Ceremony marks end of the beginning for Drexel

First graduation a key time for university’s Sacramento center

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Next week Drexel University’s Sacramento center will graduate some 100 students in its first commencement ceremony.

The June 25 ceremony at Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento also marks a graduation of sorts for the center, which launched in January 2009.

Drexel’s Sacramento center isn’t a start-up anymore, and its inaugural dean, Tobey Oxholm, is moving on to another job at the end of this month. Frank Linnehan, associate dean at the university’s business school in Philadelphia, becomes interim executive director in Sacramento starting July 1.

The Sacramento Center for Graduate Studies now is at the point it can evaluate what worked, what didn’t and where it goes from here.

Since opening its doors on Capitol Mall, Drexel’s Sacramento center has enrolled 425 students in master’s and doctoral programs. The ceremony will include those students who began their studies in January and September 2009.
Drexel Sacramento didn’t enroll as many students as university leaders expected.

No one anticipated the center would launch during such a dismal economy either.

“We are probably a little bit lower than the expectation, but not significantly,” Linnehan said.

Drexel Sacramento is expected to break even by year five, in fiscal 2013, he said. For fiscal 2012, the center has a “manageable loss.”

Fewer employers in the Sacramento region kicked in tuition for their employees than Oxholm imagined. Only around 20 percent of employers with students at the Drexel center, Oxholm estimates, assisted their workers with tuition.

Drexel leaders initially thought they’d offer a degree in engineering management, but scuttled those plans because of lack of demand. Another degree, one in information systems, will go away when its few students finish the program, also because of insufficient interest, Linnehan said in an interview this week.

ESTABLISHING THE BRAND

Drexel Sacramento students surprised university leaders with their degree of engagement and civic-mindedness, eagerly volunteering for charity and community events.

Public service is a “core value of Drexel, but not typical in graduate programs, and it has flourished in Sacramento,” Oxholm wrote in an email. “I am very proud of our students for many things, but best among them all is the fact they are leading by example in their communities.”

Drexel leaders initially didn’t think about offering full-time degree programs. Students attend class on weeknights and weekends while continuing to work full-time. Officials realized, however, that Drexel isn’t making the most out of the Sacramento center, in which it invested $1 million worth of technology, and its faculty. So this fall the center will roll out two full-time programs: a master’s in finance and a master’s in medical science, Linnehan said.

The majority of Drexel Sacramento students still will be part-time students who work full time, he said.

The additions, Oxholm said in the email, represent “a real maturation of our enterprise as well as an expansion of Drexel’s commitment to Sacramento.”

Drexel also is starting to explore offering an undergraduate degree-completion program in a few years, Linnehan said.

University leaders believe they’ve made progress in establishing a reputation here.

When Drexel first came to Sacramento, the university — which is a strong, prestigious brand at home in Philadelphia — had zero name recognition in Sacramento, Linnehan recalled. Now, he said, 60 percent of those surveyed in the Sacramento region recognize Drexel as having a presence locally.

TESTING THE WATERS

Drexel entered a landscape dominated by public institutions and lacking the elite, nonprofit private universities so pervasive on the East Coast. Drexel was trying to fill that void.

The university came to Sacramento after the Angelo K. Tsakopoulos family and two other families and their partners offered 1,150 acres west of Roseville to be put toward a 600-acre Drexel campus, with the remaining land being sold for mixed-use development to fund the initial campus construction. Drexel has until 2013 to accept the gift; university leaders are evaluating the idea while using the Sacramento center to test the waters.

In terms of enrollment numbers alone, perhaps Drexel Sacramento hasn’t really altered the region’s higher education landscape. Compared to thousands enrolled at the University of California Davis or California State University Sacramento, Drexel’s student count is miniscule.

“Does serving 400 students change the landscape?” asked Sanjay Varshney, dean of Sacramento State’s business school.

But under Oxholm, Drexel has become an active supporter of the community and charitable organizations. It has provided classroom and meeting space for free to government agencies, nonprofits, educational institutions and public-private partnerships. The center employs 23.

“I think Drexel has done a terrific job of creating a presence in Sacramento, creating buzz and excitement for graduate programs that might help serve the market,” said Richard Rojo, spokesman at the University of the Pacific, a Stockton-based university that is considering expansion here. The university has about 1,000 students in Sacramento at its McGeorge School of Law.

And Drexel’s Sacramento center has provided competition to other universities in certain programs.

Drexel Sacramento won over Kyle Glankler, a Roebelen Contracting Inc. business development manager who graduates next week with a master’s in business administration. Glankler, 32, said he chose Drexel for its dedication to innovation in wanting to become a bicoastal university.

The Sacramento center, he said, provided him with a good education and personal service. Sure, he said, the first few weeks the center had some hiccups with technology, such as in his video conferencing classes.

Glankler’s overall grade for Drexel? “I would give Drexel a strong A minus,” he said.

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