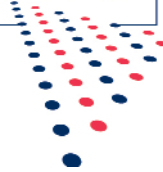


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2006 SERIES: "CREATING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE"

– ESSAY 3 –

Creating Campus Community:  
A Place Conscious Legacy

## Creating Campus Community: A Place Conscious Legacy

**DR. DONNA M. CARROLL**

President, Dominican University

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In the recently published (2005) and widely quoted book, *Student Success in College*, George Kuh and colleagues argue that sense of place “transcends the physical setting and location of an institution”...mixing “with memories of activities and events to build loyalty and connection...” While I do not disagree with Professor Kuh’s statement, for the sake of this essay my muse is another practitioner scholar, Sir Winston Churchill who said, “We shape our buildings and they shape us” --- and arguably, our sense of campus community.

Every day (and night) hundreds of Dominican University students park in the west lot, zip down the ramp into the Crown Library Building, grab a cup of coffee in the Cyber Café, greet friends, browse the online campus calendar, check email or print out a last minute paper in the Information Arcade, while catching a bit of news on one of two large screen TVs. Just the thought of so much concentrated activity, and noise, especially early in the morning, makes me anxious --- but it also gives me great satisfaction, because five years and \$8 million dollars ago I remember an empty library, and a campus in which gathering space, at least for commuting students, was much less intentional.

According to *American School and University* magazine, during 2005-2007, colleges and universities in the United States will spend approximately \$42 billion on construction --- including new buildings, additions, and renovations. Currently, Dominican University has three buildings in the works with a combined price tag exceeding \$50 million. While this building frenzy is driven in part by demographics, we who survived our college years with good friends, a typewriter, and a pay phone at the end of the hallway, know that something else is going on. Creating competitive differentiation among colleges and universities today is not only about the quality of academic programs, but also about the quality of the activities and facilities that surrounds the academics --- and how these co-curricular elements mold behavior and foster identity.

### A Place Conscious Legacy

At Dominican, as at many sibling institutions, our challenge is to build for the future, while learning from, and keeping faith with, the past. That challenge has made me acutely place conscious --- leading to a few insights about buildings and community, and about building community.

As a point of departure, let me explain that the original Dominican University (Rosary College) campus was designed in the 1920s by noted collegiate gothic architect Ralph Adams Cram. The Cram buildings continue to give the university its distinctive character, which is animated by the Sinsinawa Dominican sister’s founding vision of academic community --- *Make campus as much like home as possible*. A campus need not be gothic or homey, however, to benefit from Dominican’s experience. Here are three points to ponder.

### ***The Importance of Scale***

To establish the platform for effective community development, students, and faculty for that matter, need to know that they are important, and that the university has their experience and needs in mind when planning space. As we build monstrous facilities, and I am building one right now, it is important, therefore, to think in terms of human scale --- lounges that encourage students to gather between classes, comfortable corners for quiet study, space for faculty/student research, small seminar and meeting rooms, and of course, coffee. The Cyber Café, as I mentioned earlier, has become a community center for Dominican University --- and it is not unusual to see a neighbor mingling with students and faculty over a cup of java or a computer.

When Cram successor Ethan Anthony, AIA visited Dominican last month for the groundbreaking of our new academic building, he spoke about the impact of architecture on community: "...buildings need to thoughtfully reflect the traditions, aspirations, and spiritual life of the people who inhabit them. How better to inspire [students] to behave and to do well than to provide them with spaces that are wholesome and spiritually strong?" --- which brings me to my second point, or better, a question.

### ***What Constitutes a Spiritually Strong Building?***

Given the level of competition for enrollment today, I worry that we chase after amenities to please students without considering such amenities in an educational context. I do not mean to suggest that coffee bars (Heaven forbid!) and fitness centers and cable television are not worthwhile investments. They can be if they are a means to creating campus community and fostering identity --- or as Anthony might argue on Cram's behalf, are the result of reconsidering tradition in the light of new challenges.

A spiritually whole building or campus, in my mind, is one that resonates with tradition --- and over the years, tells a story about, and to, its residents that is more complex and compelling than its architects and founding mothers ever could have imagined.

Mazzuchelli Hall at Dominican University is one such building. To know the building is to understand the intentionally communal nature of the university. At its center, and the center of campus, is the Rosary Chapel. You enter the chapel on the second floor through the old library, thus exemplifying our twin ideals of study and prayer. Below are the dining and social halls, suggesting hospitality (or community) and service. It is no surprise that Dominican's master plan describes this building as *the heart of the university*.

To build new buildings on a campus that has such a palpable sense of place is a daunting endeavor. There is so much more than function to consider, which brings me to my third point --- about beauty, and how it contributes to building campus community.

### ***The Experience of Beauty***

Nobody plans to build an ugly building, but not every campus building is beautiful. Structural beauty is, ultimately, about more than bricks and mortar. It is about inspiration. Once upon a time, when the Dominican sisters traveled from Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, to Chicago to establish Rosary College they had a mental picture of the community that they wanted to create --- one that's physical presence would inspire in its students a love of the arts and a sense of the contemplative life or faith. Even now, 80 years later, Dominican's original buildings remain beautiful, not just visually, but, as Anthony put it, because they "remind us of the presence of God in all things."

That said, the Dominican University Crown Library, while striking, is not a beautiful building. It is functional, and it is full of amenities that appeal to students, which is all well and good as long as its presence does not overshadow the tradition and the beauty of Mazzuchelli Hall. Whereas Crown gets the job done admirably, Mazzuchelli gives students a sense of shared history and values that will stay with them long after college and coffee.

## The Hidden Dimension

There is one more point that I would like to raise briefly regarding the nexus of space and community --- and that is about culture. As student demographics change, so too do their patterns for gathering.

In his 1966 book, *The Hidden Dimension*, Edward Hall discusses the impact of culture on how people experience space. True, we have come a long way in our multicultural understanding since the 1960s; however, I would argue that the level of diversity on college and university campuses today challenges us to reexamine our assumptions about the configuration of facilities, programs, and traditions. Students with different backgrounds have different definitions of space --- and privacy. They have different tastes in food, look for different amenities, and often have religious traditions that require different space. The campus communities that we create in the future will only be spiritually strong if they are thoroughly inclusive.

## End Note

At the risk of rambling, let me close with a personal insight about the lasting influence of place on one's sense of campus community. Next month, I will celebrate my 30th Reunion from Wellesley College. Dominican always has reminded me of Wellesley --- familiar, like home. It turns out, not surprisingly, that Ralph Adams Cram designed both campuses, and so I owe a lot to Cram --- and to the women of Wellesley and Rosary whose place conscious legacy has enriched the lives of generations of students.

My special thanks to Ethan Anthony, President of HDB/Cram and Ferguson, Inc., for speaking at the March 16, 2006, groundbreaking of Parmer Hall, and for sharing his remarks, which have inspired mine.

*Donna M. Carroll is completing her 12th year as president of Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. It was during Carroll's tenure that Rosary College made its successful transition, in name and status, to Dominican University. Carroll is credited with leading the university through a decade of substantial growth and definition. A frequent speaker on topics relating to leadership and strategic planning, she is currently on the board of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the Council of Independent Colleges, Rush Oak Park Hospital, Catholic Theological Union, and Fordham University. Carroll received the 2005 CEO Leadership Award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and was recently listed as one of the top ten women in education by the Chicago Sun Times.*

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