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Sacramento's Drexel campus marks 1 year in area

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Carl "Tobey" Oxholm remembers a time not that long ago when most Sacramentans hadn't heard of his university.

Drexel University, of Philadelphia, is a household name in the Northeast, but virtually unknown in the Sacramento region. A local telephone survey in 2008 confirmed it.

"Not a single person had heard of us. They thought we were affiliated with (furniture manufacturer) Drexel Heritage. That's a significant hill to climb when you want someone to plunk down \$20,000 to \$40,000 to get an education from us," said Oxholm, a Drexel senior vice president and dean of its Center for Graduate Studies in Sacramento.

But as Drexel University's Center for Graduate Studies marks its first anniversary today, that anonymity has begun to disappear.

In the year since the Philadelphia-based school opened its doors in Sacramento, it has boosted enrollment from an initial 60 to 175 students and doubled its master's degree offerings to eight, including graduate study in business administration; library and information science; and human resource development.

Its 20,000-square-foot home at One Capitol Mall in Sacramento has been retooled with some \$1 million in new technology, and the university has introduced programs such as its Sacramento Leadership Fellowships to attract and cultivate new academic talent.

And it adds another option for the working professional pursuing graduate studies in the region.

"Their presence in the area – that tide raises all boats," said Steven Currall, dean of the Graduate School of Management at University of California, Davis. "That mix is good for students. The variety is good in terms of the options they have."

And the nonprofit Drexel offers a mix not often seen in California of private and public colleges operating side by side.

It's a development Sanjay Varshney, dean of California State University, Sacramento's business school, says is still playing out.

"In (the Northeast), the value proposition is well-evidenced, but the West Coast is different. In California, there are very few private (universities)," Varshney said.

"More options and more opportunity is a good thing, but they're trying a new way of doing business, so it's too early to tell. Whether they add value to the region still waits to be seen."

But Oxholm talks about the area's graduate studies programs as collaborators, not rivals.

"We are not competitors. We're trying to increase the pie, not recarve it," he said.

Oxholm talks with pride of his crop of students at Sacramento's campus, four of whom placed third in the recent Capsim Foundation Challenge, an international competition for business students.

"We have world-class talent here in Sacramento. That's good news," he said.

And he talks about a future that could include the region's first major private university on 1,150 acres of Placer County farmland.

The man largely responsible for bringing Drexel to Sacramento, university president Constantine Papadakis, died in April at 63.

Sacramento developer Angelo K. Tsakopoulos, an acquaintance of Papadakis', offered Drexel more than 1,100 acres in west Placer County to house a campus.

Under the plan, Drexel would build a 6,000-student campus on 600 acres, funded by sale of the remaining acreage to residential and commercial developers.

That plan has been stalled by the region's real estate slump and also faces opposition from the Sierra Club, which has filed a lawsuit that argues the development would promote urban sprawl as well as traffic problems and air pollution.

Tsakopoulos could not be reached for comment.

While the campus plan is delayed, Drexel remains committed to the area through its graduate program, Oxholm said.

"There's no doubt that the vision that brought Drexel to Sacramento was Papadakis'. He passed in April, but there's been no diminution," he said. "We have more students, we're offering more programs. This is our commitment to the community."