

Leveraging Facilities to Create Value

By Scott D. Miller and Marylouise Fennell

Frequently viewed as a barometer of institutional success by prospective students, families, and donors, non-academic facilities play a primary role in the entire enrollment management process. Leveraging the successful strategies of the non-academic environment has become an integral part of an academic institutional vision, mission, and a competitive advantage.

Often grouped under the area of “student services and facilities,” this critical area now constitutes the “frontline” for colleges and universities striving to create competitive differentiation. Institutions are increasingly being tasked with attracting potential students, retaining existing students and faculty, supporting institutional growth, and engaging employees.

Particularly for rural campuses, student-friendly facilities are of paramount importance. As our colleague Earl D. Brooks II, president of Tri-State University, Angola, IN, notes, facilities have become catalysts for residential life. The quality of student life in general and of residential life in particular must be especially inviting if students visiting from urban and suburban environments are to enroll. To meet their needs and to retain a critical mass of students on campus, Tri-State aggressively attracted funding to construct the TSU Campus Village, two new townhouse-style buildings adjacent to campus.

Demand was so high for the initial two buildings that the university immediately set about identifying private funding sources for three to four additional apartment-style housing projects. Neumann College in Aston, PA, also constructed its new student residences in phases, with the dedication of three centers in 1997, 1999, and 2002. Another hallmark of today’s students and families is the demand for state-of-the-art wellness programs, recreation, fitness, and dining facilities. It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of such

non-academic facilities on the overall health and vitality of a college or university today. These factors are often paramount in enrollment decisions, especially for scholar-athletes.

This trend is paralleled by an emphasis upon dining as an integral part of the student experience, leading both Tri-State University and Wesley College to retain new foodservice vendors emphasizing a student-friendly campus. Institutional ambiance and foodservice are out; contemporary, individualized, fresh food cooked to order is in. Further, as colleges recruit more diverse student bodies, dining choices must reflect their varied food preferences.

At Stephens College in Columbia, MO, where dining facilities have become a focal point for campus life, the foodservices staff tailors its daily cuisine to enhance campus programming. It has found that special events such as beach parties and luaus create buzz that takes on a life of its own. For example, a popular midnight breakfast scheduled for final exams has become a much-anticipated event.

Finally, campus facilities and amenities today are increasingly key to meeting faculty and community expectations as well as to recruiting and retaining qualified faculty as the large “Boomer” generation retires. Rather than competing with academic needs for funding, the infusion of institutional funds into recreational and ancillary facilities will be essential to remaining competitive. Colleges must continue to invest in facilities that directly support faculty, teaching, and learning. At the same time, facilities for the use of community residents, teams, and organizations have become critical to the creation of mutually beneficial partnerships.

Preserving Institutional Assets While Supporting Change

New facilities and upgrades produce a solid return on investment – by increasing tuition revenue; inducing more students to “live on;” creating a more vibrant campus community; and by attracting more and better qualified students, faculty, and staff. As we have personally witnessed, new facilities also re-engage alumni with their alma mater, who then become stronger candidates for major and deferred gifts.

How can relatively small institutions with modest endowments hedge their bets while supporting expectations of change? Following are a few recommendations.

Student residences can be designed as rental apartments should demand drop. Use new facilities as a magnet to lure more potential donors back to campus to cultivate and re-engage them. Seek synergistic community organizations to share the cost. Consider leasing rather than building some facilities.

Looking beyond the academic arena to leverage opportunities, campus CEOs must innovate, lead and plan strategically, solve problems, create efficient financial structures, and operate with fiscal responsibility. Presidents should leave no stone unturned to ensure the viability of their institutions.

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