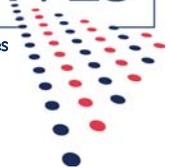


2007 SERIES: ENABLING CAMPUS GROWTH AND OPTIMIZATION

# Expanding the Learning Environment When There Is No Room to Grow

**PRESIDENTIAL  
PERSPECTIVES**

a higher education presidential essay series





# EXPANDING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT WHEN THERE IS NO ROOM TO GROW

DR. PATRICIA P. CORMIER, PRESIDENT, LONGWOOD UNIVERSITY

**D**uring the past decade, the meaning of the campus living and learning environment has evolved significantly. Colleges have always worked tirelessly to find innovative ways to meet and exceed the educational, social, cultural, and physical needs of students. Today, however, they also must find ways to address the high expectations of students and parents when it comes to living in the learning environment.

## A New Approach to Residential Living

Colleges and universities across the country are finding that most students are no longer content to live in traditional residence halls for the majority of their college careers. Beyond the freshman and sophomore years, many seek housing options with amenities that were once reserved for college graduates and newly married couples. Private bedrooms, large living spaces, full kitchens, cable/satellite TV connections, high-speed Internet service, and complexes that offer a variety of activities are becoming standard fare for institutions that want to attract and retain students. Providing a variety of dining options is also a challenge as students living off campus continue to purchase food plans in university-sponsored dining services. Housing and dining officers are working to find creative ways to meet these demands while continuing to enhance the traditional residence hall living arrangement.

At Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia, we have confronted these challenges while also facing the added obstacle of a land-locked campus. The Longwood campus sits on a 51-acre triangle of property in the middle of town. Acquiring land adjacent to campus in order to build student housing is nearly impossible, not to mention costly. Furthermore, it is not possible to predict the living preferences of students 10 to 20 years in the future, so knowing what to build today is difficult.

*“As the lifestyles and preferences of students continue to change, college administrators will witness enormous challenges arising from the living and learning environment.”*

In 1998, with the decision made to expand the student population, the University faced significant deferred maintenance of campus housing, totaling nearly \$100 million. In 2003, with these issues in mind, we began to explore alternatives for expanding our residential options for Longwood students. A proposal was created for an alternative housing project adjacent to campus. We envisioned apartment-style living that would provide students the safety and convenience of living on campus with an off-campus feel. However, since Longwood is a state institution, we quickly realized that going through the burdensome state procurement system would be very costly. Thus, in June 2004, the Longwood Real Estate Foundation was formed. It is a private 501(c)(3) entity that exists by and for Longwood University and functions to acquire properties which are then leased to the University.

Beginning in fall 2007, nearly 1,000 students will reside in three apartment communities—Longwood Landings, Longwood Village, and Lancer Village—that were built or purchased by the foundation. Some of the amenities and features of the apartments include private bedrooms (some with private baths), full kitchens (most with dishwashers), washer/dryer units, large living areas, high-speed Internet, and cable television. Many of the apartments are completely furnished. Two of the three communities have fitness rooms and swimming pools, and one has a hot tub, a tanning bed, and a game room.

The newest of the three communities is Longwood Landings at Mid-Town Square, which opened in August 2006. Located within walking distance of campus, the residential village includes four, four-story buildings. The top three floors are dedicated to student housing and the ground floor is devoted to leased retail space. Longwood students occupy 96 four-bedroom and 24

single-bedroom apartments. Retailers include Barnes & Noble, which operates Longwood's bookstore and is scheduled to open this summer. The hybrid store will include a Starbucks Café and will serve both the University and the community. In addition, ARAMARK Higher Education will expand Longwood's dining options by opening Camille's Sidewalk Café, a fast and casual restaurant with indoor and outdoor seating.

Longwood students and their parents appreciate the advantages of off-campus housing that is managed by the University—it offers the best of both worlds. Students enjoy the multiple benefits and amenities of apartment living, while families feel assured that the environment in which they live is safe, since it is managed and staffed by Longwood resident assistants.

Maintenance staff is on call 24/7 to respond to requests, and the Longwood Department of Public Safety regularly patrols the complexes. Additionally, academic-year leases mean that students are not locked into 12-month leases. The added residential space has the advantage of further use by Longwood housing officials for swing space to replace on-campus housing taken offline for renovation.

## Brock Commons

The most defining transformation of Longwood's campus was the creation of Brock Commons, a pedestrian mall complete with trees, plants, grass, fountains, and a large, tiered plaza. Brock Commons was once narrow Pine Street, a busy corridor that divided the campus. In December 2002, the street was closed and the \$7.5 million project began. In April 2004, a formal dedication service was held honoring Macon F. Brock Jr., and his wife, Joan Perry Brock, a 1964 Longwood graduate, who donated \$3 million to the project.

Aside from ridding the campus of an unsightly and unsafe public street, Brock Commons has united the campus and created an inviting space where students mingle, townspeople walk for exercise, dogs and children play in the fountains, and the campus community gathers for formal and informal outdoor ceremonies. It is almost impossible to imagine the campus before Brock Commons.

One of the major goals of Brock Commons was to make Longwood more pedestrian-friendly and less of a vehicular campus. However, in addition to creating a pedestrian mall, the transformation of a public street to Brock Commons has solved other problems. Due to the topography of the land—which was once a bowl-shaped depression—a 142-space underground parking garage was constructed, making it possible for the Brock Commons plaza to be level and flat while simultaneously providing much-needed parking on campus. The plaza is accessible from the garage both by an elevator and stairways.

Adding green space to the campus was another issue that was resolved with the creation of Brock Commons. Areas that were once asphalt are now filled with grass, trees, and plants. Some estimate that there is perhaps five times more green space on campus than before. The Commons is also adorned with a sculpture made possible by Longwood's Art Department and the Longwood Center for the Visual Arts. The Outdoor Sculpture Program brings contemporary art to Brock Commons for students, faculty, and staff to enjoy on a daily basis. The initiative allows artists to complete a residency during which they display their work with the help of students, and present lectures and

workshops for classes and student groups. The goal of the Program is to display a variety of work over the course of several years.

As the heart of Longwood's campus, Brock Commons is most certainly a focal point of our revitalized living and learning environment.

## Health and Fitness Center

Longwood University's commitment to physical and mental health also shapes the living and learning environment. In November 2005, plans were announced to construct the Health and Fitness Center, a 75,000-square-foot building designed to centralize the offices of Campus Recreation, the Counseling Center, and the Student Health and Wellness Center. The facility will open in fall 2007, featuring one multi-purpose gym, two full-court gymnasiums, three group exercise rooms, two racquetball courts, a fitness area with approximately 120 pieces of exercise equipment, a 30-foot climbing wall, a one-eighth mile walking/jogging track, a juice bar, and locker rooms. The Center will be open to all Longwood students, faculty, and staff members and will offer extended hours seven days a week.

As noted, Longwood's Counseling Center, staffed by three counselors, will be located in the new building. This move will provide additional space for confidential counseling services, classrooms, a resource library, a group room/workshop area, and a light therapy room to treat students with seasonal affective disorder.

## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

The Health and Fitness Center will play a critical role in the physical development of all Longwood students—especially our student-athletes who will begin competing at the NCAA Division I level in 2007/08. We expect the Health and Fitness Center to quickly become one of the most popular leisure spots on campus.

As the lifestyles and preferences of students continue to change, college administrators will witness enormous challenges arising from the living and learning environment. However, we must be ever mindful of our unwavering commitment to the education of tomorrow's leaders.



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