



## 'All the Bells and Whistles'

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As community colleges enroll more full-time and traditional-age students, many are building stand-alone student centers in the mold of those found on the campuses of four-year colleges and universities. Given that some two-year institutions have begun building dormitories, some see the promulgation of these multi-use facilities as yet another step in the ongoing transformation of the community college.

Tidewater Community College, in the Hampton Roads region of Virginia, broke ground last month on one such facility; by 2012, the school plans to have one on each of its four campuses. With a combined price tag of nearly \$90 million, they are the first community college student centers to be built in the state, and among very few in the country.

“As I’ve made the rounds and met with students to ask them what they like and don’t like about Tidewater, there was one recurring theme,” said Deborah M. DiCroce, who is in her 12th year as president of the college. “They didn’t have a place of their own. They were looking for a place to engage in various activities when they were not in class.”

This desire among students for a place to call their own did not come out of thin air. Rather, DiCroce believes it is a natural response to both the changing role of the community college and the changing demographics of her students.

For example, in the past 10 years alone, Tidewater’s overall headcount has grown by almost 50 percent, to about 40,000 students. Within this overall growth, the number of recent graduates from high school has increased by 75 percent, and the number of full-time students has grown by 74 percent. In 1998, the average age of Tidewater students was 29.4; last year, the average age was 27.2, constituting what DiCroce calls a “significant drop” for an institution of Tidewater’s size. Now, half of the college’s student population falls between the ages of 18 and 24.

“We’re finding with our changing demographics, our students are more consumer savvy and expect all the bells and whistles of a full university student experience,” DiCroce said. “As community colleges are increasingly being looked upon to provide an on-ramp, if you will, to baccalaureate study, more students are looking for these accouterments of a university. In the founding years of our system, at least in Virginia, I don’t think anyone would have considered this. The conventional wisdom was that students wanted to take classes and go home to get on with their life. This isn’t the case with many full-time students.”

Though Tidewater’s student centers will look and feel like those buildings found on traditionally residential four-year college campuses -- with offices for student groups, places to grab a bite to eat, and a bank -- they will contain a few features that may help differentiate them. Of the services DiCroce defined as characteristic of a community college student facility and among the most requested, childcare services for the many students with young children will be located in each center.

The building plans have not come without some minor criticism, however. DiCroce admitted that it is possible to “go overboard” and “risk becoming extravagant” when building such facilities during trying economic times. The perception that the price of attending many four-year colleges has been driven up by student demand for luxuries – the much maligned climbing wall, for instance – has become a major issue in the debates over fast-rising college tuitions. DiCroce believes, however, that there is an indefinable “value added” for students in the addition of such meeting places to her campuses.

"I've heard the naysayers saying that this is a waste of money, but they could say that about virtually anything," DiCroce said. "Some people say that about our investment in technology and implementing it across our institutional mission, and they'll ask, 'Why not go bare-bones?' My response to that is a very simple but fundamental point. It makes far more sense to try to fashion an educational experience that is reflective of the diversity, complexity and interdependency of the world we live in. What constitutes education, increasingly, is not confined to what happens in the classroom. [These student centers] will constitute a value added to that student when they go into the workforce."

As the Virginia government does not help pay for the construction of auxiliary facilities, Tidewater is paying the \$90 million bill through the generosity of private donors and several local governments. In addition, students have agreed to a \$5 per credit hour price hike on their fees to help pay for the construction of the facilities.

Tidewater's ground-breaking has turned the heads of a few community college leaders in Virginia, DiCroce said, who have come to seek its advice on planning their own. And, if the changing demographics of two-year institutions around the country are any indication, some national groups think student centers could be popping up on community college campuses all around the country in the near future.

Marsha Herman-Betzen, executive director of the Association of College Unions International, a group of student union professionals at more than 600 two- and four-year institutions, said there are some community colleges that have had stand-alone student centers for years. She pointed to one at Salt Lake Community College, with everything from a health care center and bookstore to a television lounge and a snack bar, as a longstanding example. More commonly, however, student services are not centralized on community college campuses, but rather spread throughout a number of buildings -- a remnant of the commuter origins of most of these institutions, Herman-Betzen explained.

"You're going to see a rise in the stand-alone student union center at community colleges since we're seeing younger and more traditionally aged students," Herman-Betzen said. "While you don't need a building like that to develop community, to have a place that has artifacts and memories is important. When you go back to visit your school, you don't go to the chemistry building."

In addition to child care services, Herman-Betzen said most of the new wave of community college student centers contain other items of convenience that reflect their population, such as lockers where students can stow their belongings between classes. Some have also relocated their registrars' and financial aid offices to their new facilities to provide more access to students.

Herman-Betzen said these new community college facilities have the same operational issues as their older four-year counterparts. With fewer state dollars coming in for facilities, she said many have tried to make their student centers auxiliary-driven to help fund their own operation.

So, what will be the next building boom on two-year college campuses now that dormitories and student centers have begun to make an appearance?

Herman-Betzen thinks that aquatic and fitness centers may be next. DiCroce, however, said students had wanted Tidewater's student centers to include a gym, but the idea was scratched from the plan because it was deemed "too extravagant."

— **David Moltz**