

Springfield looking more like a college town

By **CHRIS DETTRO**

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No one is going to confuse Springfield with Ann Arbor or South Bend.

But last week's announcement that Springfield College in Illinois has officially morphed into Benedictine University at Springfield gives the city a trio of four-year institutions of higher learning -- and a sense that it might be becoming a bit of a college town.

"It's certainly my goal to grow, grow, grow," said Benedictine University President William Carroll.

But Springfield also may have to grow into the role of being suitable and hospitable to college students, he added.

It's true that Springfield's three four-year schools are only branches of larger universities with main campuses elsewhere. Their total enrollment of 6,500 is only about 5 1/2 percent of Springfield's total population, and the vast majority of those 6,500 are commuter students. Plus, there isn't a football team — American football, anyhow — to be found among the three.

But officials at the three schools — Benedictine, University of Illinois Springfield and Robert Morris University — sense a change is coming.

"If it's going to be a college town, it will be UIS driving it," said Richard Ringeisen, chancellor at UIS, by far the largest of the three.

"One of the biggest problems is to define what is a college town," he said. "I was at Clemson University (in Clemson, S.C.) where the students outnumbered the townspeople. That's definitely a college town, and I think Urbana is a college town."

But despite declining employment numbers, "state government will always be the driver here," Ringeisen said.

UIS's campus has taken on a more collegiate look in recent years, with a quad, a central colonnade, two 200-bed residence halls for freshmen and sophomores, and a new recreation and athletic center.

"On Parents' Weekend, anyone driving by the Wal-Mart on South Sixth Street could see the effect on the local economy," Ringeisen said. "The students and their parents were out there loading up."

Erich Bloxdorf, executive vice president of the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce, said the effect of having three four-year schools on economic development "is huge."

"Many companies look at the education level of the workforce to determine what kind of employment pool they'll have," he said. "If I'm in Phoenix, Arizona, trying to convince a company to come here and I tell them we have three four-year colleges, and that we have quality community colleges, that can set you apart from other communities."

Bloxdorf said four-year schools and two-year community colleges are important components in the economic development picture.

"There are certain skills that community colleges can get up and running very quickly," he said. "I'm thinking of Lincoln Land Community College's Workforce Development Center.

"Then there are companies looking for people with four-year degrees, such as in the service and medical industries. Those may require a four-year degree.

"You can't separate those two from an economic development standpoint," Bloxdorf said.

Dennis Mumaw, dean of admissions at Robert Morris University in Springfield, said the climate for higher education students is improving here.

"The college town concept is evolving in Springfield," he said. "The climate kind of changed when UIS added freshmen and sophomores."

Mumaw said Robert Morris' main campus in Chicago is on "college row," where 60,000 students are concentrated.

"We want to show we've got something to offer outside Chicago, and that applies to our other campuses in addition to Springfield."

He said Robert Morris, now strictly a commuter school housed in two westside buildings, hopes to add to its educational offerings as early as next fall with a major in hospitality management.

"Our bachelor of professional studies degree is offered in Chicago, and we are scheduled to receive those down here," he said. Students could concentrate in the fields of allied health, architecture, and legal studies.

"That degree would offer a smooth path for junior college students to complete a four-year degree," Mumaw said.

Ringeisen sees other indications that lines between UIS and the city are becoming blurred.

"More students are involved in the community," he said. "They've become more visible with the increase in more traditionally aged students."

He said the university has vans that take students to the west side of Springfield for shopping.

"People mention to me more frequently that they've run into students around town," he said.

He acknowledged that commuter students remain UIS's "bread and butter," but cited the 1,100 students living in campus dorms, apartments and townhouses, compared with only 200 to 300 eight years ago.

"Our commuter students now are starting to join in activities developed because of the residential students," he said.

He said the number of faculty also has grown in the past few years, from 170 to 240 now.

In 2008, trustees updated the master plan for UIS to include land owned by the university outside the ring road for long-term growth and development.

Ringeisen still envisions a campustown-type mall with a cafe, grocery and other businesses across from the townhouses on the west side of 11th Street.

"Given the economy, we felt we were unlikely to get bids on that right now," he said. "But our goal is to have a shopping center there."

He said the university also would like to see residential housing, such as senior citizens' housing, developed outside the ring road.

Benedictine president Carroll said he's not only looking to build traditional programs at the Springfield campus, but to look at non-traditional programs that would include all of southern Illinois and St. Louis, with Springfield as the hub.

He said Benedictine has a special program that will increase the number of Chinese students attending Benedictine-Springfield.

"The Chinese presence will grow, and they will need housing," Carroll said. "We're tearing down some old housing and will need new dorms.

"Springfield has to be a destination for these students," he said. "They have to want to come to Springfield and stay there. The city will have to grow and adapt to the presence of college students, and look at what it has and what doesn't it have."

Chris Detro can be reached at 788-1510.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITIES

University of Illinois Springfield

History: Established in 1969 by the Illinois General Assembly as Sangamon State University. Became part of the University of Illinois system on July 1, 1995.

Once one of two upper-division and graduate universities in Illinois, UIS began accepting a few freshmen under its Capital Scholars program in 2001. Started accepting other freshmen and undergraduate transfers on a regular basis in 2006.

Enrollment: 4,961, including 3,027 undergraduates.

Students living on campus: 1,089.

Programs offered: 22 undergraduate programs, 20 master's degree programs and one doctoral program. Will add a 23rd bachelor's degree program in the fall.

Benedictine University at Springfield

History: Established in 1929 by the Ursuline Sisters as Springfield Junior College and took on the name Springfield College in Illinois in 1967.

In 2003, after years of financial instability, SCI entered a new era in a cooperative venture with Benedictine University, a 3,000-student school in Lisle, a western suburb of Chicago. With the partnership, Springfield College got the ability to offer bachelor's and graduate degrees on the north end campus.

Trustees voted last week to recommend to the Benedictine board of trustees that the Springfield College in Illinois corporation be dissolved and Benedictine University at Springfield become only a four-year school.

Enrollment: 918, including 453 in associate degree programs, 340 in bachelor's programs and 125 in graduate programs.

Students living on campus: 45.

Programs offered: Five bachelor's degree programs with six areas of concentration, and six more pending approval by the state Board of Higher Education; four master's programs and one doctoral program.

Robert Morris University

History: Chartered in Illinois in 1965 when it opened as a two-year school at the former Carthage College campus in Carthage. Acquired the Moser

School in Chicago, an independent business school, in 1975.

In 1986, the North Central Association of College and Schools accredited Robert Morris College, and the school began offering a full program of associate and bachelor degrees.

In July 1988, Robert Morris College opened its first branch campus in Springfield at 3101 Montvale Drive. The school closed the Carthage campus a year later to concentrate on its Chicago and Springfield campuses. It has since added campuses in Peoria and in the Chicago suburbs. It also has an art gallery in downtown Springfield.

Earlier this year, the school became Robert Morris University.

Enrollment: 525, including 50 graduate students. (Enrollment is approximate because of RMU's academic calendar.)

Students living on campus: None.

Programs offered: Two bachelor's degrees with four areas of concentration; one master's degree with three areas of concentration.

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