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UR urges students to explore Rochester

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Largely hemmed in by the Genesee River, Mount Hope Cemetery and Genesee Valley Park, the University of Rochester is like an island inside Rochester.

But in the past couple of years, UR has taken a variety of steps — from shopping incentives to rental cars — in an attempt to get its students increasingly off campus and involved socially and culturally in the community.

"A lot of our students, you can see them getting into 'what is Rochester?' " said Lydia Broome Crews, assistant director of Wilson Commons Student Activities at UR.

UR is among a number of area higher education institutions taking new steps to get their students off campus.

At State University College at Geneseo, incoming students during the summer got an orientation on the village's downtown as part of a research effort to see whether that affects the amount of discretionary spending students do on Main Street.

Each fall in Brockport is "Tour de Brockport," which is a walking tour/scavenger hunt in the village's downtown co-sponsored by SUNY Brockport's student government.

Each year at Rochester Institute of Technology there is a "Getting to Know Rochester Week," during which residence halls highlight things to do in the area, and have a different activity each day that takes students into Rochester. And St. John Fisher College provides a student shuttle service on Fridays to Rochester's East End entertainment district.

Outside UR's Fauver Stadium, the four rental cars sit parked in a row. The service, started at UR last month by Boston-based car rental firm Zipcar, lets students as young as 19 — as well as UR employees — rent cars for as little as \$7 an hour, plus an annual membership fee.

Having a car of your own "is a little expensive," said UR senior Iris Jo, a chemistry major from New Jersey. She and a friend scurried into a sporty red Mazda 3, hurrying to catch a flight.

Leaving campus

More than 90 percent of UR's 3,700 undergraduates in the College of Arts & Sciences, Engineering and Applied Sciences live on the River Campus. And UR has tried to build links to the city in the past, such as a pedestrian bridge over the Genesee built in 1991. Much of the recent effort has focused on transportation issues — "to make it easier for them to get off the island we're on," said Dean of Students Jody Asbury.

That push started three years ago with the reworking of the Regional Transit Service bus lines that serve the River Campus, reducing the trip to the Eastman School of Music from 40 minutes to less than half that and adding weekend service to the Public Market and malls, Asbury said.

Ridership on the three lines that serve UR has gone up 10 to 13 percent since then, and now averages roughly 2,000 riders a day — including but not limited to UR students — according to the Regional Transit Service.

Resident advisers also now are trained on using the bus system, so they can teach students.

That same year, UR started its Rochester Every Day, or RED program, as an incentive to get students off campus. The red RED stickers on students' ID cards get them discounts from roughly 150 businesses in the South Wedge, Monroe Avenue, Park Avenue and in the neighborhoods across the Genesee River from campus.

Starting later this fall, UR students will be able to use their Flex Account cards — a type of campus debit card commonly used at the campus bookstore and in laundry machines and photocopiers — at some off-campus businesses.

Volunteerism

For the past two years, resident advisers in UR's dorms have been required to do programming for students that gets them off campus.

And this fall UR is "looking to take that to the next level" with the Zipcar program, said Bryan Rotach, program manager for UR's Rochester Center for Community Leadership.

Unlike most rental car programs, Zipcars are available to UR students ages 19 and up.

The push to get students socially and culturally off campus comes atop longstanding pushes at UR to get students involved in community service activities and volunteerism off campus.

Every fall for the past 18 years, incoming freshmen have taken part in Wilson Days, with busloads being sent around the community to volunteer at various community organizations.

The university, working with Leadership Rochester, five years ago started its Urban Fellows program in which students at UR and other area colleges each summer work in paid fellowships at community organizations or businesses doing some form of community work.

Three dozen undergraduates last year took part in a new effort, Coaches Are Role Models for Empowerment, which partners up with a handful of Rochester School District elementary schools to provide coaching and tutoring.

And UR is trying to find funding to pay for an idea, City Youth Year, in which recent graduates of area colleges would receive a stipend and free housing at area colleges while they spend a year in local urban social-service agencies, doing youth related programming, Asbury said.

"It's natural. We have some talented, bright kids who are dying to share their expertise, Asbury said.

"And Rochester is incredibly accessible ... and has done some great things for them. We think of the city as vivifying ... student life."

UR's undergraduates generally don't go off campus too much, said Jo.

Freshmen and sophomores in particular "don't know how," she said.

The trip to the airport marked her first time using a Zipcar, which uses a swipe card to get in. But it probably won't be her last, she said. "Just if I want to get away from everybody," she said. "Just to get off campus."

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