

SMU-in-Taos: Campus unifies academic, larger community

By Cody Hooks, chooks@taosnews.com

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Fort Burgwin wasn't much to look at in 1973 when Southern Methodist University (SMU) took over the independent research facility that was solely focused on archaeology. But four decades later, SMU-in-Taos is a full-fledged campus. With a slew of renovations in the past two years, the campus is starting to cultivate the community feel it has long desired.

SMU-in-Taos is a multipurpose educational facility that sees a rush of energy during the summer as Dallas-bound SMU students come to Taos for one of three summer terms.

But for years, the campus didn't have the physical layout befitting a community of learners. The old cafeteria was built in the 1970s and always served as a de facto student center for SMU students who make the summer trek from Dallas to Taos. It had the open space. It had the TV.

That all changed with the opening of a new student center — the Miller Campus Center — last summer.

Though only a wall separates the new building from the old cafeteria, they're worlds apart in terms of contemporary amenities and construction. In addition to a classroom and gym, the new center is also the campus living room, replete with couches and a wraparound porch that bring students that much closer to the outdoors that brought them to Taos in the first place.

"So much of being here is being outside," said Max Gunther, a health psychology professor. It's the little things — watching the dramatic change of color and clouds at sunset, the forest abuzz with life, while finishing a midterm essay — that make the SMU-in-Taos experience what it is," he said. "You can't get that in Dallas."

Steps lead down to what is essentially the new campus plaza — a hallmark of the Hispanic and Pueblo communities the students study — which also serves as an outdoor amphitheater. A newly constructed chapel anchors one side of the plaza, while a handful of *casitas* and classrooms round out the other.

"This moves the center of gravity of the campus up here to the *casitas*, to where they live and study," said SMU-in-Taos Director Mike Adler, who has been a professor with the university for 25 years.

Adler stressed the importance of informal spaces — those places where students can be absorbed in their surroundings or even just sit with the unsettled feeling of "quiet," so foreign from Dallas noise. "It's the osmosis between the indoors and outdoors that's very important," he said.

And that's something professors are beginning to take advantage of, too, by "teaching naked," abandoning the classroom altogether and taking the class — and learning — outside.

“Out here, you can learn stuff you just can’t learn in the classroom,” said Gunther. “They remember stuff in a different way.” A trip to Williams Lake — “or as close as we can get,” he said — is supplemented the day before with a lesson about the cardiovascular system (“why they can’t breathe”) and the day after with a lesson on the body’s pain systems (“which they’re all feeling”).

Beyond all the elements of learning and development that aren’t in the curriculum — like self-confidence from climbing a mountain or the ability to sit still in the calm of nature — the campus directly supports the academics of the school, said sociology professor Sheri Kunovich.

“The Taos campus is inherently interdisciplinary,” she said. It’s commonplace for an environmental history professor to take a walk with a botanist and students, striking up conversations that would have never happened without two steams of thought having the time and space to simply meander together, she said.

A recent round of field trips took SMU students to Taos Pueblo to hear from tour guides about the community and its story — both historical and with an eye to the future. When those same students went to the Kit Carson Museum a day later, they could hold the indigenous Taos Pueblo perspective against the more prevalent myth of the heroic mountain man — able to take in the nuances of the area’s competing narratives of history and society.

“In Dallas, they are even more scheduled. The students are even more intense. But here, we can spend an hour to just talk on the deck — about whatever. They aren’t looking at their phone. They’re just here,” said Kunovich.

Madison McKay, an SMU student, agrees. When she’s in school in the middle of Dallas, “it’s hard to balance” a high-stress business degree with her personal dance practice and all the other demands of a college student in the downtown area of a large city. “Out here, I can focus,” she said.

“We want this place to have a lasting effect. Yes, fall in love with Taos first. But this is more than a beautiful place. It’s a place with deep complexity. If they can appreciate the culture, then they can understand the importance of debates around policy and social inequalities,” Kunovich said.

But the burst of summer energy at SMU-in-Taos is short lived. Once the term ends in August, the campus is mostly quiet for the rest of the year. It’s then, Adler says, the campus is the perfect venue for the larger Taos community — the folks who actually build and maintain the place.

SMU-in-Taos has been trying to figure out how to integrate with the community. It’s hard, Adler said, because so few people realize there’s a campus — with a professional dancing-quality auditorium and lecture hall — just a few minutes outside of town on the way to Penasco.

That was true for Cyndy Ginble, campus coordinator for the Fort Burgwin school. She arranges the summer terms as well as performances and groups from Taos and the region. She wasn’t always so involved. “I lived here 20 years before I even knew about this place,” she said.

But, Adler said, baby steps are starting to change that.

Music performances are on the rise, and a lecture series will do its part to bring thinkers, academics and writers to the campus throughout the year.

“You have to get out here to really understand this place. This isn’t a closed campus,” said Adler. “We’re here for the community.”



Above: The new Carolyn and David Miller Campus Center creates a cozy common area where students can collaborate, study or just hang out. Katharine Egli



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