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Upper Iowa marks best financial year in 153-year-history

By Bekah Porter

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Upper Iowa University (UIU) officials noticed the recession. They just refused to allow it to affect their growth.

This month, the Fayette educational institution completed the largest capital improvement project in its 153-year history by investing \$75 million and constructing several new facilities and nearly doubling campus enrollment.

"It's not easy for a university to say that it weathered a recession by moving forward and not suffering a bit, but that's what we did," said Upper Iowa's president Alan Walker. "We had a goal of building ourselves up as a recession-proof institution, and I think that this recession proved that we achieved that goal."

Improvements included:

- Construction of an \$8.6 million liberal arts building that opened this past month,

- Construction of a \$7.3 million South Village suite-style residence hall that opened this past month,

- Starting construction on a new student center, and

- Starting construction on a new building in downtown Fayette that will house a restaurant, coffee shop, lounge and retail shop that is expected to open this winter.

The new facilities feature several amenities, Mr. Walker said.

For example, the new liberal arts building includes computer labs, an office for the student newspaper, a large auditorium, expanded classrooms and a raised floor system to keep cables, wiring and pipes concealed underneath.



Upper Iowa University recently invested more than \$70 million to update its campus to be equipped to cater to its increasing enrollment, which has grown by 40 percent in the past few years.

"Geothermal technology will be part of every new building," said Bryan Jolley, UIU director of facilities. "The systems are cost-effective, green and much better for the environment."

Other features which officials deem "gentle-on-the-Earth" include the use of sustainable construction materials, including repurposed barn wood brought in from the surrounding community.

The new residence halls won student approval as officials sought the input of those who would be living in the facility.

"Part of what makes the new residence hall special is that students got to have a voice in it," said Justin Marchant, UIU Student Government Association president. "The university brought in choices of furniture - beds, chairs, desks - that the students could try out and vote on, and now

the students' favorites are actually the furniture being used in the residence hall."

Features of the suite-style arrangement accommodate up to five students in one suite with a living room and bath for each suite. Common spaces include computer labs, meeting rooms, study halls, lounges and kitchens.

These improvements came about originally because of a drive to make the university more competitive, said president Walker.

"A lot of the thinking behind (this movement) had to do with positioning the campus to be more attractive in a market that is becoming increasingly competitive," he said. "Then, in the meantime, we experienced about a 40 percent spike in enrollment, so then we needed the expansions for a very practical reason as well.

We literally were running out of room."

The number of students attending classes on campus jumped from about 625 to 950. Much of the college's overall enrollment comes from the 2,000-plus students who receive their degrees from the university's online curriculum.

Now, the college campus can accommodate some 1,500 students.

"People are always asking me how big I want to grow, and I always answer by saying I want to grow as far away from 256 as possible," Mr. Walker said.

That was the university's lowest recorded enrollment, which came about during the Farm Crisis in the 1980s. Instead, the school is now poised for next fall to break its all time enrollment high of 1,091, which was achieved in 1969.

"We're continuing to grow, and we're continuing to grow right," Mr. Walker said. "We plan on maintaining our principles of small classes, individual attention to students and having a personal atmosphere where faculty members know students by name."

He said the next phase of construction - which will bring the university's total investment since 2004 to about \$90 million - will include building new science facilities, a technology center, more suite-style residence halls and improving the athletic structures.

"And we're in a position where we can do this," he said. "While other educational institutions are struggling in the face of this recession, we're having our best financial year ever."

Mr. Walker said that the school accomplished this feat by diversifying its revenues instead of heavily relying on interest accrued from large endowments. CBJ