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JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

**Two College of the Holy Cross athletes headed to the school's athletic center, with the city of Worcester in the background.**

**By Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 28, 2014

WORCESTER — Boston, Cambridge, and Amherst exude college-town ambience in many neighborhoods. Leafy campuses give way to an inviting array of restaurants, bars, shops, coffeehouses, and music clubs. Students and locals mix along bustling thoroughfares, and ride side-by-side on public transit.

And then there's Worcester.

Although it boasts nine colleges and more than 35,000 students, the city is more likely to conjure visions of its gritty, industrial past than as a vibrant higher education hub. The various colleges, and many of Worcester's attractions, are scattered across the city, and even some of its liveliest streets are pocked by vacant storefronts.

But now local officials and university leaders are hoping to transform Worcester into a thriving college town. They aim to spur economic development, catch the eye of more college applicants, and then retain the students after they graduate to bolster the residential and workforce populations.

"The sense of Worcester as an old, industrial city is really no longer accurate," said David P. Angel, president of Clark University and head of the Higher Education Consortium of Central Massachusetts, an association of Worcester-area colleges. "The question for us is: What can we do more to make this a really attractive place for students, faculty, and staff to work, reside, and stay."

Officials say they believe ongoing development projects in the city's center will increase many of the amenities students want, including shopping, entertainment, and dining choices, and they are exploring ways to increase transportation options and address safety concerns.

Still, many here acknowledge that building a reputation as a college town transcends commerce; it rests on creating something more illusory: a buzz.

Interviews with students show that Worcester faces a host of challenges to raise its profile. Some said they believe certain areas to be unsafe, so they tend to stick close to their campuses.

A number of areas do draw students: the Canal District, parts of Highland and Main streets, and a stretch of Shrewsbury Street known as "restaurant row." But students said that many of the

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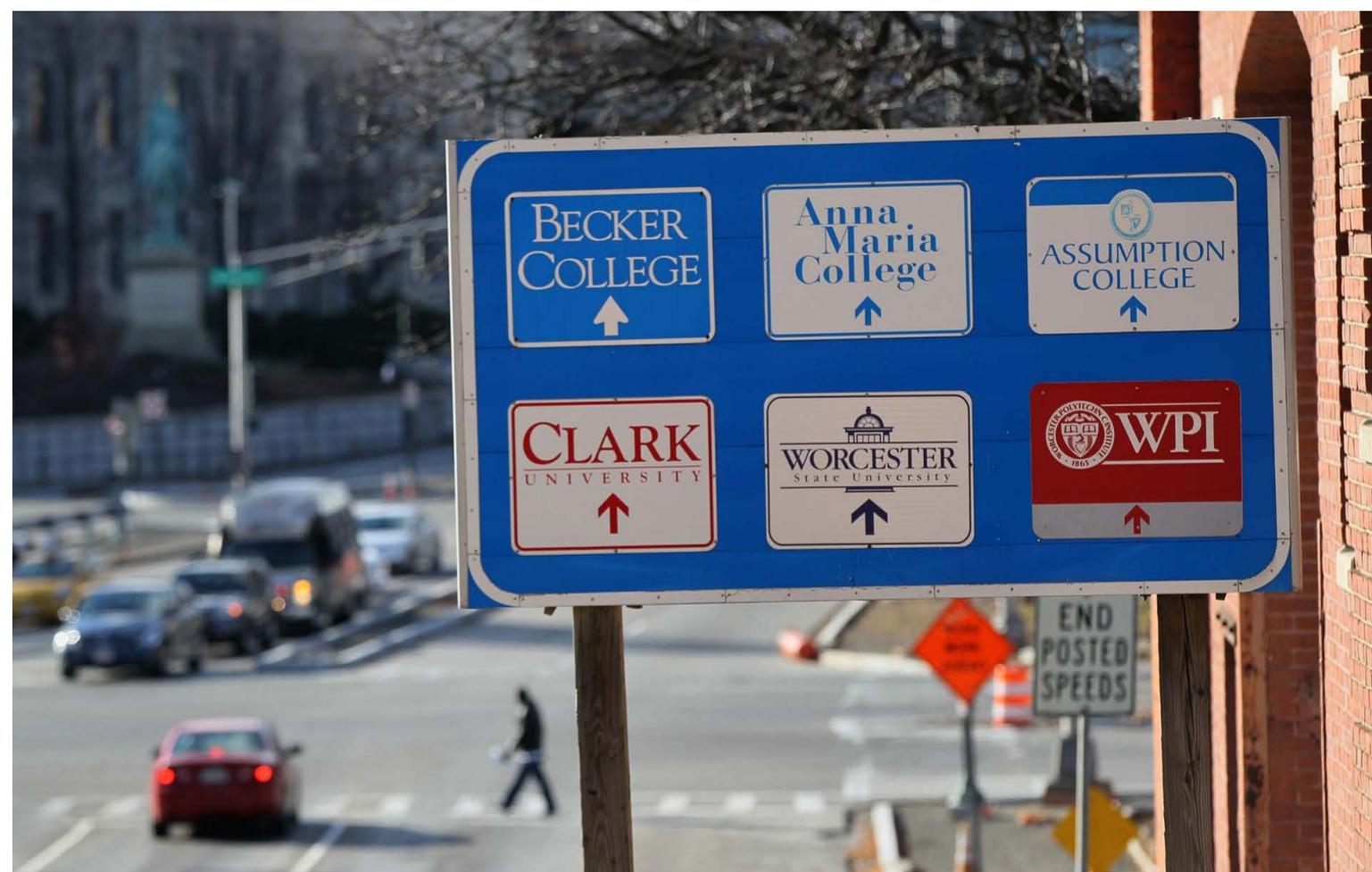
*'The sense of Worcester as an old, industrial city is really no longer accurate.'*

David P. Angel, Clark University president  
and head of education consortium

spots can be difficult for them to get to without a car, and they described city buses as unreliable or confusing and taxis as too expensive to take frequently.

“I think the biggest challenge is there’s separate locations in Worcester that are acting as main streets,” said Ryan Thornhill, a senior at Worcester Polytechnic Institute who grew up next door to Northampton and is familiar with thriving college towns. “It’s not as unified here as it could be. There’s not really a common mingling area.”

Officials say they are committed to improving transportation, and are in discussions about restoring and improving special shuttle service that once ran between the city’s campuses. Local leaders also believe development in the city’s center will create the one-stop spot students have been waiting for.



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

**A sign pointed to some of the city’s wealth of higher education institutions.**

A half-billion-dollar downtown project, called City Square, is expected to create a walkable, 2-million-plus- square-foot focal point featuring shops, restaurants, entertainment offerings, offices, and housing. Nearby, an apartment construction project will add some 250 beds that will be marketed to students looking to live off campus.

“We’re starting to build that student presence downtown,” said lifelong Worcester resident Timothy Murray, the former mayor and lieutenant governor who now heads the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, which recently surveyed local colleges about where the city should improve.

“One of the things that’s been missing is having a place where students could go and a place where people could go and get that downtown feel,” Murray said.

Worcester has the second-largest student population among Massachusetts municipalities. The number of college students in the city has risen by more than 30 percent over the past decade to 35,000, a sizable portion of the city’s overall population of 182,000.

The higher education presence downtown has grown significantly in recent years as local officials encourage more schools to open classrooms, dorms, and offices in the city’s center.

MCPHS University, formerly known as the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, was the first school to set up space in the city center. Since opening a downtown campus in 2000, the college has invested more than \$350 million to buy up property and to build dorms and academic buildings for some 1,800 students and 250 employees, said Worcester native Charles F. Monahan Jr., president of MCPHS, which was founded in Boston and has a larger campus there.

“Worcester is not Boston,” Monahan said. But, “there’s a lot happening in downtown Worcester. We’ve been very successful in Worcester. We got in at the right time.”

Last fall, Becker College opened a dorm that houses about 70 students a couple of blocks away. Next door, Quinsigamond Community College this fall opened classroom and office space for about 1,500 students, establishing a downtown campus several miles from its main site near the northern edge of Worcester.

Quinsigamond’s president, Gail Carberry, said the community college expects to eventually host another 500 students at the facility. She said Nichols College has signed a deal to run academic programming out of the building, and Elms College, Bay Path University, and Worcester State University are considering similar arrangements.

Students have taken more steps to interact with the city and with other campuses.

“What we’re hoping to do is find that niche that brings them all together,” said Patrick Rielly, a sophomore at the College of the Holy Cross and vice president of the Worcester Student Government Association. “There is so much potential in Worcester, but it’s matter of a bringing everyone together.”

The citywide student government group formed last summer to organize events — including a talent show and a 5K race. Two years ago, another student group established an annual event that recruits volunteers from the city’s colleges to spend a day helping refurbish parks and playgrounds.

“We’re trying to make it a very welcoming experience for college students,” said Mayor Joseph M. Petty. “It’s

always been a fight to get the kids involved in the city, but I think we've come a long way. They really love the city when they get to know it better.”

Students can take classes at any of the campuses in Worcester as well as three others just outside the city that belong to the higher education consortium. Some students said they also periodically attend events or parties at other schools.

Noah Carr, a Clark senior, said he plans to leave Worcester after he graduates. But he said he has enjoyed his time in the city overall, frequenting downtown bars and attending concerts at the Palladium and the DCU Center.

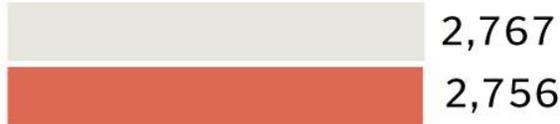
“Worcester’s definitely not the same as your classic college town,” Carr said. “But it’s changing. It’s definitely getting there.”

# Worcester campuses

## Attendance at the nine college campuses

2003 2013

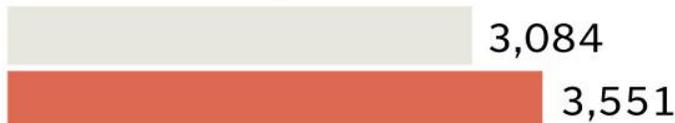
Assumption College



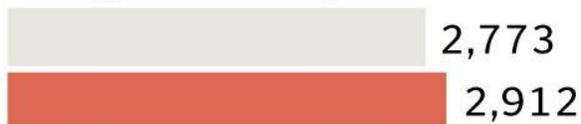
Becker College



Clark University



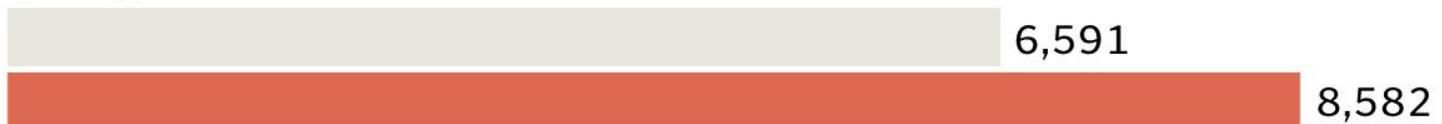
College of the Holy Cross



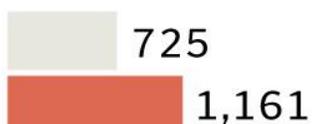
MCPHS Univeristy



Quinsigamond CC



UMass Medical School



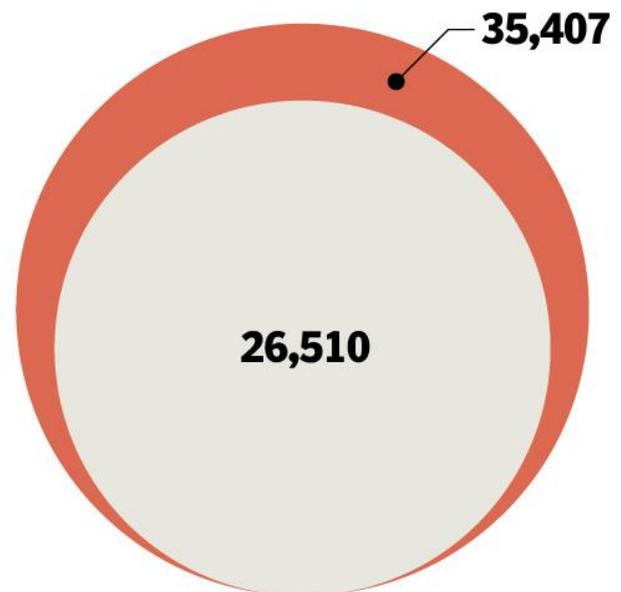
Worcester State University



Worcester Polytechnic Institute



## Total attendance



SOURCE: US Department of Education

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*Matt Rocheleau can be reached at [matthew.rocheleau@globe.com](mailto:matthew.rocheleau@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele)*



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