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# Reshaping Student Life

By John Roberts

Major changes are in the works  
to cultivate a richer campus environment  
for intellectual development  
and social interaction.



**A**t High Point University, an ice cream truck makes daily rounds around campus. The posh student center features a terraced dining area and an outdoor swimming pool with Jacuzzi. In fact, the campus will soon have four outdoor pools.

A campus townhome community includes its own wellness center, and in December the university announced plans to build a 400-bed residential/student services facility that will cover two city blocks. Students can also take advantage of dry-cleaning services, and “campus concierges” collect feedback and provide answers to questions about all areas of campus life.

Nido Qubein, the North Carolina school’s seventh president, came to High Point in 2005 from a career as a business entrepreneur and motivational speaker. He pushed the liberal arts institution to pursue a recruiting edge through student services, with an emphasis on gleaming new facilities and special amenities.

The customer-service, business-centered model has produced results. Since 2005 undergraduate enrollment at High Point has increased from 1,450 to 3,800, the operating budget has tripled, the campus has doubled in size, and parent giving has soared from \$14,000 per year to \$2.9 million. The school’s goal is to enroll 4,800 students by 2015.

Along the way High Point has bulked up its faculty and academic programs, and in the past six years its students’ average SAT scores have jumped 100 points. The explosive growth has been called the “Miracle on Montlieu Avenue.”

So, can we expect to see the Furman campus undergo a similar explosion in construction any time soon?

Not exactly. But changes designed to more tightly integrate academic and student life — and offer a more edifying campus experience — are on the way.



**Last fall**, the Furman board of trustees voted to approve an expansive Housing and Student Life Master Plan that will reshape some campus facilities and cultivate a richer environment for intellectual development and social interaction. The plan calls specifically for sweeping renovations to the University Center and the residential areas.

“Students are coming to us with stronger credentials,” says Connie Carson, Furman’s vice president for student life. “They want a higher level of experiences than they had in high school.”

While Furman’s 82-page plan includes facility renovations and upgrades, Carson emphasizes that its overarching goal is to strengthen the connection between academics and student life. “They should meld together and complement one another,” she says. “Philosophically, we are moving along this path.

“We want to ensure that the in-class and out-of-class experiences for our students are integrated and provide a strong academic focus. We want our facilities to be nimble to changing student needs. This new plan will allow us the flexibility to adjust our programs over time.”

The upgrades are in line with conventional thought. Higher education experts say that all universities, regardless of their reputation or level of selectivity, need to have modern facilities and student-centered services to meet the expectations of prospective students.

Which is why, on today’s college campuses, student centers are replete with high-tech digital signage, plush movie theatres, and game rooms outfitted with flat-screen televisions and pool tables. Workout rooms rival those at private clubs, residence halls are roomier, and dining hall food is healthier and tastier. Some schools, including High Point, Wake Forest and Georgia Tech, now offer restaurants with wait staff.

“Many colleges talk about bridging academic and student life. We want them to be seamless.”

— Connie Carson  
*Vice President for Student Life*





Says Scott Derrick, Furman's director of student activities: "These sorts of things really speak to this generation."

George Kuh, Chancellor's Professor Emeritus and Director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment at Indiana University, refers to the trend as a "physical plants arms race."

"All of this is a product of the background from which students come today," he says. "My brother and I shared a bedroom. Today's students cannot imagine living on a corridor in a room with another person. They have always had their own bedroom."

From residential life programs to student activities, campus recreation and health services, student expectations are likely to increase. The result: Student life divisions are playing a more prominent role on campuses, and their staffs are beefing up their programs to ensure that they meet expectations.

**As Carson says,** Furman envisions a campus in which academics permeate residential and extracurricular life.

The University Center, where renovations recently began, will soon become home to three programs currently housed in academic buildings: the (Lilly) Center for Vocational Reflection, Study Away/International Education, and Undergraduate Research and Internships. To make the student center more of a campus destination, it will also feature expanded gathering areas (both indoors and out) with comfortable seating, a larger food court, a "sports restaurant," more work space for student organizations, and a larger career services office. (See page 20.)

The University Center makeover is expected to cost approximately \$6.75 million.

Plans for the residential facilities, which will require more extensive work over a longer period of time, call for South Housing (McGlothlin, Blackwell, Manly, Poteat and Geer halls) to be addressed first. These buildings, among the oldest on campus, will be updated, with redesigned rooms and more informal spaces for study and conversation. The complex's underused quadrangle will be transformed into an attractive commons area, and new residence halls flanking a graded and leveled Blackwell (E) Field will be added.

When completed, South Housing will serve as a "first- and second-year residential college." Faculty fellows will be invited to develop high-impact out-of-class activities that will complement students' formal education.

Lakeside Housing will undergo similar renovations to include more lounges, meeting and advising areas, seminar rooms and gathering spaces. Both residential areas will have enhanced sustainability features.

The anticipated cost to revamp the residence halls is \$65 million.

Jane Wright, president of Hanbury Evans Wright Vlattas, the architecture and planning firm that helped craft Furman's plan, says colleges and universities began to integrate living and learning environments in the late 1990s. The most common adaptations include placing seminar rooms and classrooms in residential environments. Some schools have also introduced a faculty-in-residence program, which Furman is considering.

In general, she says, this kind of environment helps students adjust to college more easily. They tend to have better grades and establish deeper friendships, and they are less likely to transfer or drop out of school.

"These are all very positive indicators for a university," says Wright, who is the lead planner on the Furman project. "Because there is proof [of the benefits], we are seeing many more requests."

**During her years** as assistant vice president of campus services and planning at Wake Forest, Carson played a leading role in developing the university's master plan, which was updated in 2007. Fresh from that experience when she arrived at Furman in 2008, she saw several immediate needs.

"I was surprised to see how far behind we were in some of the residence halls," says Carson. "And when I walked into the University Center, I didn't see students hanging out. It was more like a service center than a student center."

Dozens of administrators, students, trustees and architects worked 18 months to develop the Housing and Student Life Master Plan. If all goes as expected, Carson says it will be completed over the course of three five-year phases.

And where Furman is concerned, Carson offers a different perspective than Indiana's Kuh. The Furman plan, she says, is less about shiny buildings and physical improvements than about creating a life-changing learning environment for students.

"We are not in an arms race for amenities," Carson says. "The learning outcomes are what's important. Many colleges talk about bridging academic and student life. We want them to be seamless."

Kuh, a widely published author on higher education trends, does point out that, because students spend roughly three-quarters of their time outside of classrooms, it makes sense for colleges to "try to thread together what students do inside the classroom to what they do outside the classroom."

"You try to create an environment where the discussions from the classroom spill over into student life. The students can learn from each



other, and you can transform your campus into a learning community.” In the end, he says, “Students are more satisfied and benefit more. More institutions are looking to carve out these types of activities.”

This approach will allow Furman to expand the concepts behind current programs for select students and apply them across the board. These programs include Engaged Living, which “promotes student success, supports Furman’s academic mission through contributions to borderless learning, and fosters intentional engagement among students, faculty and staff,” and the Greenbelt Community, where residents share a lifestyle that embraces sustainable practices.

**Parents and students** are also gravitating to institutions that provide strong on-campus medical care and mental health support, areas of student life which Furman is already addressing.

When Steve Dawes, director of the Furman Counseling Center, came to the university in 1995, his staff included two counselors. He now manages four clinicians, a nutritionist and two consulting psychiatrists.

“We have grown in size and scope to meet student need,” he says. “We do many more psychiatric consultations and have more of a clinical focus.”

This year the center’s appointment load was up 27 percent, and Dawes says most of the cases he and his staff see are linked to depression and anxiety.

“Students are not as resilient in coping with their emotional problems on their own as they once were,” he says. “There is a lot of speculation about what’s causing this. We live in a society that is increasingly reliant on technology. Often, relationships are shallow, and we see and communicate with people face to face much less.”

Dawes adds that more students enroll each year with existing conditions that need to be monitored. “Children with problems are identified much earlier now, and the medications have really improved,” he says. “Fifteen years ago some of the people with these conditions could not have attended college. Now they can.”

Given these issues, Furman’s Housing and Student Life Master Plan, which encourages the development of more in-depth relationships among students, faculty and staff, will further complement the university’s ongoing efforts to help students cope with the demands and stresses of college life. [F]

*The author is director of communications at Furman.*

Aside from the changes to the University Center and residential facilities, the Housing and Student Life Master Plan also calls for:

A pedestrian and bike path connecting Furman’s Vinings apartment complex on Duncan Chapel Road to campus.

A Greek village.

A transport system from the North Village apartment complex to central areas of campus.

Additional outdoor recreational sports venues.

Want to read the full plan? Click the Student Life link at [www.furman.edu](http://www.furman.edu).