

Rising student enrollment energizing Midway University campus

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A NEW BARN was added last fall for students taking classes in Midway University's equine program. It's near the indoor riding arena, which consolidates equestrian facilities on one side of campus, President John Marsden said. (Midway University photo)

Growth in student enrollment – and the energy students bring with them – continues at Midway University as the 2023-24 academic year begins, President Dr. John Marsden told the Sun.

The growth has occurred in the traditional daytime program where the number of students has jumped from 777 last year to 852 this year, Marsden said.

Before becoming a coeducational institution in the spring of 2016, Midway had 239 students as a women's college, he pointed out.

Now, Midway U serves four different student populations: traditional daytime, online undergrads, graduate students, and dual credit high school students (from nearby school districts, including Woodford County High School) who are taking college courses.

Together, those populations have grown total enrollment to over 1,900 students, including a record number for the incoming class of daytime traditional students, which has grown to 332 from 297 a year ago, Marsden said. He said the university also has a record-breaking 258 graduate students.

Because most of Midway U's revenue comes from student tuition, having a diverse student population also provides diverse revenue streams, explained Marsden. He said the university has been able to increase enrollment while not negatively impacting revenue and still offering academic, athletic and other scholarships.

Among the challenges of having eight consecutive years of student growth is a shortage of parking and a demand for more housing. The university added 43 beds on the second floor of the library, which will be completely converted to a dormitory after a new library is constructed at some point in the future, Marsden said.

"Now, we're feeling the pressure to move quickly along with (the library) project because if we're going to continue growing, we're going to need to keep adding housing," said Marsden. He also acknowledged the three existing residence halls are in older buildings.

Pinkerton Hall, for example, was built in the 1850s and converted back to residential living about three years ago. Upgrades to those older buildings in recent months and years have resulted in improved bathrooms, flooring and common areas, Marsden said.

Even with the housing added this year, Midway University's dorms are now at capacity (about 445 students), he said.

The university has managed to keep most of its academic buildings and residence halls at the center of the 200-acre campus, while adding the Hunter Field House, baseball stadium and tennis courts to create an athletic complex on the east side of campus, Marsden said.

He said several delays related to weather, hitting rock and sinkholes have resulted in the new turf field and track facility not being completed at the start of the academic year.

Midway University's sprint football team is moving its first "home game" to an off-campus site, but Marsden said he's hopeful the team will play its second home game at the new field on Oct. 21, which is also homecoming weekend. "We're watching that closely," he added.

Marsden said the delay in finishing that project has also impacted on-campus parking.

If a new parking lot and other spaces were available instead of being delayed by the construction project, the current parking problems would not have been as big an issue, according to Ellen Gregory, vice president of marketing and communication at Midway University.

Meanwhile, the university also completed a new barn for its equine program last fall. It's near the indoor riding arena, which consolidates equestrian facilities on one side of campus, Marsden said.

Because these additions have occurred away from the heart of campus, the center "green space" where students walk to academic buildings from their dorms has not changed, said Marsden. He said different locations for the new library are being explored by the architect, with an eye toward keeping "all of the academic buildings together around this green space."

In addition to housing book collections, the new library, which Marsden described as "much more a library of the future," will have technology and group study spaces, classrooms and exhibit spaces for presentations.

More than a decade into his presidency at Midway University, Marsden said he was determined – with the support of his administrative team – to turn the finances of the institution around when he came here.

The transition from being a women's college to becoming a coeducational university played a significant role in that financial turnaround, he said. He said being nimble and willing to change has sustained growth over the last eight years.

“Because there have been opportunities to build both academic and athletic programs as well as actual buildings and repurposing and renovating space, that has kept me interested,” said Marsden, who has an undergraduate degree in architecture. “I also have a strong Board of Trustees who are very business-minded, who will make decisions quickly, who offer great ideas ... have been supportive of my tenure and have also given me the autonomy to work with my team and get things done on campus.”

Marsden takes pride in being approachable – and visible – on campus and would love to see more people from Midway come to campus and support the athletic programs, which he said would build a community spirit.

Asked about the future of Midway University, Marsden said, “There’s still some room for growth. We just grew a little bit faster this year than I expected.”

“Now,” he acknowledged, “I’m feeling the pressure” to raise the funds to build the new library to free up space for more residential student housing.

It’s the type of pressure this longtime university president has embraced throughout his tenure, and looks forward to facing in the better days that seemingly lie ahead for Midway University. “Everyone wants to back a winner. So, if you’re on a positive trajectory that helps with morale and energy,” said Marsden.



PRESIDENT JOHN MARSDEN has been leading Midway University for more than 10 years. He said he takes pride in being approachable – and visible – on campus. (Midway University photo)