

Rural Colleges Seek New Edge and Urbanize (New York Times – February 7, 2007)

CONWAY, Ark. — Across from the red-brick Collegiate Gothic campus of Hendrix College in central Arkansas lie a few beat-up ball fields, tennis courts and an expanse of woods. Downtown Conway is only a half-dozen blocks away, but it is “not overflowing with amenities,” as Frank H. Cox, a member of the Hendrix board of trustees, diplomatically put it.

For decades, colleges like Hendrix in rural areas of the country embraced a pastoral ideal, presenting themselves as oases of scholarship surrounded by nothing more distracting than lush farmland and rolling hills. But many officials at such institutions have decided that students today want something completely different: urban buzz. “You can’t market yourself as bucolic,” J. Timothy Cloyd, the Hendrix president, said.

At the same time, officials have realized that a more urbanized version of the ideal campus could attract a population well past its college years — working people and retiring baby boomers — if there is housing to suit them. And so a new concept of the college campus is taking root: a small city in the country that is not reserved for only the young.

At Hendrix, construction will begin this year on a large urban-style village on the 130 acres of ball fields and woods that the college owns across the street from the main campus, with stores, restaurants and offices. Soon, officials hope, will come nearly 200 single-family houses, many with rental apartments above the garage; 400 town houses, apartments and loft-style condominiums; and a charter school with the college as a participant.

On the corner of the property, a large student fitness center is already being built, which will be available to the owners of houses and condominiums and to the apartment dwellers, probably for a fee, as will many of the college’s other cultural and educational facilities.

Similar projects are under way at about a dozen other institutions nationwide, including the University of Connecticut in Storrs; the University of Notre Dame; Furman University in Greenville, S.C., where a retirement community on campus is being planned; and Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., where construction will begin soon on 120 condominium apartments on campus for working people and retirees.

“It’s part of a pattern of colleges and universities realizing that they have elements that are appealing to a population far broader than 18- to 25-year-olds,” said Ralph J. Hexter, president of Hampshire College. “It’s often said of a college education, ‘It’s a shame it’s wasted on the young.’” “The distinctive marks of many of these campuses are shops, restaurants, offices and housing that, together, create a destination. The idea is to produce street life and to promote social interaction.

Nearly all of these developments are being built by institutions with vast tracts of unused land; officials hope to take advantage of that asset to help build endowments. Generally, these are also institutions that are not looking to expand significantly the size of their student bodies.

Students graduating from high school these days seem particularly attracted to urban settings, said Dr. Cloyd, the Hendrix president. Many come from the suburbs, he said.

“I think students crave the kind of vitality you have in an urban space,” Dr. Cloyd said. “The images that reveal an active social

life are urban-based.”

Storrs, for example, is home to a 20,000-student flagship state university, but it is a hamlet in the hills of eastern Connecticut. Downtown consists of three small strip malls, and university officials say the lack of a vibrant college town is frequently cited by students who decline offers of admission or decide to transfer. Officials are seeking final zoning approvals for a large mixed-use complex that will include shops, office space and up to 800 apartments and town houses.

“This would make it easier for them to attract students,” said Cleo Szmygiel, a Connecticut freshman from New York City. “There is really not a lot to do here.”

Keelan King, a sophomore from Scotia, N.Y., said of the university, “It’s a nice campus, but there’s nothing around here, a place to eat, someplace to go after a basketball game.”

The new complex, Storrs Center, is meant to provide a place to go. “We’re never going to be Boston,” said M. Dolan Ewanovich, the university’s vice provost for enrollment management. “But having a quintessential New England town with 100 businesses and a town green will be the missing link for us.”

Housing for people unaffiliated with the university is essential to the project’s long-term success, said Cynthia van Zelm, executive director of the Mansfield Downtown Partnership, a coalition of university, town and community officials working with a developer to create the complex. (Storrs is a hamlet in the town of Mansfield.)

“You need to have a population of people living downtown,” Ms. van Zelm said. “We need that 24-hour presence.”

Even the very urban University of Pennsylvania is building a large complex on land it owns across from its law school in Philadelphia; the 295 apartments will be available to the public. So will other housing Penn plans to build on a 25-acre site it is buying next to campus.

“When you picture a global university, you picture urban,” said Amy Gutmann, the Penn president. “You picture restaurants, art galleries, you picture day and night, taking in movies, live performances.”

If Penn thinks it needs to make its campus more dense and lively, imagine the yearning for some touches of urban life at Hendrix, a small liberal arts college in Conway, a modest but growing city of 53,000.

Like the developments in Storrs, the Hendrix project will be built in a style known as New Urbanism. Buildings will be close to the street and roads kept narrow to encourage pedestrian traffic and de-emphasize cars. The neighborhood and its buildings are meant to recall the housing and shops built in American towns in the first half of the 20th century.

“It is about creating walkable places that are sustainable and gratifying on a human scale,” said Robert L. Chapman, managing director of Traditional Neighborhood Development Partners, the developer of what will be called the Village at Hendrix.

The college is contributing the land and will invest \$8 million to \$10 million in the project’s first phase, said Dr. Cloyd, the Hendrix president, and it will share profits with the developer.

Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa., which has created several programs to revive adjacent neighborhoods and to encourage faculty to live nearby, is building an apartment complex for undergraduates across from the main entrance to campus. There will be retail stores on the first floor.

“I think liberal arts colleges and universities are all about the serendipitous moments,” said John Fry, president of Franklin & Marshall. “You’re in the coffee shop on a Saturday morning sipping a cup of coffee and you run into a professor, and two hours later you’ve had one of those transformative moments.”