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– ESSAY 8 –

New Challenges and Solutions in Facilities Management

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There is ample formal research and anecdotal evidence that a campus visit remains the single most critical action in an institution’s ability to attract a new student. This fact places the burden on the rest of the campus to create a positive overall experience and a compelling reason for the prospective student to select that college or university.

Accordingly, the role of facilities has taken greater prominence in the operations, strategic planning, and mission of colleges and universities today. Increasingly, facilities managers are assuming a seat in the President’s Cabinet, while facilities needs have become high-ranking priorities in institutional strategic plans. These structural changes demonstrate that higher education recognizes the strategic role that facilities can play in creating a unique living and learning environment.

At the same time, the process of managing facilities has undergone transformation. No longer viewed as simply a support function, facilities management today operates in a landscape in which expectations are higher than ever before. Managing facilities today does not consist simply of maintaining structures, operating efficiently, and delivering daily services. Rather, attracting potential students, retaining existing students and faculty, supporting institutional growth, and engaging employees are the new measures of a facilities organization.

Facilities as Catalysts for Residential Life

Particularly for universities located in rural areas, such as Tri-State University (TSU), student-friendly facilities are of paramount importance. While families may tend to prefer campuses in smaller communities—which they perceive as relatively secure—students themselves say they prefer campuses in larger urban areas with more cultural and social opportunities. Therefore, 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.

At TSU, the aggressive planning and implementation of building projects, including the TSU Campus Village, assumed a high priority in the University master plan. Perhaps nowhere else has the University transformation been more apparent than in the physical appearance of its campus.

When it comes to campus residents, students today expect far more than their parents did just 20 years ago. To meet their needs and to retain a critical mass of students on campus, the University aggressively attracted funding to construct four new townhouse-style buildings adjacent to campus. The initial

campus villas—each built townhouse-style with their own separate, private entrances—contain modern amenities, including privacy, a quiet study environment, and laundry facilities. The administration and board of trustees recognized the pivotal role of the total student experience in recruiting and retention for Tri-State. Further, they actively engaged students in the engineering, design, and furnishing of the new residences, even including them in post-construction decisions concerning landscaping and parking. It is a reality in today's higher education landscape that not only have students and their families become highly discriminating users of amenities, but they demand a more active voice in their ongoing function.

Demand was so high for the initial two buildings—90 applications for an initial 40 openings—that the University immediately set about identifying private funding sources for three to four additional apartment-style housing projects.

With the completion of the new student residences, the issue of upgrading existing residences became paramount, and the University was able to secure funding to renovate two older facilities as well.

Ancillary Services, Recreation, and Fitness

Another hallmark of today's students and families is the demand for state-of-the-art wellness programs, as well as recreation and fitness facilities. In a generation accustomed to daily workouts and personal trainers, colleges and universities today compete not just with YMCAs, but with for-profit fitness centers with all the bells and whistles, including heated pools, spas, saunas, and massage. At TSU, private support underwrote the completion of the new Ketner Sports Complex as a multipurpose recreational facility and expanded training and locker space.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of such nonacademic facilities to the overall health and vitality of a college or university today. No longer are simple pools and gymnasias sufficient to

attract student athletes. Students and their families actively comparison shop for these amenities during the college selection process, and institutions that do not invest accordingly will find it increasingly difficult—indeed, impossible—to compete.

The entire trend toward a greater emphasis on wellness is also paralleled by an emphasis on student dining as an integral part of the entire student experience. Institutional ambiance and food service are out—contemporary, individualized, fresh food cooked-to-order is in. As in housing, students expect to be valued and consulted in the design of dining facilities, menu selections, hours of service, and other operational aspects. Further, as we actively recruit more diverse student bodies, dining choices must reflect these varied food preferences—such as vegan diets. Taken as a whole, these national trends have created a new demand for outsourcing the increasingly specialized food services area. The retention of a new food services vendor was another by-product of TSU's emphasis upon a student-friendly, contemporary campus.

Colleges today are seeing the impact of Title IX vast expansion of opportunities for women in intercollegiate athletics, and the resulting increased participation in athletics. Fully two-thirds of our students participated in one or more varsity sports at the secondary level, and admissions figures project that an even higher percentage expect to play at Tri-State—either at the intercollegiate, club, or intramural level. National studies support our experience that after location, cost, and availability of major, the existence of a competitive intercollegiate athletic program is the decisive factor in the enrollment decision for a majority of students. Thus, our ability to enroll qualified student athletes is largely dependent on the continued meeting of expectations in this critical area.

Meeting Faculty and Community Expectations

In the early 21st century, campus amenities and facilities such as these are increasingly essential to fulfilling our academic mission. With an unprecedented retirement of current faculty

projected to occur within the next decade as the baby boomers reach their 60s, competition will be keen to attract and retain the best faculty and administrators. Likewise, the quality of the entire campus experience will be critical to their families in the decision to accept or reject a given position. Therefore, far from competing with academic needs for funding, the infusion of institutional funds into recreational and ancillary facilities for the use of the entire college community—including faculty, staff, and families—will be essential to remain competitive.

In addition, of course, it is important to invest in facilities that directly support faculty, teaching, and learning. Thus, TSU is also building a new University Center and Center for Technology and Online Resources, which will house our library and renovation of our old administration building.

Likewise, to leverage the synergistic opportunities that exist to create mutually beneficial partnerships with community residents and like-minded organizations also requires that universities offer contemporary, user-friendly facilities.

Preserving Institutional Assets While Supporting Change

Mark Twain once wrote, “It’s not what a man doesn’t know that hurts him. It’s what he thinks he knows that just ain’t necessarily so.” In other words, conventional wisdom is often wrong, and institutions that do not think strategically while operating creatively are often hurt in the process. So while capital investments are costly, in the long run they produce a solid return on investment—by increasing tuition revenue, inducing more students to “live on,” creating a more vibrant campus community, and attracting more and better qualified students, faculty, and staff—the list goes on and on. And in TSU’s experience, once alumni and friends see the transformative process begin, they want to be in on the momentum. As new facilities draw more alumni back to campus, in turn, more become re-engaged in their alma mater and become stronger candidates for current major gifts and future deferred opportunities.

However, what about the short-term costs? How can relatively small institutions with modest endowments hedge their bets while supporting expectations of change?

Following are a few recommendations:

- Build facilities with an alternative use in mind. For example, 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.

It takes real commitment, leadership, and vision to meet today’s facilities needs while planning for the future and exercising good stewardship over institutional assets. But if done well, the effort will pay off in long-term results for the institution.

Dr. Earl D. Brooks, II, has served as president of Tri-State University, Angola, Indiana, since June 2000. He has led the institution through a historic transformation, including its current \$70 million capital campaign. Dr. Brooks is active in many professional organizations, including CASE, CIC, NACUBO, and NAICU.

Tri-State University is a private, co-educational institution offering associate, baccalaureate, and master’s degrees in more than 40 programs. Founded in 1884, it maintains a 485-acre main campus in Angola, Indiana, with off-campus centers in Fort Wayne, South Bend, Merrillville, Kendallville, LaGrange, Indiana; and Centreville, Michigan.



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