

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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EDITOR'S MEMO

Just a year-and-a-half ago, Connecticut was boasting a \$400 million budget surplus, Massachusetts voters approved a tax rollback, and public higher education officials across the region were confidently expecting significant budget increases. By early 2002, however, that was ancient history. The dot-com bubble had burst. New England had lost nearly 100,000 jobs, and the six state capitals were awash in red ink.

As it turns out, the late, great economic boom had done little to lift the New England states out of the nation's higher education funding cellar. By fiscal 2002, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, Massachusetts and New Hampshire ranked 43rd, 46th, 48th, 49th and 50th, respectively in state support of higher education operating expenses per \$1,000 of personal income. Maine did a little better, ranking 35th.

Chronic underfunding of higher education compromises access and quality in many intangible ways. But the cover stories in this issue of CONNECTION are about something more concrete ... and steel and glass and brick. Underfunding, of course, also results in deferred maintenance and deteriorating buildings that must be rescued later by heroic measures such as UConn 2000, the billion-dollar program to upgrade facilities at the University of Connecticut, which is described in this issue.

Whether on the grand scale of the UConn initiative or the modest level evident at dozens of New England colleges, campus-building raises a host of new edu-architectural concerns. There is the opportunity, and the mandate, for colleges to improve access for people with disabilities. There is the chance for colleges to practice in sustainable building design what they preach about stewardship of the planet. And there are challenges, from wiring buildings for a wireless future to sating the appetites of today's consumerist students.

The built environment on college campuses is shaped in part by marketing concerns and has been at least since U.S. campuses chose Gothic buildings and quadrangles to imitate the temples of learning of Oxbridge. Today, the look of housing options—including "luxury dorms"—is particularly important in the student recruitment game. Campus planners know that more students are growing up with their own bedrooms and expect at least equal comforts at college (to hell with the virtues of sharing close quarters and experiences with roommates of different backgrounds).

All the focus in campus architecture is not on luxury dorms, however. There is also new interest in functionality—in how daylight, flexible furniture and space to collaborate improve student learning. Above all, changeable ideas about teaching and learning demand that buildings be adaptable, lest form follow dysfunction. And high stakes may be spreading to building design. In an article about K-12 school buildings in *Education Week*, architect Prakash Nair, suggests that "School officials responsible for planning, constructing and renovating facilities ought to be held accountable not only for whether the cost estimates are met and the air conditioning works, but also for the impact their decisions have on student learning."

Amid all these functional concerns, we can also hope that New England's colleges will continue to commission and preserve the kinds of bold, boundary-pushing architecture that inspires wonder in students and passersby as it enriches the regional landscape. As with so many other kinds of challenging expression, if colleges don't provide a safe environment, who will?

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.