ART, TECH MEET ON VALLEY CAMPUS

By Chris O'Brien

San Jose Mercury News

Until a few months ago, if you had stopped by Chuck House's office at Stanford University and mentioned "Cogswell College," his reaction would have echoed that of most people in Silicon Valley:

"I'd never heard of the place," he said.

Which is why he's surprised to find himself running the Sunnyvale college. I did a double take myself this summer when I heard that House, a longtime executive at Hewlett-Packard, had ditched his gig as executive director of the Media X program at Stanford to become chancellor of Cogswell.

Why would anyone leave world-renowned Stanford for ... what was that name again?

House told me on the phone a few weeks ago that I'd have to visit Cogswell to understand the appeal. And so I did, and now House's rationale is perfectly clear. Spending a few hours at Cogswell convinced me that this unheralded college just might be the most creatively geeky corner of Silicon Valley.

"If I was a teenager again, this is where I'd go to school," House said. "It's an incredible playground."

Cogswell is a private, four-year undergraduate college that primarily focuses on majors in digital animation and video game design. As such, it sits at an intersection between art and technology that is not just vibrant, but timely.

Both industries are struggling to attract enough talent to keep up with growth. That's inspired many schools across the country to introduce digital arts courses and programs.

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Cogswell Chancellor Chuck House came to the school from directing Stanford's Media X program.

"To address future needs, we are aggressively encouraging students to pursue science, technology, engineering and math educational paths so they can become the video game industry's next generation," Rich Taylor, senior vice president for communications and industry affairs for the Entertainment Software Association, said in an email.

Despite seeming to be at the right place at the right time, Cogswell had been struggling with declining enrollment several years ago as it lost focus and resources and as the economy went south. In 2010, things stabilized when Palm Ventures, a Connecticut-based private equity firm that invests in educational businesses, acquired the school.

But after getting the school on solid financial footing, Cogswell began a search for a new chancellor, which led it to House. He had worked at HP for 29 years before landing at Stanford as executive director of Media X, a program designed to explore the nature of innovation while encouraging collaboration between academics and industry.

He was perfectly content there until he visited Cogswell. Founded more than a century ago as a high school in San Francisco, Cogswell has moved all over the Peninsula before landing in its current location, a nondescript building tucked north of Highway 237.

Inside, it's a whole different story. The collision of artistic vision with geek culture jumps right out. A visitor enters the lobby to find clay sculptures of two fantastic creatures, one with long curling horns and the other a spiky fish head. There are several signed posters from video games and digital films that Cogswell students and alumni have worked on.

As we toured the college, we ducked into a modeling studio where students

Assistant professor Michael Huber's students created the clay figures behind him for animation projects.

learn to sculpt characters out of clay by hand. We walked through hallways where comic book covers had been used as wallpaper. There's a break room full of old-fashioned board games. And there's a sophisticated recording studio where student musicians jam and learn to record music for films and video games.

And of course, there are many classrooms filled with banks of computers for courses on everything from robotics to 3-D animation to game development. But the philosophy of the school is to emphasize that analog skills such as drawing, sculpting and storytelling are just as important as programming or how to use all the sophisticated technical tools.

"Just because you have a Stradivarius doesn't mean you can play the violin," said Michael Huber, an assistant professor at Cogswell.

One measure of the caliber of students at Cogswell is Project X, run by Huber, which brings together about 24 students who produce a digital animated short. The most recent film, "Worlds Apart," tells the story of aliens who land on a post-apocalyptic Earth and extract the memories of an abandoned teddy bear to learn about the tragic final days of its last owners. Besides being poignant, the quality is simply astonishing, and holds up against anything you might see from Pixar or DreamWorks.

The film, along with a previous student film, "The Offering," have been winning awards at film festivals around the globe. And while Project X was in place before House arrived, it's already raising the profile of Cogswell.

"Without a doubt, they've produced something spectacular," said Marilyn Friedman, head of outreach at PDI/DreamWorks in Redwood City. "It's not easy to do this stuff, and those two pieces are going to give them a lot of visibility."

That's not lost on places like DreamWorks, which currently employs about a dozen Cogswell alumni, Friedman said. That's a lot from a small school, Friedman said, but it's also impressive because they work at a wide range of technical and creative jobs across the company.

Josh Hodges, 26, has already benefited from Cogswell's reputation in industry circles. He came from Sacramento more than five years ago, after seeing Cogswell listed on the résumé of an artist he admired. During his time at Cogswell, he experienced a wide range of digital animation roles before graduating. That helped him land a recent project at Nintendo, and left him feeling prepared to pursue his goal of becoming an art director for a major animated film.

"The school really pushed me to try a lot of different things," Hodges said. "The school might not be known by the general population, but people definitely recognize it when I'm talking to them about jobs."

The next goal for House is continue to boost enrollment. While the school currently has 300 students, up from 200 a few years ago, the college has room for up to 800. As part of that growth, House is adding an entrepreneurial track to allow students to learn more about the business side.

But at its heart, House said, he wants Cogswell to remain focused and attracting and nurturing creative misfits.

"This is not a place for the conventional kid who loves school and is great at academics," House said. "We're looking for that kid who was daydreaming at school and didn't quite fit in. They're the ones we want to help make the next great film or video games."

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