed to promote accessibility and inclusivity.”

As his career as an architect progressed, Cunha reached for a long-held dream. “I was a first-generation college student,” he says. “I always wanted to go to graduate school, but after completing my bachelor's degree in architecture at NJIT, it was more important to help my parents pay for the bills I incurred as an undergraduate.”

“I started researching the master's degree programs at Montclair State, but was a little put off by the required testing to gain entrance,” he says. “By this time, I had a family and life was already pretty overwhelming. A few years ago, however, the University began accepting career experience in lieu of the entrance exams. I decided to go for it.”

The MBA program served Cunha's interest in strengthening his ability to oversee complex institutional facilities projects. “My roles as project manager, senior project manager and director of Architecture required a lot of project management,” he says. “I was responsible for coordinating financing, design, planning, construction and team management.”

“As an architect, it was very interesting to delve into the mindset of an MBA education,” he adds. “It involved a lot of questioning and looking at things from new perspectives. We learned human behavior and psychological profiles. I gained insights that aren't generally considered in the study of architecture.”

Cunha found the program's international study trip to be particularly transformative. “Everyone in the cohort votes to decide the destination,” he says. “We chose Australia, visiting Sydney and Melbourne, and we were also able to spend time in Dubai. We visited financial businesses, the opera house, vineyards and more. It was fascinating for me as an MBA student, and also as an architect.”

It was a proud moment for Cunha to accept his Montclair State degree surrounded by his wife, parents and children. “I couldn’t have done it without my family,” he says. “I stayed with my parents on weekends so that I could attend the Friday-Saturday sessions, and my wife and boys were understanding when my schoolwork conflicted with family events.”

In 2022, Cunha – who is a registered architect in 11 states – is realizing another long-held dream: pivoting his career to grow his own architecture and design firm. “I have enjoyed a wonderful career at Montclair State, but now I am ready to focus on my own business,” he says, noting that the MBA program gave him the confidence, and the skills, to brave the life of an entrepreneur.

“I am a more confident public speaker, more confident in my ability to work effectively with financials, and more open to innovations in technology and trends,” he says. “The Montclair State MBA program encouraged me to develop myself. It made me a better employee and will help me be a better CEO.”

As an alumnus, Cunha hopes to be able to give back by becoming an alumni donor to the University. “A lot of alumni don’t realize that there are so many options for directing your support to Montclair State,” he says. “You can support what you think is most important.”

Now that his oldest son is planning for college, Cunha often thinks of the advice he received from one of his MBA program mentors. “He told me to be the kind of person you want your children to be,” he says.

Cunha has a bit of advice of his own to add. “I would like to let my children – and every young person – know that it is never too late to reach for your dreams,” he says. “If you find your passion, and you have the courage to be your own person, you can change the world.”