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Pittsburgh Technical Institute adds housing on its campus

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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Lake Fong/Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Technical Institute President Greg DeFeo at the new student apartment building on the North Fayette campus.

Most post-secondary career schools don't have places for students to live on campus, but this year Pittsburgh Technical Institute will open on-campus apartments for 372 students.

The expansion into the housing market follows the for-profit school's buying 180 acres in North Fayette and moving its classes out of several Downtown locations in 2000. The school has about 2,000 full-time students in associate degree and certificate programs.

The housing is part of a plan to develop a campus with some of the amenities more common on four-year campuses while remaining a two-year campus.

"It positions us uniquely in the marketplace," said PTI President Gregory DeFeo, who is looking for enrollment growth of 2 to 3 percent a year.

Founded in 1946, PTI had just 226 students in 1988, but grew through the 1990s as it added more programs and acquired Boyd School and Penn Tech. It became accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in 2002. In addition to the North Fayette campus, PTI also has a Cranberry Center at the Regional Learning Alliance.

Mr. DeFeo said two-year students who choose a commuter school miss out on campus life "whether it's intramural activities or the camaraderie that's built through living arrangements."

He said such experiences "help the students grow beyond their technical classroom education. It helps them grow as individuals."

Robert Cohen, senior vice president, communications, of the Career College Association, said most career schools serve working adults who are living and working in the community and do not provide living arrangements.

Pittsburgh Technical has a potential market for on-campus housing because about 80 percent of its students are under 25 and all attend classes full-time.

In addition, the school has been attracting students from a wider area, including Hawaii, California, Vermont, Texas and Florida, in the last five or six years.

Even so, nearly half of the students come from Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Lawrence, Washington and Westmoreland counties, and nearly three-fourths are from Pennsylvania. Allegheny County accounts for 21 percent.

The school's expanded campus comes at a time an increasing numbers of students are shifting from four-year to two-year colleges, at least in part as a response to the recession, according to Tom Mortenson, higher education policy analyst for Postsecondary Education Opportunity.

At the top of PTI's driveway off McKee Road sits a \$20 million, 165,000-square-foot classroom building, the first building to be developed on the site. Nearby, three apartment buildings, which cost a combined \$18 million to build, are nearly completed. Two will open in July and the third in October.

A second phase, including two more apartment buildings and a student center, is planned within the next three years.

A third phase calls for a sports facility. The school already has outdoor basketball and volleyball courts as well as softball and football fields.

The campus is just a mile away from Community College of Allegheny County's West Hills Center, which opened in 2007 in a building previously owned by Westinghouse and Siemens. CCAC is not planning any student housing.

CCAC charges county residents a total of \$5,797 in tuition and fees for the four semesters needed for an associate degree at the current rate, subject to change. Out-of-state residents pay \$16,338 for four semesters.

Pittsburgh Technical tuition varies by program, from \$4,000 for a three-month program to become an A+ service technician to \$40,000 for 24-month associate degree programs in multimedia technologies, information technology and computer-aided drafting, said Linda Allan, director of public relations.

The cost of Pittsburgh Technical's 24-month associate degree programs includes eight quarters of classes over two years. The school does not charge additional fees and does not raise tuition if a student maintains continuous enrollment.

About 97 percent of Pittsburgh Technical students take out loans; at least 40 percent receive institutional, federal, state, or local grants or a combination, according to federal data. At CCAC, about a quarter of the full-time students take out loans, and at least 20 percent receive state, local or federal grants or a combination.

Pittsburgh Technical, which admits 88 percent of applicants, has a graduation rate of 57 percent for first-time, full-time undergraduates. CCAC, which has open enrollment, has a graduation rate of 8 percent for first-time, full-time undergraduates, according to federal data.

Pittsburgh Technical's four-bedroom, four-person furnished apartments will rent for \$2,025 per student per quarter, including cable TV, Internet service, local phone, utilities and parking. There will not be a meal plan.

The school now sponsors housing for about 750 students in off-campus apartments and will continue to provide some off-campus housing.

The school encourages prospective students to see the campus first, then discuss the finances. Its Web site does not list tuition for its 25 programs, noting that "tuition varies from one student to the next based on start date, program and individual circumstances."

"A lot of people will come up our driveway and say, 'Wow, this isn't what we expected.' We want you to come and see us. Come and see us and see how we can help you," said Marylu Zuk, vice president of enrollment management.

While CCAC is supported in part by the county and state, Pittsburgh Technical is a for-profit school. Faculty and staff own 48 percent of the school and a former president, J.R. McCartan, owns the remainder. The school has had an employee stock ownership plan since 1997.

Throughout Pittsburgh Technical, signs featuring photos of students who have jobs or internships say, "PTI grads get good jobs."

"Employment is really the driver," said Ms. Zuk. "Students come here wanting to get a degree and get a job."

According to the school, 95 percent of the members of the class of 2008 -- including January, April, July and October graduates -- are in full-time positions.

CCAC says that 92 percent of its career graduates work full or part-time for local businesses, based on 2007-08 figures.

For those who want to transfer to four-year schools, both schools have articulation agreements with a number of colleges and universities.

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