

Cool Comes at a Cost

Investment in student-centered areas is changing spending for institutions.

BY DR. SCOTT D. MILLER AND DR. MARYLOUISE FENNELL



COMPETITION AMONG peer institutions is the most intense we have seen in over 30 years, with the demand for student-centered programs, services and facilities forcing significant shifts in institutional spending. But such “cool” offerings come at substantial cost.



Student Expectations

It's no secret that today's Millennial generation expects campus amenities beyond what their grandparents and parents could have imagined in their wildest dreams. Food courts, shopping malls, fitness centers, state-of-the-art athletic facilities, high-end residences and

well-equipped recreation attractions are not only expected, but also essential to driving enrollment and retention. A student's 168-hour week consists of 18 hours in the classroom and 50 sleeping; for the remaining 100 hours, it's up to us to partner with them to provide the entire educational experience. Increasingly, many colleges and universities are spending more to guarantee the attractiveness of that experience.

Even with significant investments in these areas, many institutions are seeing declining six-year graduation rates, especially on small and rural campuses. Strained finances, pressures of juggling academics, employment and extracurricular activities and a preference for urban attractions all contribute to attrition.

All this suggests that to stay in the game, campuses must be increasingly student-centered, and that means shifting spending priorities. Many institutions have doubled or even tripled student-life spending to keep pace. Recent research suggests that student-services spending “has grown 20 to 30 percent at many colleges, outpacing any other category,” as reported by Scott Carlson in a July 28, 2014 article. He adds that “even if the amenities, activities and support cost many thousands of dollars per student, especially at elite institutions, they represent a college cost that students and their parents have asked for — either explicitly or through their decisions in enrollment.”

Family Expectations

Family expectations of the college experience have also upped the ante; we're all familiar with the so-called “helicopter” parents and even what some have called the “snowplow” families who

continue to be involved in their students' lives even after those students have matriculated. Common complaints directed to campus administrators include lack of athletic playing time, students' grades and a perennial favorite, dining-hall food. New research by the Delta Project of the American Institutes for Research and others reveals some trends in institutional spending during the period 2001-2011:

- Four-year institutions' investment in non-instructional student services continued strong while “efforts to preserve instructional spending were mixed.” Private institutions were especially inclined to spend more on student services.
- Student support services and facilities are also part of the mix. More first-generation, learning-disabled, special-needs and nontraditional students often require increased counseling and other student services to enable them to succeed. Colleges today are serving new populations that either would not have matriculated in earlier generations, or would have been underserved.
- Compliance with regulations is another factor in institutional spending. Bethany College recently tallied the number of mandatory report deadlines from accrediting and regulatory bodies (and the like), and found that the number is in excess of 200 annually. For small institutions with typically thin staffing, compliance — though a necessary and integral part of the academic mission — is often challenging.

Although “cool” is undeniably costly, institutional investment in student-centered areas is increasingly essential for colleges to remain competitive in a volatile and aggressive enrollment marketplace. The challenge, simultaneously, will lie in making needed investments on the instructional side, to meet students' career expectations. **EPJ**

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