



Dr. Norman Smith, Wagner College president, stands in front of a new granite sign bearing the school's name. The area is landscaped and lit at night.

Wagner restoration: 'It's a showpiece'

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In his three years as Wagner College president, Dr. Norman Smith has worked hard to improve what was the declining appearance of the 108-year-old college.

"The campus was indeed in disrepair," Smith wrote in his annual review for 1989-1990. But the college has undergone a restoration, he said, "that has turned it into a showpiece."

More than renovating dorms and replacing cafeteria furniture, Smith is overhauling the college's image.

Known mostly as a local college, Wagner has initiated a marketing campaign to attract students from as far away as Pennsylvania and Boston.

Applicants who make Wagner their first choice is up 25 percent

"We want to become more com-

petitive among small, private colleges in the Northeast," said Smith during a campus tour with an Advance reporter.

From new lighting along its tree-lined walks to a new fitness center, the Grymes Hill campus is decked out like a young buck ready to woo.

And that is exactly the plan. Next year, colleges are expecting the fewest college-bound graduates in the last 90 years. Faced with a shrinking market of students headed for college and stiff competition from other local colleges, Wagner has had to rethink its recruitment strategy.

While concerns about campus aesthetics may seem minor in the world of higher learning, they make a difference in attracting students.

Since he took the helm, Smith has promoted a full-steam-ahead program of campus renovation. And last year, after a decade of declining enrollment, the school saw a 30 percent increase in applications.

"When a student is considering a college, a paramount consideration when visiting the college is the condition of the campus," Smith said.

The dining hall has been refurbished, including a new acoustic ceiling and new dining chairs that are the same ones that were made for the Eisenhower Library in Gettysburg, Pa.

Standing in the cafeteria, Smith commented on the new acoustics. "This place used to ring with echoes," he said. "You have to remember, students eat here seven days a week. They want a nice atmosphere."

Around the bend in the Student Union building, the terrace by the large windows has received new tiling, plants and wrought iron furniture.

"This place used to be called 'The Pit,'" said senior Robin Fago, studying in the area. "Now it's nice and relaxing."

About 100 black lamp posts have been added to the campus, improving its appearance at night and adding to general security. Dorms now have computerized card-access locks. A current card, with a valid identification number, is required. When a student leaves, the number is removed from the computer.



ADVANCE PHOTOS/FRANK J. JOHNS

A panoramic view of the Wagner College cafeteria shows a spacious, comfortable setting embellished by plenty of foliage.

The dorm furniture had not been replaced in 20 years, and Smith himself described it as shabby. Beds, desks and chairs have been replaced.

Senior Jennifer Norton appreciates the difference. "Before, the bedrooms looked kind of dismal," she said. The veneer was chipping, chair legs were weak.

"The new furniture — I love it," she said.

The college is doing more than simply replacing furniture to improve living conditions. One dorm

has been reconstructed into two-bedroom suites with a living room. "It creates a more adult atmosphere," Smith said. "More privacy."

This all comes in addition to a new fitness center, a computer center and renovated classrooms.

The difference is showing. The average SAT score of applicants has gone up 100 points in the past two years. Student retention is up 20 percent. The number of applicants who made Wagner their first college choice is up 25 per-

cent, Smith said.

Smith believes that attracting students from a broader geographic area will elevate the campus atmosphere, introducing students from different parts of the country.

School officials are not, however, looking for a great increase in enrollment. Smith wants to keep Wagner a small, liberal arts college, where students don't feel lost in the crowd. Sixty percent of Fortune 500 executives graduated from small colleges, he said.

"The campus is park-like, but is near top employment opportunities in Manhattan," he said.

He showed with pride an article from the Chronicle of Higher Education, which indicated that students at large universities often feel ignored by professors and crowded into large classrooms.

At Wagner, an amphitheater classroom used for large lectures will be converted into a video room in which movies and video lessons will be shown.

Other plans include a television production studio where students can film their own projects, renovating the music recital hall, and a high-tech language lab that moves away from earphones and cassettes to interactive projects involving computer and video.

"We are reshaping the reputation of this college, adding to its stature," Smith said, standing beside a new granite sign bearing the school name. The area is landscaped and lit at night.



The school's new fitness center features a variety of equipment for the health-conscious student.



Wagner College students Margaret Arena, left, and Jennifer Norton relax in their dormitory room, which sports new furniture