

Opening of new MCC campus one of biggest changes for local colleges

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Daniel Skerritt. (Photo: Staff Photographer/Jim Goodman)

As a Monroe Community College student who attended the old campus in downtown Rochester, Daniel Skerritt can fully appreciate the new one.

"This feels like a college experience. We are not stacked on two floors — jammed together," said Skerritt, president of the Student Events and Governance Association at MCC's new Downtown Campus.

Located in four totally renovated, interconnected buildings that now look like a single structure, MCC's new campus, with a price tag of \$78 million, was once part of the Eastman Kodak Co.'s corporate headquarters.

It gives MCC a much more visible presence in the city and is expected to help MCC attract new students and increase college completion — providing collaborative work spaces and services that can help students stay in school.



Monroe Community College President Anne Kress. (Photo: file photo)

"The reality is that this campus, from the ground up, was designed for our students," said MCC President Anne Kress.

MCC's new campus, which opens for classes on Tuesday, is one of the major changes at local colleges in a year that has brought in two new college presidents — Rochester

Institute of Technology President David Munson and Hobart and William Smith Colleges President Gregory Vincent.

The University of Rochester, which in addition to its academic programs takes in Strong Memorial and four other affiliated hospitals, continues to grow as the largest employer in the region, with 30,142 employees at the end of June.

But as a university heavily dependent on federal funds for research, concerns persist about possible budget cuts proposed by President Donald Trump.

"All the proposals that have been made by the White House would have a very negative impact on our institution and therefore on our community," said Peter Robinson, who is UR's associate vice president for government and community relations.

Colleges, which depend on the free flow of ideas, also take on added importance in today's politically charged environment. As UR President Joel Seligman put in his "Welcome Back" message, "We are a sanctuary for new ideas, we encourage innovation, and we learn from our differences of opinion."

Another new factor is the state's Excelsior Scholarship program, which provides free tuition to eligible students in the State University of New York and CUNY systems.

This program, still in its infancy, doesn't appear to have siphoned off many students from the small private colleges in the Rochester area this school year.

The major private colleges — University of Rochester and RIT — both experienced a record number of applications and have initiatives that are expected to keep them on an upward trajectory.

The Trump travel ban, which seeks to prohibit the issuance of new visas for 90 days to visitors from six targeted nations, is now before the U.S. Supreme Court and has created a sense of fear among international students on U.S. campuses.

At least UR seems to have weathered this storm, but has found new difficulties for international students who graduate from the university and now seek federal work authorization for a limited time.

But undocumented students who have been protected from possible deportation under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program could be vulnerable if Trump ends or revises these protections. He is expected to announce his decision on Tuesday.

"There are dozens of students in DACA at UR," said Cary Jensen, senior counsel and director of the International Services Office at UR.

DACA grants two-year stays, which can be renewed, for undocumented immigrants who have been in the United States before they turned 16 years of age.

President Barack Obama initiated DACA in 2012, after Congress failed to enact legislation that would provide protections that were previously in a law that expired, said Jensen.

About 800,000 undocumented immigrants – including some now attending colleges – have been protected by DACA.

On another matter, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School hopes to finalize the sale of its campus and relocate to a new building that would be built on campus.

The initial location of the new building, near the northeast corner of South Goodman Street and Highland Avenue in southeast Rochester, drew opposition from residents in the area.

As a result, Colgate Rochester wants the new building moved to the site of two residence halls, which would be demolished.

Whether the Colgate Rochester property should be designated as a landmark will be before the city Preservation Board on Wednesday and the Planning Commission on Sept. 11.

"The plan is to carve out a place at the top of the hill where development would go without Preservation Board oversight," said Peter Siegrist, preservation planner for the city.

Kress' vision

Establishing the new Downtown Campus was one of the first issues that Kress faced when she became president of MCC in 2009.

She expressed a sense of relief for a mission accomplished — "It is done. It is done." — as she discussed her hopes and plans in her office at the Downtown Campus.

"What this building does is provide a one-stop for our students. All of their needs can be served right in this location," said Kress.

She tells how the new Downtown Campus, at the corner of Morrie Silver Way and State Street, is a big improvement over the fourth and fifth floors rented by the Damon City Campus in the Sibley Building on Main Street.

A priority for Kress has been to increase college completion. Twenty-three percent of students who start MCC graduated within three years, according to the U.S. Department of Education's latest statistics.

The new campus is designed not only to help students academically but also to assist with any problems that arise out of the classroom.

On the fourth floor is the Learning Commons, where students can receive free tutoring in an area that includes the library and computer lab.

Among the programs at the Downtown Campus is Dreamkeepers, which offers students assistance in unforeseen financial emergencies.

A new program, MCC FastLane App, at the Downtown and Brighton campuses allows students — trying to juggle a busy schedule — to book online appointments for consulting with an MCC staff member for such services as enrollment and financial aid.

Locating MCC's Economic and Workforce Development Center on the seventh floor of the new campus provides a direct line for those at the campus to job training opportunities.

Among the new programs being explored is teaming up with four-year State University of New York and other colleges to "build a four-year college center on this campus," where residents could complete their college education.

"We see a large number of people in the county who have some college but no degree," said Kress.

Enrollment trends

MCC, like other community colleges, has struggled with declining enrollment, in part because the pool of high school graduates dropped in recent years. That decline now seems to have leveled off.

Last fall, MCC had a total head count of 13,587, with most of the students at the Brighton campus and 2,046 at the Damon downtown site — compared with 2,928 in the fall 2010. Overall, MCC enrollment back then was 18,995 students.

MCC's new budget predicts a 5 percent drop in MCC's overall enrollment but Kress — considering the interest generated by the new campus — believes that decline might be less pronounced.

"Everybody feels at home," said MCC student Irvin Williamson, 31, of Gates during a recent orientation session attended by about 50 students.

Full-time, in-state MCC students will pay \$4,280 this school year.

About 1,400 MCC students are potentially eligible for the tuition-free admission under the state's new Excelsior Scholarship program, which kicks in this fall for families making under \$100,000 and after state (TAP) and federal (Pell) financial assistance are factored in.

One limitation is that many students who attend community college are also working and going to school part time. Students must enroll full time to be eligible for tuition-free.

With an improved economy, fewer residents are likely to gravitate toward community colleges, although non-credit programs, such as MCC's Corporate College, that reach out to the community with specialized training have shown growth.

The totals are still coming in, but the figures now made available don't show that availability of tuition-free at SUNY schools has had a major impact on local private colleges.

As of late August, St. John Fisher College's enrollment was 3,785 compared with 3,809 last fall.

"There hasn't been a big impact," said Jose Perales, vice president for enrollment management at the college, who expects this fall's total to exceed last year's number.

And he noted that the freshman class this year is 633 — the largest ever.

Nazareth College's enrollment of 2,802 is ahead of the 2,769 total of last fall.

Roberts Wesleyan College estimates a fall enrollment of 1,742 compared with 1,708 last year.

Twenty-four students who put down deposits chose not to enroll — twice as many as in past years, with the tuition-free option at SUNY schools apparently drawing some of these students.

The College at Brockport, which is a SUNY school, expects an enrollment of 8,320 — 77 more than a year ago.

John Follaco, spokesman for the college, said that between May 1 and Aug. 28, the college received 192 more applications than for a similar period last year — a sign of increased interest because of the tuition-free measure.

Enrollment at the State University College at Geneseo is 5,684 — an increase of 82.

New leadership

RIT President David Munson, who took office in July, mapped out priorities in his first major address.

Noting that RIT is "very strong in the making arts, but not as strong in performing arts," Munson said any campus of this size should have a major performing arts facility that would not compete with existing facilities.

He put an emphasis on "experiential education," encouraging students to study, work or do research overseas.

Munson also wants to deepen RIT's commitment to research and increase the number of graduate students from 18 percent of the total enrollment last fall to about a third.

Fundraising efforts are expected to step up, with Munson embarking on a "Tiger Tour" of cities over the school year to meet with alumni, parents and other potential donors.

Diversity and inclusion are priorities as well.

"In this day and age, and especially with what has taken place over the last couple of weeks, this is a critical topic at every university in the nation," Munson said.

Vincent, who took office in July as president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, is a 1983 graduate of Hobart who has gone on to earn a reputation as a national expert on civil rights, social justice and campus culture.

He previously served as vice president for Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.

As president, Vincent responded to the violence in Charlottesville with an email to the HWS community condemning "the bigotry and hatred espoused by the white supremacist movement."

In an interview, Vincent expressed his disappointment in President Donald Trump's response to this incident. "It is most unfortunate — and I'll be blunt about this — that our president did not take the opportunity to do that in his first opportunity," he said.

And he said: "I do think it's the role of higher education to be that North Star, to be that place that speaks to these issues, speaks about our core values that make our country the envy of the world."

Vincent, who succeeded Mark Gearan as president, plans to continue HWS' commitment to partner with the Geneva schools and help revitalize downtown.

He also wants to deepen the commitment to the sciences — including increasing scholarships for research and possibly building a new building.

Federal issues

Concerns about possible cutbacks in federal spending for research emerged as a major issue, with UR and RIT being the biggest recipients locally.

In a June speech, Seligman noted that the Trump budget proposal would cut research funding by 16.8 percent, or \$12.6 billion for the federal fiscal year that begins in October.

Overall, the Trump administration has proposed \$54 billion cuts in non-defense spending, according to UR.

Federal funds make up the lion's share of UR's research budget — 72 percent of \$361.7 million for UR's fiscal year that ended June 30, 2016.

Robinson, who is the UR official overseeing governmental relations, has been encouraged by Congress not going along with the severe cuts sought by Trump as the budget process has unfolded.

But September could prove to be a crucial month of decision-making and votes.

"I don't expect that we are going to see anything like the cuts that are being proposed by the president," said Robinson. "But each program will be on the line."

Travel ban update

There was initial turmoil caused by Trump's attempt at a travel ban of 90 days from six predominantly Muslim countries and to prohibit new refugees from resettling for 120 days.

Initially blocked by lower courts, Trump's travel ban is now before the Supreme Court, which in June allowed part of the ban to take effect while they consider the case.

Colleges were most affected by the travel ban, which prompted some international students — especially from the targeted countries — to cancel plans to visit their homelands for fear they wouldn't be allowed back here.

But the partial implementation of the travel ban now permitted by the Supreme Court does not allow denial of visas if the applicant has a verifiable connection to the college.

As a rule, international students have such a connection, since the colleges have admitted them for study.

The six countries targeted for the ban are Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

UR, which had 2,886 international students last fall, doesn't have a final head count yet for the new school year.

"My expectation is that we will be above the 2,886," said Stephanie Krause, an associate director in UR's International Services Office.

RIT, which last fall enrolled 2,732 international students, has not tabulated the total count for this school year.

UR, according to a preliminary count by Krause, has 37 students enrolled from the six nations — with the vast majority from Iran. That's the same number as a year ago.

New difficulties have surfaced in getting the needed federal approval for international students who have graduated from UR and seek authorization to work in the United States for one to three years.

An apparent reluctance to provide approval for work permits has put some in what Krause called "no man's land" — unable to work.

Two graduates from China who earned doctorates at UR are now awaiting appeals of work permit denials.

"In one case, the requested information had been provided. In the other case, the officer made a judgment call that the officer did not have the academic understanding to make," said Krause.

And she said: "We have experienced unprecedented delays."

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