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The conference center as competitive edge: in the New World of custom business-curriculum offerings, facilities planning and management is critical

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In this day and age, it's a real challenge for colleges and universities to attract traditional undergraduate students to a four-year campus experience, and then retain them. Right behind the competition to offer top faculty and curricula are the efforts of both public and private institutions to offer the facilities, amenities, and technological access that campus-bound students expect today.

Yet higher ed institutions are also in heated competition to attract graduate business students to their custom curriculum programs--those programs that offer individual business students and corporations ongoing, targeted education. Here too, quality of program is key. But essential, as well, is an institution's ability to compete in the critical area of hospitality services--and that means not only top-flight residence and dining facilities, but superbly equipped conference and meeting areas. It also demands the level of facilities construction and management (not to mention support systems and staffing) that might ordinarily be found in top-ranked hotels, conference centers, and dining establishments worldwide. After all, for many of today's sophisticated MBA and corporate students, this is their frame of reference.

"We're seeing marked growth in college and university conference centers," notes Katherine Grayson, University Business Editorial Director. "The reasons are many, and certainly include the center's ability to attract new revenue streams for the institution. Yet, such partnerships also greatly enhance an institution's ability to give back to the region and the nation by providing larger and better-trained workforces and professional cohorts, not to mention improving the school's ability to offer its own graduates and students better career opportunities and lifelong affiliations."

Environment and Lifecycle Relationships

Others agree. "One of our tasks is not only to devise programs, but to create environments that bring value to the university by attracting alumni, corporate clients, and other professionals to our non-degree programs," says James W. Dean, Jr. He is Associate Dean for Executive Education at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School, and its Chapel Hill-based Paul J. Rizzo Conference Center. In fact, Dean and his administrative colleagues at Kenan-Flagler are acutely aware that their ability to enhance the post-undergrad experience at UNC means not just new enrollment for the business school, but building a stronger alumni base for the university as a whole. And that translates into a powerful branding boost and, bottom line, a healthy and growing donor base.

"We actually take the view that an undergrad's experience at the University of North Carolina should be just the beginning of a lifelong relationship," he says. He adds that though creating a customized curriculum may be at the core of Kenan-Flagler's executive programs, the school's state-of-the-art learning, luxury accommodations, fine dining, and recreational facilities--specifically designed for executive education--are all key to the school's image and ability, to attract and retain students. The programs bring enrollment from all over the world, he points out. That's one reason why facilities planning and management is now a crucial factor in the success of such programs.

Customizing for Target Student Populations

Via its range of professional program offerings augmented by accommodation, recreation, and dining facilities, the 15,800-square-foot, two-and-a-half story Rizzo Conference Center serves more than 19,500 visitors annually. Its nearby Georgian Revival 56-room luxury hotel houses many of them. Dean believes that the key to the success of attracting the clients the school wants--and then cementing and extending those relationships--is the successful implementation of customized programs and facilities for the business-management community. What's more, he adds, top-level facilities that include customized meeting and conference centers with dining, residence, and recreational facilities support a school's substantial investment in its faculty, and help to expand the program's reputation to a wider and more influential audience. A clear understanding of the need to tailor facilities to the needs and expectations of the targeted student--from whatever region or nation he or she may hail--"is the cornerstone of our growth," says Dean, who adds that his customers can "feel" the high quality of a conference center as much as see it.

Supporting the Facility

"In fact, the so-called 'feel' of a venue is not communicated solely by the facility itself, but by the professionalism of the support staffs," says Ted Beck, Associate Dean for Executive Education at the School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Madison. In fact, "Support staff is critical to any facility's success," he says.

Creating the "professional" learning center. Not long ago, UW Madison business school administrators realized that in order to compete effectively, the institution needed to erect a facility that provided amenities on a par with the leading business schools. They understood that the new facility would have to represent the state university well and help draw added and high-level enrollment. But they also knew that to succeed among its peers, return a qualified and professional workforce to the region, and attract dollars for construction and ongoing operation, it would have to attract the interest of corporate business both in and outside

Wisconsin.

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