

New colleges will transform Mesa, put city on state's higher-education map

I ran for mayor four years ago with the desire to transform Mesa's economic future.

A central component of this was increasing higher-education opportunities and options. This was important to stop the "brain drain" as many of our best and brightest students left the community, and often the state, to pursue their college degrees. A thriving higher-education environment was also essential for attracting new companies and business investment.

This led to our city embarking on what we call a grand endeavor: searching out, recruiting and then creating a home for top-notch colleges in our historic city center.

Today, we have four colleges with rich histories that have committed to

establishing campuses in downtown Mesa: 162-year-old Westminster College, 157-year-old Albright College, 126-year-old Benedictine University and 80-year-old Wilkes University.

A fifth school, Upper Iowa University, plans to locate in our Fiesta District just south of downtown.

Renovations are well under way at our former city court building, transforming it into the Mesa Center for Higher Education. The 53,000-square-foot space will be the new Mesa home to Westminster and Wilkes.

Construction is under way on renovations of the former Southside Hospital, which will serve as Benedictine's Mesa campus. The Illinois-based school already has an office on Main Street and is enrolling juniors and seniors for classes that will begin this fall. This marks the first opportunity for students to receive a Catholic university education in Arizona.

Within five years, we expect to see

several thousand students enrolled at the colleges in downtown Mesa. I believe that by having these "legacy schools" located here, we will create the vibrancy of a college town. These students, educators, staff — and new businesses to support them — will add to the built-in advantages of our core: street-facing retail, a growing restaurant and entertainment scene, a world-class arts center and the extension of light rail.

Mesa is doing something that has never been done before. With the addition of these colleges, Mesa has succeeded in bringing together college campuses from different regions of the country. And they are working together to create a collaborative environment that will change the dynamics of higher education in Arizona.

A common theme among our state's job creators is that Arizona doesn't have enough highly trained students entering the workforce, not only to

meet our current needs, but to take advantage of future opportunities. In Mesa, we are working to change that.

Arizona has an excellent university system, and even within Mesa we have ASU's Polytechnic campus, NAU, Mesa Community College, A.T. Still University and many other higher-education opportunities.

These new colleges will provide further options for Arizona residents. In addition, businesses will benefit from having more college resources to draw upon and will have more local college graduates from which to choose.

We want people from not only our great city, but throughout the state and country to think about Mesa and associate it with innovative approaches to higher education.

We believe we are making great strides in that direction.

Scott Smith is the mayor of Mesa.



My Turn
SCOTT SMITH