

Mesa

Upper Iowa tops off Mesa bid for colleges

Five historic institutions sink new roots in city

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By the time the first Anglo pioneers straggled onto the land that would someday be called Mesa, Upper Iowa University already had a generation of students under its belt.

It wasn't called Upper Iowa University when it started, and it was more a church school than anything else. Its first name was "Fayette Seminary of the Upper Iowa Conference," a unit of the Methodist church.

That cumbersome monicker was shortened to its present form in 1858, only a year after the school opened. Thereafter, Upper Iowa sent a contingent of students to fight in the Civil War, educated a future speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives (David B. Henderson), welcomed electrical power to its campus in 1895 and saw its gym become a military barracks during what was then called the Great War.

Meanwhile, Mesa was busy fighting droughts and floods, growing cotton and clinging to its tenuous place in the baking desert.

With all that on its plate, Mesa never produced its counterpart to Elizabeth Alexander, who in 1854 saw the need for a college in the nascent town of Fayette and persuaded her husband and son-in-law to donate \$15,000 and 10 acres.

Stories like that were playing out all over the East and Midwest at the time, planting seeds for a rich legacy of higher education that churned out generations of American leaders.

Fast-forward to the early 21st century. Mesa is hardly an educational wasteland, with one of the best public-school systems in the country, a thriving community college and a burgeoning medical school, all topped off with Arizona State University in next-door Tempe and in Mesa's own southeastern corner.

As to an Upper Iowa-style legacy, nothing.

It wasn't just a prestige thing, Mayor Scott Smith said when he started talking about it early in his term. Without educational choices, Mesa and Arizona could lag in the increasingly fierce global competition for brainpower.

So, if Mesa had neglected during its first 130 years to nurture its own college legacy, could it at least borrow one?

The city launched an aggressive effort to find out. The answer was a resounding and amazing yes.

Last week, Upper Iowa became the fifth college this year to establish a campus in Mesa. The city is now home to five liberal-arts institutions with a combined age of 676 years. The others:

Illinois-based Benedictine University, the first Catholic college to set up an Arizona campus, founded in 1887.

Westminster College of Fulton, Mo., which has done a bit of legacy-borrowing of its own by tapping deeply into British history, founded in 1851.

Albright College of Reading, Pa., founded in 1856.

Wilkes University of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., the baby of the clan, founded in 1933.

All except for Upper Iowa are locating in downtown city-owned buildings. Mesa said after Wilkes committed in July that its Center for Higher Education at 245 W. Second St. was maxed out, and Benedictine will fully occupy the former Tri-City Services building at 225 E. Main St. But Upper Iowa was still in the game then, looking to rent empty retail space in the Fiesta District.

Economic Development Director Bill Jabjiniak said that didn't pan out, so Upper Iowa is renting space from Mesa Public Schools in its student-services center at 1045 N. Country Club Drive.

That's only temporary, Upper Iowa's president Alan G. Walker said. The goal is permanent quarters in west Mesa, working in concert with efforts to revitalize that part of the city.

Upper Iowa, aiming its diverse bachelors programs at adult learners, doesn't plan a residential campus in Mesa.

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21

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