

PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS MASTER PLAN

Chapter Two: Issues and Opportunities

2.0 ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES

The university articulated key concerns for the PSU campus at the project outset, but a more focused set of goals emerged from a series of Steering Committee workshops, faculty and staff interviews and campus-wide forums that addressed both the campus' qualitative and quantitative needs and future goals. Some of the key goals that resulted from these workshops and that now form the basic themes for the master plan, include:

1. Enhance campus identity & unity: campus gateway and sense of arrival
2. Increase on-campus student residency: suite-style housing balanced with upgrades to existing dorms
3. Diversify the student experience: opportunities for informal interaction
4. Optimize efficient use of existing resources: maintenance of existing infrastructure, site & buildings
5. Embrace natural environment: expand stewardship of natural resources
6. Maximize opportunities for town / university collaboration: public / private partners
7. Anticipate change: build for flexibility

2.1 PSU IMAGE & IDENTITY

Issues:

While the campus' regional setting is ideal, PSU's image and identity within its town context leaves something to be desired. The campus has grown in accretions since its inception as a Normal School in 1871, expanding its campus not according to a plan, but according to which properties became available in town. As a result, the campus reads as three separate campuses – the Core Campus, Holderness Campus, and North Campus – and lacks a strong architectural cohesion and sense of connectivity. While much has been done to unify the campus since the 1994 Plan (closing off streets for pedestrians, solidifying a campus quad, etc...), the university could greatly enhance its identity and presence within the towns by seizing on a number of opportunities and natural assets.

Recommendations:

Improve the Arrival Sequence & Create a Gateway

The 'sense of arrival' is not just one experience, but a series of events that, together, make up a visitor's perception of arrival onto both the campus proper and in the Town of Plymouth. PSU should focus its efforts on enhancing a number of campus entry 'experiences' (vehicular & pedestrian) to strengthen the overall arrival sequence and sense of place on campus.

1. The redevelopment of the Holderness campus is a critical area in this entry sequence namely because it is usually the first PSU experience a visitor has coming off of I-93. PSU could activate the Holderness campus by creating a critical mass of programs that would bring more students to this side of campus. These activities could capitalize on current uses, including new athletic facilities, but might add new uses to the mix including academic and admissions functions. The Holderness Campus could also be improved by developing a new entry plaza to the PE Center linked to the pedestrian walkways and new shuttle waiting area. Additional tree and shrub buffers along Holderness Road, sidewalk improvements, and other landscaping would greatly improve the perception of this as both a gateway and a connected part of the overall campus.
2. When implemented, the joint Town of Plymouth and PSU TEA-21 bridge realignment and streetscape initiative will greatly improve the experience for visitors and residents arriving from the east off of I-93, as well as for pedestrians crossing over the Pemigewasset River. The addition of a traffic circle at the entrance to Plymouth would help signal the vehicular arrival to Town as well as create a safer zone for pedestrians using the bridge and High Street.
3. Changing the current use of the landmark Rounds Hall from academic to administrative to include the Office of the President and Admissions for instance, will help define the heart and symbolic entry to campus. While the steep slopes present a challenge for the vehicular approach along Court Street, streetscape and landscape improvements could help this area become the ceremonial campus entry.
4. Efforts should be made to enhance other points of entry to campus, particularly from the west along the heavily trafficked Highland Street.

Develop comprehensive signage and graphics plan

Graphics and signage will play an important role in the identity of PSU – both in signaling its stature as regional university, as well as in integrating its identity with the Town of Plymouth. Furthermore, a comprehensive way-finding system is needed to facilitate circulation for visitors, faculty, and students.

- Clearly communicate information with signage hierarchy
- Integrate graphics into Town of Plymouth graphic identity while maintaining a university signature
- Address traffic patterns and functional requirements of the campus
- Use signs as a way to motivate viewers to participate in on-campus activities

2.2 ON-CAMPUS RESIDENCY

Issues:

One of PSU's principle goals for the next ten years is to increase the percentage of its traditional undergraduate students living on campus from its current 56% to at least 65%. Increasing on-campus residential participation would enhance student participation in all walks of campus life

in addition to improving – if not solving – some of the town-gown issues related to private off-campus student housing.

While PSU’s on-campus housing stock is diverse in age and character, it currently lacks the diversity that students are looking for as they mature throughout their university experiences. In short, it is both institutional in character and lacks suite-style housing. With the exception of the White Mountain Apartments, residence halls are corridor-centered with gang showers and gang baths, with most students living in doubles and even triples. While this type of residence hall may be considered part of the “freshman experience”, sophomores and juniors, in search of new environments that reflect their more sophisticated status, choose instead to live off-campus.

Interviews and meetings with students revealed that PSU students would be interested in staying on campus if more intimate, suite-style environments were made available to them. Other student comments included: more space for personal items, common areas for socializing and relaxing, sufficient power for electrical devices, as well as related amenities like fitness, café, and laundry facilities.

Because the current inventory of housing is predominantly ‘traditional style’, it was determined that all 650 new beds be designed in residence halls with a suite-style configuration. Moreover, to maintain the intimate culture of the university, it was felt that new residence halls should maintain a sense of community scale. Existing residence halls should be upgraded to accommodate a mix of room configurations and to minimize the institutional nature of older dorms. Moreover, a range of amenities such as fitness rooms, laundry, lounges, and computer clusters, should be included in both new and existing facilities.

Recommendations:

1. 650 new suite-style beds
2. New residence halls should maintain a sense of community scale
3. Renovate existing resident halls to include a mix of singles, doubles and suites
4. Include additional amenities like fitness and computer clusters in residence halls

2.3 DIVERSIFY STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Issues:

Students, increasingly sophisticated in their tastes and expectations of the “college experience” seek variety in all areas of academic and social life, including more spaces for informal interaction. With few of PSU’s facilities identified for informal interaction, spontaneous exchanges between students and/or faculty members are inhibited. While the expansion of the Hartman Union Building (‘the HUB’) has done much to improve the quality of life for PSU students, including providing new fitness spaces for non-athletes, meeting rooms, student activity offices and cafes, the HUB is currently one of the only places on campus where students can congregate on campus. Consequently, space in the HUB is at a premium, with a growing need for more off-hours activity space, fitness space as well as meeting and banquet space.

Most student lounge spaces in academic and residential buildings have, over the years, been reclaimed for storage or academic space. After 11PM, there are no available informal gathering places other than resident hall rooms or off-campus apartments, a fact much bemoaned by students and faculty.

Recognizing that the HUB is still the center of campus life, the students have proposed a more distributive approach that would provide smaller nodes or “mini hubs” across campus for day and late night informal study, socializing and/or catching a quick bite. Mini-hubs could also be geared differently towards undergraduate needs and/or the growing population of graduate and commuting students.

Recommendations:

- Introduce mini-hubs at key areas on campus to contribute to 24-hour campus experience
- Increase designated space to the HUB for fitness and meeting spaces
- Increase hours of student accessibility for HUB, mini-hubs, and library
- Enhance usability and program of outdoor spaces. This is especially true at Langdon Park; accessibility and awareness of the park’s amenities should be emphasized.
- Make Holderness an integral part of the campus experience
- Introduce variety of housing options, including suite-style residents
- and faculty participation.

2.4 UTILIZE EXISTING RESOURCES

Issues:

Like many universities, PSU has an aging inventory of buildings, many of which are outdated or beyond their useful life in terms of cost and relative benefit. However, many of these older buildings (like Rounds Hall, Memorial Hall and Mary Lyon) are campus landmarks and make a considerable contribution to the character and history of the campus. Significant efforts should be made to renovate these landmark buildings so that they are equipped with modern amenities and efficiencies. Other less architecturally significant buildings could accommodate space needs on an interim basis, but in the future, should be considered as development sites.

Recommendations:

1. Renovate campus landmark buildings to accommodate new uses
2. Integrate technology into all areas of campus life
3. Consider ‘non-contributing buildings’ as future sites for development (Holmes House, Bulk Mail Building, Mary Taylor, Counseling Center, Purchasing Office & Baker Infirmary)
4. Re-evaluate existing building and site systems inventory for energy efficiency and long-term campus sustainability
5. Develop underutilized property, including Holderness campus and appropriate portions of Langdon Park
6. Right-size classrooms appropriate to utilization (25 sf per student, etc.)
7. Coordinate streetscape plans with bridge realignment

8. Change use of landmark buildings such as Rounds Hall to align with ceremonial use
9. Improve adjacencies to maximize efficiency and interaction
10. To the extent possible, locate parking on the periphery of campus (with reliable shuttle service to enforce pedestrian campus environment); buffer parking lots with shrubs and trees in keeping with Town parking designs
11. With moderate investment, enhance landscape elements across campus

2.5 EMBRACE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Issues:

2.5.1 Campus Landscape

One of PSU's greatest assets is its natural environment. However, the university has not always made the best use of that environment: pedestrian paths and places lack direction and connectivity, campus plateaus or "terraces" hinder pedestrian feeling of proximity and accessibility; residential buildings, for the most part, are inward-focused and do not let in the outstanding surrounding environment; the river is seen more as a barrier than an asset and finally; and Langdon Park is underutilized as a campus resource.

2.5.2 Sustainability

Also, of increasing concern is the environmental impact the built campus has on the natural environment. The university also hopes to produce graduates who incorporate environmental considerations into their decision-making processes in both their professional careers and private lives. The university should serve by example and reinforce its own commitment to ecological stewardship in the North Country Region by promoting principles of environmental sustainability through concrete Sustainable Design Guidelines in the overall operations and design of the university's physical environment.

Recommendations:

- Use signature buildings on campus to punctuate campus views along campus terraces
- Maximize long and short-range views afforded by extreme topography
- Create more east-west pedestrian connections to connect campus terraces
- Embrace the river's edge: create parks and recreation along the riverfront to unite both sides of campus
- Site new facilities respecting local floodway/floodplain zones and wetland regulations
- Emphasize the natural beauty of the context

Landscape Recommendations:

- Create a greenway surrounding campus by connecting riverfront parks & fields to Langdon Park and campus quads
- Landscape elements should be used to define the edges and entries to the PSU campus, improving the visual quality of the campus, bringing a greater sense of unity to the outdoor environment, and facilitating visitor orientation

- Based on recently installed landscape improvements, a unified and compatible palette of landscape materials should be developed along with clearly defined design criteria to ensure consistent implementation of landscape recommendations
- Pathways, furniture, and plantings should be composed to set rhythms and patterns, to create meaningful outdoor spaces, to help define routes of travel, and to provide appropriate outdoor amenities for campus buildings. These features also start to act as three dimensional “graphics” that signal the university’s presence. Pedestrian ways could be signaled by use
- Plant materials should be used to frame and enhance views, to create gateways and mark primary points of destination, to form transitional links between buildings of disparate styles, and to provide year-round interest.

Sustainable Design Recommendations

PSU has set the goal for campus planning, architectural, ground maintenance systems and operations to be designed according to the PSU Design Guidelines. These guidelines will interpret the principles of the United States Green Building Council and the LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) rating system in a program of sustainability that may be achieved and maintained as guiding principles for Plymouth State University.

2.6 TOWN/GOWN COLLABORATION

Issues:

While at first glance PSU appears to be physically integrated into the Town of Plymouth, the reality is often quite different. As with many universities and their host towns, issues arise over institutional real estate acquisition, off-campus housing, student behavior, accessibility of facilities, and, as always, parking. PSU and the towns of Plymouth and Holderness have made the commitment to work collaboratively throughout the master plan process to change past dynamics and devise innovative public/private initiatives for town/gown collaboration.

As part of this process, PSU, Holderness and Plymouth have augmented efforts towards working together and have begun a number of new initiatives fashioned to improve the quality of life for long-term residents (many of whom also work at the university), and students. Even before PSU began updating its master plan, PSU and the town had collaborated to secure federal transportation funding to re-align the bridge and improve the related streetscape. And, as a result of recommendations made during the master plan process, the Plymouth Town Selectmen and PSU jointly approved a traffic circle at the intersection of Main and High Streets.

Recommendations:

- Increase on-campus residency to 65% of traditional undergraduate students to alleviate pressures on near-by residential areas
- Explore public / private housing management / ownership opportunities to enforce off-campus housing standards
- Work with town planners to identify alternative funding opportunities for PSU initiatives and temporary space needs

- Invest long-term in health of Main Street businesses to ensure vital campus town atmosphere (locate bookstore, wilderness equipment, and/or gallery in town to draw students to Main Street)
- Increase accessibility to campus facilities and events
- Provide sufficient PSU parking to alleviate stress on local residential streets; explore options for shared parking
- Work with towns to coordinate signage, street furniture, and landscaping of appropriate areas

2.7 ANTICIPATE CHANGE

Issues:

In an age where technology changes radically every few months, permanent building solutions can quickly become outdated if total flexibility for adaptation is not considered from the outset. “Plug and play” had been the expected solutions for many years, but wireless technology eradicates the need for desktop connections. But how do we know that wireless will not be replaced by something even more flexible in the next few years?

And how do we create buildings and classrooms that anticipate this extraordinary change? Along the same lines, we must look a step ahead to secure new properties for growth and development to ensure PSU will be able to meet its mission beyond the 10-year planning horizon.

Similarly, while designing ‘green’ buildings may appear a lofty ideal today, sustainable planning and design will – and must – be the norm tomorrow. Campus design guidelines should be put in place that ensure that PSU anticipates academic, social, and technological concerns. The guidelines inherent in this Master Plan reflect a sensitivity to the changing requirements anticipated for 21st century university environments.

Recommendations:

- Identify future building sites beyond near-term needs to implement a proactive approach to change
- Plan for the digital age
- Plan for changes in pedagogy and curricular interest (This is particularly true in relation to the development of a regional university)
- Institute an approach that embraces stewardship of the environment