

More colleges open dorms to group meetings

Rates are less expensive, and conference space often nearby

By Laura Ruane
USA TODAY

A growing number of nearly 2,000 college and universities across the USA will do double duty offering lodging and conference centers this summer.

Adult demand for on-campus digs has soared during the recession, says Chuck Salem, president of the Johnstown, Pa.-based marketing company Unique Venues, which oversees the website UniqueVenues.com. The company connects meeting planners with distinctive meeting and event space.

Salem says meeting planners' requests for proposals for the schools his company represents rose 90% from 2009 to 2010. The company's roster of colleges, which stood at 140 in 1988, grew to 354 last year.

Higher-learning institutions are thinking about adult seasonal guests when upgrading their dormitories and meeting spaces or designing new buildings, Salem said.

That trend has caught the attention of meeting planners with groups that want overnight accommodations that are cheaper than many hotels but have convenient access to conference facilities and dining, said Vicki Westcott, manager of conference services at the University of West Florida in Pensacola. Newer student-housing complexes "are not your traditional dorm rooms anymore," Westcott said.

"Sure, you don't have all the amenities, like blow dryers and shampoo," Westcott said, "but most adults are fine with that."

Dorm-room marketing doesn't alarm Fred Hirschovits, owner of the Holiday Inn Fort Myers Airport at Town Center, 3 miles from the Florida Gulf

Coast University campus in Fort Myers, Fla.

"They're going after a different type of customer," Hirschovits said of the colleges and universities.

"Parents usually want a different type of accommodation. They will stay in the surrounding hotels," Hirschovits said.

Newcomers or those upping their hospitality game include:

► Wagner College on Staten Island, N.Y., which in 2010 opened Foundation Hall, with double- and single-occupancy rooms and six suites with living rooms furnished with a sofa, a table and chairs.

"It's apartment-style living. If this were in Manhattan, it would be very expensive," said Carole Lavinio, director of conferences. Outside guests staying at Foundation Hall pay \$75 a night for single occupancy and \$60 a person for two people sharing a room, Lavinio said.

The hall is open to non-student adult groups from about late May until August. It's reserved for college seniors the rest of the year, Lavinio said.

Summer bookings "are meeting expectations. This is a new facility. A lot of people don't know about it yet," Lavinio said. She's counting on the college's listing at UniqueVenues.com and word-of-mouth referrals to grow the business.

► Florida Gulf Coast University is planning to hire a full-time conference coordinator to solicit groups, reserve dorm rooms and classrooms, coordinate catering and provide technology required for meetings, said Brian Fisher, director of university housing.

► Ave Maria University, in a rural area east of Naples, Fla., has more beds (1,000) than students (800). The university trans-



By John David Emmett, The (Fort Myers, Fla.) News-Press

Checking in: The Chicago Fire soccer team members unload their bus at Xavier Hall at Ave Maria University in Naples, Fla., last month. The team stayed in the dorm for two weeks.



By John David Emmett, The (Fort Myers, Fla.) News-Press

Settling in: Chicago Fire teammates Kwame Watson-Siriboe, right, and Gonzalo Segares fix up their room at Ave Maria University.

formed Xavier Hall into the Xavier Hall Conference Center and rents rooms to invited guests of the university for \$50 to \$70 a night, said Ave Maria President Nicholas Healy.

"This isn't a profit center for us, by any means," Healy said. "In fact, we probably lose money on it. But the nearest hotel is so far away, so it has a great convenience factor for our guests."

In mid-February, the Major League Soccer team Chicago Fire checked into Xavier Hall. Players spent two weeks on campus as part of their preseason training, according to Healy.

► Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., is undergoing a \$72 million renovation of the Ambler Johnston residence hall, adding such improvements as central air

conditioning and a small theater suitable for a variety of shows and presentations, according to Ken Belcher, senior associate director for housing services. The school aims to make these spaces available to outside groups in the summer of 2013, Belcher said.

► The University of Vermont in Burlington opened a new student center and a residence hall in 2007. Both emphasize environmental friendliness.

"Our motto is: This is where you meet, eat and sleep in a green environment," said Shane Cutler, university director of conference and event services.

These facilities are available to outsiders — people taking a class or attending a conference — in the summer, Cutler said, adding

that prices range from \$43 a person for double occupancy to \$68.25 a person for a private room with one bed.

For many schools, summer youth programs continue to fill more beds.

Pepperdine University's undergraduate Seaver College in Malibu, Calif., has played host to a week-long yearbook workshop for high schoolers for more than 25 years, said Corey Mundwiler, the workshop director and a senior sales rep at Balfour Publishing.

Mundwiler and his teaching staff stay on campus in the dorms during the summer workshop. "It's dorm life: a single bed, spartan," Mundwiler said.

Views of the Pacific Coast from the hillside campus and a group beach trip are pluses, but so are guard gates at university motor entrances and the university's own public safety department that monitors the campus, according to Mundwiler.

"Parents want to make sure their children are safe and secure," Mundwiler said.

Said Belcher at Virginia Tech, "It's not just about adding revenues for the summer. . . . A child who comes here in the summer might become a Virginia Tech student in the future."

Ruane reports for *The News-Press* in Fort Myers, Fla. Contributing: Dave Breitenstein, *The News-Press*.