

Bristol's cutting-edge campus

The new lower Bucks Community College setting offers a state-of-the-art facility.

By Kristin E. Holmes

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It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that a hub of campus life at the Bristol Center of Bucks County Community College is the hallway.

Outside of the 11 classrooms that made up the college's Lower Bucks location, the hallway was pretty much it.

It was the place for demonstrations (an origami table), student chit-chat (pretzel day), and special displays (door decorating contest). The entire "campus" was a row of classrooms in an office building that was once a high school. But not anymore.

On Wednesday, the college will debut its new Lower Bucks Campus in Bristol Township. The \$21 million, 35,000-square-foot building is a state-of-the-art, two-story structure that is designed to give students a campus life beyond the hallway.

"We're trying to create a comfortable and warm atmosphere so that students just don't come in, take a class and go home," James Sell, executive director of the new campus, said. "Research shows that the more you engage students, the more successful they will be."

When Sell talks "warm and inviting," he uses the example of Barnes & Noble, the chain that has helped transform the act of buying books into more than a commercial transaction.

So goes the Lower Bucks Campus. There will be more than just the exchange of knowledge at 1304 Veterans Highway. There will be a library, cafe, bookstore, faculty offices, outdoor patio with tables and chairs, jazz concerts, a new administrator for student services, and common student areas that do indeed rival a Barnes & Noble.

It is part of a trend in community college construction and renovation, said campus architect Eric Gianelle, a senior project manager with KCBA Architects in Hatfield. "The kids who are coming to community colleges are a lot younger than in the past, and the schools are catering to that," Gianelle said.

The entrance to the new Lower Bucks Campus building is a bright, open space, with high ceilings and windows, with a new living-room-like Student Commons area just to the right, the library to the left, and a balcony just above.

The building is an expanse of creams, light-colored woods and gray floors, with red and rust accents in furniture that add warmth.

The Bristol Center "was pretty nice, even if it wasn't the best. We did a lot to make the campus look brighter," said Lower Bucks student Stephany Priest, 19, of Tullytown. "But the new campus, oh my goodness. I love the comfy chairs. It's amazing."

The campus' Phase I will be ready to open Wednesday, with the second phase of construction set to be completed in November.

When students walk through the doors Wednesday, 12 classrooms, a biology lab, an allied health lab, the library, the outdoor plaza and four computer labs will be waiting. Coming in November: eight or nine additional classrooms, the cafe, rooms for clubs and organizations and student services. Four degree programs and two certificate programs will be offered initially, with others to be added.

The campus is the third facility of Bucks County Community College, which opened in Newtown in 1964. That campus, once part of the Tyler estate, sits adjacent to Tyler State Park.

In 1999, the school opened its Upper County Campus in a renovated CoreStates bank building in East Rockhill. The college serves nearly 10,000 credit-seeking students each year, and more than 70,000 students enrolled in noncredit programs.

"We had been seeing our enrollment grow each year at the Bristol Center, and we just knew there was a need," said Catherine McElroy, the college's dean of academic and curricular services.

The school began planning for the new campus in 2004. Officials traveled to conferences and other colleges for cram courses on the latest in classroom design. As a result, the campus is equipped with movable and collapsible furniture that can create multiple classroom settings. Accommodations include wireless Internet access and smartboards.

Green building elements also have been incorporated. A geothermal system will use the temperature of the ground below to cool and heat the building, and waterless urinals will be used in the bathroom, Giannele said.

No other building in Bristol is like it, said Glenn Kucher, the township's director of building, planning and development. Township officials hope that the building will become a centerpiece of the municipality's planned revitalization along Route 413, Kucher said.

Bristol officials want people to do more than just drive by on Route 413, just as college officials want students - and other community members - to do more than just go to class on campus.

"We want to be a strong member of the Lower Bucks community, and I think this facility will enable us to do that," McElroy said. "We've had good neighbors for many years, and we want to be a good neighbor to them."

For Information

A ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held from 11 a.m. to noon Sept. 6 on the lower Bucks campus plaza. A Community Day will be held from noon to 4 p.m. Sept. 8 and will feature live music, dance, food, children's activities and health screenings. The events are free to the public.

The lower Bucks campus is at 1304 Veterans Highway (at Rockview Drive), Bristol. For more information, call 215-968-8224 or visit www.bucks.edu.

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