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By: Brennen Jensen
Photography by Brennen Jensen



In recent years, colleges and universities nationwide have engaged in a dramatic physical transformation, constructing new buildings at the fastest rate since the 1960s. What's behind the boom, and when will it end?

This is not your father's college library. Even the word "library" is inadequate.

Yes, there are books here in the Athenaeum, the \$48-million hybrid library/student center that just opened on the Goucher College campus in Towson. But despite the throwback Greco-Roman name, little else is old school within this angular edifice. Clad in just enough local Butler stone to connect it with Goucher's more traditional aesthetic, the building presents a flashy façade of glass, copper, and redwood. It's fully equipped with the latest in LEED-certified, eco-friendly bells and whistles, from the green roofs to the window shades that roll up and down automatically to maximize energy efficiency.

Here, you check out Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, then read it on one of the elliptical trainers overlooking the building's atrium-cum-performance space, the Forum. Did your stomach just rumble? An on-site eatery offers alternatives to cafeteria mystery meat until 3 a.m. Just want to hang out? Collections of plush furniture create impromptu living rooms where flat-panel televisions send back video postcards from Goucher students abroad.

"I don't think the library can any longer be a distant destination, a place apart from all other aspects of students' lives," says Sanford Ungar, the Goucher president who envisioned such a facility after arriving in 2001. "We felt that the library should be part of a central facility, a gathering place on campus that would serve the college community's academic, intellectual, cultural, and social purposes all at once."

Goucher might boast one of the most striking new buildings, but bulldozers and cranes have been carving up plenty of Baltimore-area colleges and universities. Johns Hopkins University, for example, spent more than \$130 million completing a new academic quad on its Homewood campus and building a 600-bed high-rise residence hall. Morgan State University cut ribbons on a brace of new campus buildings, including a 220,000-square-foot, \$44-million library. And heavy equipment is at work on scores of ongoing projects at other schools.

"What you are seeing in the Baltimore area is very much part of a national trend," says Philip Parsons of Sasaki Associates Inc., a Boston architectural firm whose local clients include Hopkins, Loyola University Maryland, and Morgan. "There was a huge building boom on campuses over the last ten years. The only comparable time this happened was after Sputnik in the '60s,



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when there was also a massive expansion."

Several forces are driving the trend. College enrollment has been on a steady upswing, driven by the Baby Boomers' babies—the 80 million "echo boomers"—who began checking into freshman dorms in the 1990s and are still coming of age. More universities are engaging in high-tech research, which demands dedicated, space-eating facilities. And academia has added a plethora of new non-faculty staff and administrators. The number of these employees has doubled since 1989, Parsons says, "and, of course, they all need offices."

Students are also expecting more space, particularly beyond the classroom. The word "dorm" once called to mind spartan cinderblock rooms and communal bathrooms. Today's all-en-suite residence halls—with their fitness centers and coffee bars—trend more fancy than functional.

"I did a rough analysis of what's happened on college campuses over the last thirty years, and by my calculations, the space-per-student has tripled," Parsons says. "A lot of this is housing, and a lot of it is new student centers and new athletic and recreational facilities."



When in Rome: Goucher College's new Athenaeum is both library and student center.

Indeed, in those heady years preceding the current recession—before the news from higher ed was dominated by withering endowments and budget cuts—many colleges engaged in a kind of arms race over student amenities: bringing climbing walls, wellness centers, and even golf courses to campus to attract applicants.

"There was a very real danger of getting into a kind of spending war for students," says Ethan Seidel, vice president for administration and finance at McDaniel College in Westminster, which recently wound up more than \$25 million in campus construction projects. "I don't know how long our current economic problems will persist or affect this, but until very recently, students were looking for more and more amenities. There were expectations in the marketplace of what you needed to do to stay competitive."

The building boom hasn't gone bust yet, but it might lose steam now that students and parents are more interested in financial aid than climbing walls. Harvard University, which has seen its endowment tumble from \$37 billion to \$25 billion, blames the economy for its decision to postpone a new science complex—the would-be linchpin of a new campus across the Charles River in Boston. Closer to home, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, still hopes to break ground in 2012 on a medical research building, but those plans have scaled back by \$100 million.

And for many colleges and universities, there are now deep pools of potentially problematic debt lurking below those the shiny new buildings.

McDaniel, a private liberal arts college known as Western Maryland College until 2002, has seen its endowment shed \$18 million during the downturn. But McDaniel's enrollment has grown more than 15 percent since 2000, a surge accompanied by a spate of construction. A new academic building opened in 2005, joined in 2007 by North Village, a residence complex that the school likens to "a series of country manor homes," and the Leroy Merritt Fitness Center, brimming with cutting-edge workout equipment.

McDaniel's tuition, room, and board—now around \$38,000—has increased about 4 percent annually over the past few years. But, as at most institutions, heavy borrowing helped fuel the building binge, Seidel says. To keep costs down, the fitness center was designed as an addition to an existing athletic facility. Philanthropic gifts helped too: The project was kick-started by \$2 million from alumnus and fitness-club magnate Leroy Merritt. Seidel says the school's finances are sound, noting that it just had its positive bond ratings reaffirmed.

Even so, current plans to rebuild the football stadium are taking a different tack: The development office is charged with raising funds to cover the entire \$8 million price tag before a single bleacher is built.

In a more frugal era, opening a glitzy new student center might send mixed messages to wage-frozen faculty or tuition-squeezed parents. But Goucher's Ungar is quick to defend his school's growth spurt. "This is not about an amenities war at all," he says. "This is about spaces for students to be students."

Plans to spend \$32 million to modernize the school's tired '50s-

vintage library were already in the works when Ungar was hired. "I came to the conclusion that that would not make a lot of sense," he says. "When we finished, we'd just have a renovated problem."

Instead, he helped develop the Athenaeum concept, designed to be a place for students to both study and socialize. "There's obviously an element of experiment to it," Ungar says. "But it's a beautiful building, magnificently executed and brilliantly designed."

Even so, a minor flap unfolded in the pages of the Goucher student paper, *The Quindecim*, in 2007 after an article fueled perceptions among some students that Ungar was renegeing on a promise not to use tuition money to pay for the Athenaeum's construction. As Ungar explains it, the building was largely paid for with \$25 million in philanthropic dollars and some \$30 million in borrowed funds. A portion of annual tuition income—about 1 percent—now goes toward servicing this debt. "Tuition goes toward everything, from cutting the grass to faculty salaries," Ungar says. "But we have not increased the tuition for debt service on the Athenaeum one iota."

Campus growth plays out differently at public institutions. At the University of Maryland, Baltimore—the state's health, human services, and law campus comprising seven graduate and professional schools—workers are currently constructing a new pharmacy building overlooking Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Classroom and research buildings at state schools such as this are largely financed through general obligation bonds issued out of Annapolis. (In other words, through taxes). For nonacademic structures—parking garages, student centers, recreational facilities, and the like—the University System of Maryland issues revenue bonds based on the buildings' ability to generate income via food operations, leasing, or parking charges, plus college-wide student fees.

In the latter category, this summer the University of Maryland, Baltimore, officially opened the five-story Southern Management Corporation Campus Center, featuring a fitness center (with swimming pool and sauna) along with multiple dining facilities and other meeting-and-mingling spaces.

Angela Fowler-Young, director of the university's office of capital budget and planning, says the center should not be dismissed as simply the latest luxury-laden student amenity. Such a structure has been sought for nearly twenty years, especially since there is currently little interaction among students of the various silo-like schools that comprise the university. "We long wanted to create a center to campus—a hub of activity where the students, faculty, and staff of our different schools could come together and informally interact," she says. The university's previous fitness facility was tucked away atop a parking garage, and students had increasingly come to expect better, because, well, their undergraduate schools all had gleaming gyms.

These same students, however, will see their student fees increase next spring, though Fowler-Young isn't yet sure by how much. "It's a very sensitive issue," she says.



You call this a dorm? McDaniel College's new student housing complex looks more like a suburban subdivision.

At Coppin State University, a spate of construction is part of a larger revival effort currently underway at this historically black institution in West Baltimore. The school is constructing a nearly 250,000-square-foot physical education complex with a basketball arena, swimming pool, dance studios, and classrooms. Slated to open next spring, it replaces a dowdy '70s-era athletic facility. (Student fee increases will be part of the funding equation here as well.) A 168,000-square-foot Health and Human Services Building, housing the school's nursing, social work, and criminal justice programs, among others, was completed last year as the first Coppin building on the south side of North Avenue, the university's new frontier.

According to Maqbool Patel, associate vice president of administration and finance, this construction—along with some \$27 million in less glamorous but sorely needed infrastructure fixes—stems from a 2001 report by the Maryland Office of Civil Rights showing that Coppin's capital spending per full-time student was the lowest among the state's four-year colleges by a huge margin: Between 1990 and 2001, Coppin spent \$699 per student, compared with an average of more than \$16,000 at other state schools. "It was clear the institution was underfunded," Patel says. "It was a turning point."

Growth is harder at Coppin than at sprawling suburban schools. University president Reginald S. Avery calls his city campus landlocked. Presently standing in the way of a planned new science and technology building are multiple blocks of rowhouses that the school is now painstakingly purchasing. (Eminent domain is a last resort, officials say.) As much as \$15 million might need to

be spent before ground can be broken.

Another challenge at Coppin surfaced earlier this year, when a report by the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., ranked Coppin among the colleges and universities with the lowest graduation and retention rates in the nation. Based on data gathered from 2001 through 2007, fewer than one in five Coppin freshmen ended up graduating within six years. Avery says he has had to contend with critics who question whether brick-and-mortar expansion is the right move for an institution that may have more systemic problems. "The buildings are just part of several pieces of intervention we are doing to attract as well as retain students," he says. "They get a lot of attention. But they don't show the growth we are also trying to do internally to increase the number of faculty and what we are doing with new policies and procedures to make sure we are addressing the total needs of students."

A different reinvention is taking place at Stevenson University, which boasts a new name (until 2008 it was Villa Julie College) and a new campus in neighboring ZIP code.

Stevenson was founded fifty-five years ago as a Catholic women's commuter school that specialized in turning out medical secretaries. The school went coed in 1972 and added four-year degrees in 1984, but tough zoning laws kept growth at the Greenspring Valley campus bottled up. Five years ago, the school opened a second campus amid the suburban hubbub of Owings Mills, where it now has a dozen residence halls and a handful of academic buildings. Undergraduate enrollment, now at 2,600, has nearly doubled since 2000.

The Owings Mills campus, up a hill from a shopping center, looks more than a little like an office park. In a way, that's apt for a university focused on finding its graduates jobs. "We want to be the national leader in career education," says university president Kevin J. Manning. "We really try to help students understand how the world of work operates. That's the real driver behind this growth."



A bigger sandbox: Residence halls at Stevenson University's new Owings Mills campus boast a beach volleyball court

But the expansion hasn't come without sizable debt loads. Following last fall's financial disruptions, the soaring interest rates on Stevenson's \$122 million in variable rate bonds threatened to swamp the annual budget. Manning called the matter "scary" in a November 2008 *BusinessWeek* article.

Now that a degree of calm has returned to the credit markets, the university is looking to add what might be the ultimate student amenity: a football team, due to take the field in fall 2010.

If any new campus building can give the Athenaeum run for its money in terms of design, it would be the University of Baltimore's new John and Frances Angelos Law Center. Just don't look for it on the skyline yet. The twelve-story glass tower, designed by the German architectural firm Behnisch Architekten (partnering with local firm Ayers/Saint/Gross) following a high-profile international design competition underwritten by a \$150,000 grant from the Abell Foundation, has yet to rise on the corner of Charles Street and Mount Royal Avenue.

Though Orioles owner and UB law alumnus Peter Angelos already ponied up \$5 million for naming rights, funding for the bulk of \$107 million project has been winding its way through Annapolis, taking a few bruises in the process. Earlier this year, the state's Department of Legislative Services recommended postponing a \$5 million payout for continuing design work, citing the less-than-urgent need for a nearly 190,000-square-foot building given UB's static law school enrollment.

University officials successfully pleaded their case, and the latest round of funding was approved. But there are still millions to squeeze out of the statehouse. "So far, right now, we are making great progress to stay on schedule," says Steve Cassard, UB's vice president for administration and finance. "We hope to have foundation work begin the summer of 2010."

So watch that space: The tower that rises there could be also be a shiny capstone for the cranes-on-campus era.

—*Brennen Jensen wrote about landscape architect Fritz Haeg in the August 2008 Urbanite.*

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