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Ramapo strives for sense of community

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The Record

STAFF WRITER

You won't find any graduate teaching assistants at Ramapo College.

Large lecture halls are rarely used, and most faculty have an open-door "no appointments needed" policy.

Students and staff at the Mahwah campus often use the term "intimate" to describe the atmosphere.

"If you want to sit in the back and not be called on, this is not the place," said Pat Chang, associate vice president for student affairs.

With just under 6,000 students — and a fairly compact campus, Ramapo is the smallest of the public colleges and universities in the state.

"Nowhere is it more than five minutes to get to the next location on campus," said Steven Pardalis, a recent graduate who is attending Seton Hall University Law School.

You might have to walk pretty fast for that to be true, but, still, students and staff say the school can be a comfortable place. "Colleges are usually impersonal, more like factories than communities," said Pardalis. "But Ramapo is really a community."

Ramapo, along with Richard Stockton College in Atlantic County, was one of the last state colleges to come on line in 1969. Ramapo began by serving many non-traditional students in non-traditional ways: emphasizing environmental studies, interdisciplinary course work and

flexible scheduling at a time when it was not yet in vogue, longtime staffers said.

As the school evolved, it became more traditional: hosting more full-time students in a residential setting and seeing the academic profile of its faculty and incoming freshmen improve. Ramapo, like the College of New Jersey, has used scholarships to attract some of the area's best students.

Its bucolic setting — in the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains — belies the fact that it's just a short drive from the commercial corridor of Route 17.

Over the past decade, the addition of hundreds of dormitory beds and a large recreation center have tipped the balance so that now more than half the school's students live on campus.

Still, Ramapo draws mostly from the surrounding area — 47 percent of students are from Bergen and Passaic counties, although there are growing numbers from other parts of the state, school officials said.

Many local students now choose to live on campus, and the school has a waiting list for campus housing. But Ramapo hasn't entirely shed its commuter appeal or feel. Pardalis, for instance, chose the school, in part, because it was close to his home in Pompton Lakes; and there are large commuter parking lots on the periphery of the campus.

Two fairly recent additions to the campus — the Berrie Center for the Performing Arts and the Anisfield School of Business building — were launched with donations from private benefactors. But, like other state colleges, Ramapo has amassed substantial debt — \$250 million — during the building boom of the last decade.

President Peter Mercer said Ramapo is on solid footing since the school's popularity keeps bringing in paying students.

The administration recently drew criticism for levying a fee — amounting to \$1,000 for each full-time student in the 2009-10 school year — to cover deferred maintenance costs, including a new roof for the sprawling main academic building. With declining state support, Mercer said the school had little choice but to go that route as the campus nears its 40th

anniversary.

The president said that the school's evolution in no way betrays its roots. "Since we were founded, there has been a continuum of academic improvement," said Mercer, a Canadian who is Ramapo's fourth president. "I don't see it as anti-egalitarian to say we want to emphasize academic performance."

The president said the school remains committed to providing support for disadvantaged students.

Although business is now the most popular major, Ramapo touts itself as the state's public liberal arts college — a place that feels more like a small private school. "There is a great deal of access to the faculty," Professor Edward Saiff said. Saiff has the long view of Ramapo — he joined the faculty a year after the college opened and has taught biology there for the better part of 40 years.

Emma Rainforth, an environmental science professor, said undergraduates are able to do "one-on-one" research at Ramapo. Rainforth will run the school's new sustainability center, slated to open this fall: a green building that will be used for environmental programming.

Ramapo has no plans to grow substantially in the foreseeable future but will expand graduate programming somewhat, said college leaders. For instance, the school is waiting for final approval from the state for a master's program in sustainability, Rainforth said.

The campus itself, Rainforth points out, is nature-centric: Much of the 300 acres is on protected wetlands and woodlands. "We take students out there all the time," she said.


Indeed, if students want the hustle and bustle of a big city or even a college-town experience, Ramapo is probably not the choice, although New York is easily accessible by bus.

"The only security issue we have here is the wildlife," said Chang, the vice president, who has lived on campus for 20 years. "Skunks, raccoons and the occasional bear."

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