Lindenwood campus grows by leaps and bounds

BY SCOTT WUERZ
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Lindenwood University leaders had big dreams for a former high school in Belleville when they bought it with plans to turn it into a satellite campus.

But even school President James Evans said he is surprised to see how quickly those dreams have become a reality.

"We believed there was a need for a university in the Belleville area," Evans said. "We saw the things that are happening there now happening, just in the future. I don't think anyone anticipated that they would happen so rapidly."

Lindenwood leaders took over the former Belleville West in 2003, paying $1 to buy it in a three-way deal to buy it from Belleville Township High School District 201 through the city of Belleville. In January 2004, the campus opened for night classes with fewer than 100 students in attendance. In the seven years since then, according to Evans, Lindenwood has spent "well over $10 million" renovating a beautifying the campus. The number of students served jumped to about 2,500 in 2010-2011 and is expected to rise to almost 3,000 in the 2011-12 fiscal year which, for the university, starts June 1.

"We believed there was a need for a university in the Belleville area," Evans explained of the decision to come to the city. "The student growth has been so great because of the need. Another reason we have grown so rapidly is because the city and community have supported, encouraged and helped us every step of the way."

Almost every building on the campus has been rehabbed or is in the process of being rehabbed, including the Main Building, the Ittner-designed Auditorium, the main gymnasium and the a classroom building behind the auditorium. They have all received new windows, tuck pointing, electrical upgrades, Internet service and other improvements. The cafeteria building is currently being rehabbed and will include a library and student union.

While the school got off to a good start, Evans said it is up to university officials to keep things moving forward.

"We're hiring quality personnel, and we're always adding more programs to make sure we offer the best quality product to our students," Evans said. He added that the growth of the Belleville campus has pushed Lindenwood's Board of Directors to soon consider another $5 million investment in the campus.

The money, if approved by the Lindenwood board, would be used to renovate the Belleville campus stadium in preparation for a planned new football program, for construction of a running track, for the next phase of renovation of the auditorium to include work on the building's classrooms and studio and the purchase of equipment and furniture to be used in newly opened spaces, Evans said.

While the number of students grows at Lindenwood's Belleville campus, the number of employees required to serve them grows, too. According to Lindenwood Vice President Jerry Bladdick, head of the Belleville campus, the school has gone from 14 full-time employees a year and a half ago to 46 now. It also employs 88 part-time instructors.
"The economic impact we are having in the St. Clair County and Belleville area is tremendous," Bladdick said. "In addition to teachers and department heads, we've added two full-time academic advisors, a housing director (that started) May 1 and a coordinator of student activities that will start June 1. We've also added several new employees with the expansion of our sports programs."

Mayor Mark Eckert said the educational opportunities and the jobs are sorely needed in the area. And he said Lindenwood has also helped revitalize the neighborhood around the campus.

"What they've done with that campus is phenomenal," Eckert said. "They're creating a lot of positive momentum. And the city has done its part to help out."

Eckert said Belleville has committed to a beautification program between the campus and the city's downtown district. It has also pushed forward with plans to improve 17th Street and extend it from Illinois 13 to Illinois 15 to help traffic flow to and from the campus.

Gov. Pat Quinn announced last month that money has been approved to build a new Illinois State Police forensic lab next to Lindenwood.

The university helped push for the facility to be built there so its students could get hands-on experience as they pursued criminal justice degrees. It bought the land where the lab will be built on the site of a closed retail store and an old doctor's office and sold it to the state to help make the lab become a reality. Lindenwood also bought up several rundown houses and apartment buildings in the area and rehabbed them for student housing space. It also bought and tore down an empty commercial building across the street to use the space for parking. The university rents out many rooms at the nearby EconoLodge motel to house students.

Eckert said he believes that restaurants and shops will soon start to pop up in the area around the school.

In 2004, then Lindenwood President Dennis Spellmann, who died in 2006 after a battle with cancer, searched for not-for-profit organizations to help fill the Belleville campus because he couldn't imagine the school could fill all the space on campus. Today, Evans said, almost every inch of the Belleville property is either in use or is planned to be filled soon.

"It's quite right that we're nearly out of space," Evans said. "We're going to need room to grow. We have a tremendous demand for dormitory beds right now. We could fill two 200-bed dorms with no problems. Classroom space is still adequate. But we could use space for our athletic programs, especially baseball and softball."

Evans and Bladdick said Lindenwood has aggressively built its sports programs because they are a great way to attract new students.

Joshua Johnson, a Belleville East graduate, is studying business administration at the school.

"I really appreciate that it's close and that it offers the degree I wanted," Johnson, 22 said of the reasons he decided to go to college at Lindenwood-Belleville. "I don't want to have to drive all the way to Missouri to go to school."

But Johnson added that the opportunity to play on the Lindenwood-Belleville golf team was also attractive.

"I didn't think I would get to play in college because I have only really played the last couple of years and I didn't have the high school background," Johnson, who has a 7 handicap, said. "But I talked to the coach and we were able to work something out. So I'm pretty excited about that."

Full-time day undergraduate degree programs include business administration, corporate communications, criminal justice, elementary education, human resource management and pre-nursing.
Evening undergraduate bachelor's degree programs offerings include business administration, communications, criminal justice, health management and human resource management.

Graduate evening program offerings include a master's degree in business administration, master of arts degrees in communications, counseling, education and educational administration and master of science degrees in criminal justice administration, health management and human resources.

Bladdick said Lindenwood-Belleville leaders are currently working to add an undergraduate degree in psychology.

"We're very excited about what has happened in Belleville so far," Bladdick said. "But we're even more excited about our future here."

Evans agreed. He said, because of the demand and the fact that there is room to grow in Belleville while the St. Charles Main campus is somewhat landlocked, he could see a day far off in the future where the Belleville Lindenwood campus grows larger than the main campus in St. Charles.

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