

20 years later: How one flagship campus has changed

(December 8, 2008)

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Lawrence, Kan.

Even in the humble heartland, there is no escape from the academic arms race.

Twenty years ago, annual operating expenses for the University of Kansas campus here were \$204-million. Today the institution spends more than triple that, even though its enrollment, 26,000, is almost exactly the same.

During the same period, tuition and fees for in-state students have increased fivefold.

Throughout academe, college leaders often explain the rising cost of a college education as the inevitable result of an expanded menu of services that students and their parents expect, the higher costs of conducting and monitoring research, and the plusher academic and social amenities that professors and students now consider standard fare.

Kansas is right there with all the others. Over the past two decades, it has added hundreds of new academic counselors, student-affairs officers, and other employees within its Office of Student Success, hired scores of statisticians and technicians to run sophisticated laboratory equipment for its growing research enterprise, and renovated dozens of residence halls and academic spaces to make student and faculty life more pleasant.

And because it has done all that while its enrollment has stayed flat, this bustling institution of 20,000 undergraduates and 6,000 graduate and professional students is an ideal “control” for a real-world understanding of just how the dynamics of rising college costs play out.

A major research university — Kansas is one of 34 public members of the prestigious Association of American Universities — the institution is known both for its ambition (it boasts high-profile programs in drug-discovery and behavioral research) and its middle-American unpretentiousness (no over-the-top celebrity architecture here).

University leaders say the services and facilities they’ve added over the past 20 years are a necessary response to the institution’s broad mission of keeping education accessible (Kansas’s admissions requirements are less stringent than those of most other flagships) and conducting cutting-edge research.

Kansas also faces continuous pressure to do what all of its competitors are doing. “If the University of Missouri provides it, people want to know, why doesn’t Kansas provide it?” says Richard W. Lariviere, the provost and executive vice chancellor.

And provide it has.

In 1988, this 1,000-acre ridge-top campus known for its many red-roofed structures contained just under five million square feet of building space. Today, with the dozens of new and expanded buildings added since, its square footage has nearly doubled. The additions include two science buildings, a fitness center complete with climbing wall (naturally), the Dole Institute of Politics building, a multicultural resource center, and a performing-arts center with a separate recital hall for organ concerts.

Those buildings are not sitting empty. In 1988, the university employed just under 4,000 people; today the number is 25 percent higher, the result mostly of nonfaculty additions but also 100 new tenure-track jobs.

All of that carries added costs.

And while state financing to the Lawrence campus has nearly doubled since 1988, to \$150.6-million, the overall proportion of the university's operating expenses covered by the state has declined markedly, from 40 percent in 1988 to 22 percent in 2008. (Those figures exclude money the university spends on intercollegiate athletics, a high-profile program whose annual budget doubled over the past 20 years to about \$50-million; university leaders say private donations cover those costs.)

The university has made up for some of the decline in state funds with greater support from private donations and from grants and contracts. But to a larger degree, it has relied on higher tuition and fees to fill the gap — and to expand its spending.

This fall, entering freshmen pay \$7,724. That is just two-thirds the cost of the other major public research universities in the AAU, but it still reflects an increase since 1988 that is three times greater than the rate of inflation.

A big part of that increase has come since 2002, under a five-year, student-supported deal with the state that gave the university autonomy to raise its tuition and control how it spends the money. (The change reduced the difference between the in-state rate and the out-of-state rate, which is now \$18,908 for entering freshmen, one of the lowest among public research universities.)

While tuition increases weren't especially controversial, some experts say the price increases, like those at most other institutions, are a sign of a disturbing me-too mind-set in higher education.

"Everyone gets caught up in the same competitive pressures," says Kevin Carey, research and policy manager at Education Sector, a nonpartisan policy center in Washington. "But it's not constructive competition," he says, if it erodes affordability.

University leaders say that despite those increases, their tuition and fees are still a bargain. "There are a lot of universities charging 30, 40,000 for an education that is vastly

inferior to what we offer here,” says Mr. Lariviere. By rights, he says, the university should be charging even more, but “that’s not who we are.”

How has Kansas expanded? In the sections that follow, *The Chronicle* spotlights some examples of the programs driving the growth in personnel and facilities.

Services for Students

Much of the additional money Kansas spends today that it didn’t 20 years ago goes to programs and services designed to improve the student experience, including the 100 slots for new professors, plus cadres of new professional academic counselors, a new writing center, and health-and-fitness programs.

Richard W. Lariviere, the provost, says the growth in student services is a way to help improve retention, a key issue for an institution that admits any student with a 21 on the ACT or 980 on the SAT, a C-average in high school, or a class ranking within the top third. “If we accept you, we’re responsible for your success,” he says.

The university has put a vast bureaucracy behind that sentiment.

Staffing for programs and departments now housed within Kansas’s Office of Student Success (which includes academic advising and is presided over by its own vice provost) has grown from 650 to 850 since 1988. The staff includes professionals who oversee disability services, provide internship information, assist student clubs, prepare quarterly newsletters for parents to keep them abreast of campus happenings, and direct programs designed especially for students of color — many of which take place in the airy new multicultural resource center in the heart of the campus.

“It’s kind of amazing to think what we didn’t do back then,” says Kathryn Nemeth Tuttle, one of three associate vice provosts in the student success office.

Costlier Research Environment

The university has long been a major player in behavioral research (the field accounts for about 25 percent of its \$120-million in annual sponsored research). John Colombo, who directs the Schiefelbusch Institute for Life Span Studies, under whose auspices most of it takes place, says 20 years ago such research was conducted largely in “the Lone Ranger mode.”

Today, the field emphasizes studies that follow subjects for longer periods of time and involve more-complex analyses. So the university now employs a team of expert statisticians to assist research groups. It has another team of professionals devoted solely to recruiting and monitoring study subjects in long-term clinical trials, no small task in an era of do-not-call lists and medical-privacy regulations.

Drug-discovery research is the other big grant-magnet here. And even though Kansas has resisted buying some pricey equipment it would love to have — it sends its scientists to Iowa State University or Washington University in St. Louis if they need to use a gene-sequencing machine — it has nonetheless poured a lot of money into the scientific infrastructure to support this work, according to Steven F. Warren, vice provost for research and graduate studies. In the past 10 years alone, it has added two major new science buildings at a cost of more than \$75-million, including the Structural Biology Center's second phase, which opened this fall.

And a lot of labs and equipment inside those new buildings, most notably a piece of equipment used in drug discovery called a high-throughput screening laboratory, need skilled technicians to keep them running.

Having that new biology building and equipment was essential to the university's winning a \$20-million six-year grant from the National Institutes of Health in September. It also helped Kansas retain one of its star researchers, Jeffrey Aubé, an unassuming professor of medicinal chemistry who was courted with a lavish offer from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2005. (Fending off raids on the faculty is another cost that was less common 20 years ago.)

Professor Aubé says he stayed not because his university outbid Carolina dollar for dollar — it didn't — but because Kansas, where he has taught since 1986, was able to find space for him in the new biology building.

Also, he says, the university's renovation of older laboratories was far enough along that he felt confident Kansas could be on a par with other institutions and continue to win big grants. Until a couple of years ago, he worked in one of those old cramped labs, with fume hoods too small to fit modern-day instruments.

"Probably the most discouraging thing about the space" was its effect on prospective graduate students when they'd visit, he says. "They've just been to Michigan or Ohio State and they go, 'Oh,'" he says, his voice dropping.

The new lab, which features walls of windows overlooking hills to the west and the campus butterfly garden to the east, is a different world — from the larger fume hoods to the polished wood cabinetry. "It's not a dungeon," says Mr. Aubé.

Today's research enterprise also requires spending on positions and duties that didn't exist 20 years ago. For example, Kansas employs about 15 people who oversee compliance with federal rules on research integrity and the security restrictions that cover foreign nationals.

"It's not money that's going to make us any more competitive or any more successful," says Mr. Warren.

The Teaching Environment

Twenty years ago, professors who taught languages would send their students to the language lab to practice pronunciation with cassette tapes. Since then “our discipline has changed a lot in terms of the role of culture,” notes Danny J. Anderson, who began working at Kansas in 1988 as an assistant professor of Spanish. Now language instruction often involves showing films and listening to music.

Classrooms outfitted with DVD players and other multimedia equipment in Kansas’s many renovated academic buildings make those newer teaching approaches possible, says Mr. Anderson, who is now a full professor and vice provost for academic affairs.

The academic buildings are also emblematic of the university’s deliberate attempts over the past 20 years to enrich the academic experience it offers.

Pamela Gordon, chair of the classics department, says the renovations in her building, the Hall Center for the Humanities, promote greater interaction. “We see our students more” now that graduate students and the faculty share office space in the same wing of the building, she says. “It makes a huge difference. In business, what do they call that? Face time.”

The buildings are so comfortable that on a recent fall afternoon, a few students were spotted napping on the carpeted floors of the Hall Center’s corridors.

The physical changes are just part of the story. Along with adding 100 faculty members (an increase of about 10 percent since 1988), Kansas has bolstered its ranks of graduate teaching assistants by a slightly higher proportion, and the university now boasts that nearly 40 percent of all undergraduate classes have 20 or fewer students each.

Faculty members who want to spice up their teaching are encouraged to work with the Center for Teaching Excellence (established in 1997 and now operating with an annual budget of \$250,000). TA’s, as part of their contract with the university, are also expected to obtain training on teaching techniques from the center.

Meanwhile the library, which in 1988 was essentially “a warehouse for books,” as Mr. Anderson recalls, is today a campus focal point for ventures like online-journal publishing and training students (and faculty members) how to conduct research in a digital world. Those new roles, plus the rising prices for both print and digital books and journals, add significantly to its cost of operations. With just a few more staff members than it had 20 years ago (213 versus 208), the library budget has more than doubled, to \$21-million. About half the increase is attributable to today’s higher costs for library materials.

Behind-the-Scenes

In 1988, Kansas’ information-technology department managed equipment and software for a handful of specialized users, and spending on IT security — even the concept

itself — was virtually “nonexistent,” says Denise Stephens, vice provost for information services.

Today computers are ubiquitous; the university data center manages more than 450 different projects — things like the Blackboard courseware platform, research-project files, and systems for storing students’ electronic portfolios. The institution also employs dozens of people with expertise in areas that were barely imaginable in 1988, like Web design and compliance with federal restrictions on downloading copyrighted music.

The university, which spent about \$11-million on IT in 1988, now spends more than \$26-million annually. Some \$1.1-million of that is for IT security, including software, services, and a full-time staff of seven people.

Energy, too, eats a bigger piece of the budget today, in part because the institution’s physical plant is so much bigger and in part because the cost for heating, cooling, and keeping the lights on has risen. Fifteen years ago (that’s as far back as data were readily available), energy costs here were nearly \$5.2-million a year, or about \$1.11 per square foot, excluding residence halls and a few other buildings. By 2007, the total expense for the same set of facilities was almost double that, or nearly \$9.3-million annually, with the cost per square foot having risen to \$1.61.

And the university faces costs over which it has even less control: health care. The university now pays more than \$25-million a year for health-insurance premiums. Over the past 20 years, the cost of those premiums has gone up by 290 percent.

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Section: Money & Management

Volume 55, Issue 16, Page A1

Publication: [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)