Store transformation and partnership combine to create flagship campus store

The Challenge

Home to 17,000 students, UMass Lowell is a national research university located on a high-energy campus in the heart of a global community. As part of the university’s commitment to fulfill the needs of its ever-growing student body, support the university’s goal of environmental friendliness and help revitalize the town, UMass Lowell invested $95 million in a state-of-the-art complex to unify its North, East and South campuses and the community.

Called University Crossing, the 230,000-square foot student engagement center was designed to house all critical student services and amenities under one roof – including financial aid, registration and billing; shared space for more than 250 student organizations and clubs; dining options; meeting and event space; and last but not least, the UMass Lowell River Hawk Shop.

Built to replace three smaller separate bookstores, the River Hawk Shop was developed to achieve UMass Lowell’s vision of creating not only a campus store but a community store. To operate the flagship store, UMass Lowell selected Follett Higher Education Group based on its track record of managing college and university campus stores as well as its financial stability, innovative offerings and ongoing flexibility and support.

The Solution

To accommodate an increase in demand for UMass Lowell apparel and merchandise following the university’s move to Division I athletics, the River Hawk Shop spans two floors, offering a wide array of River Hawk team apparel and other university-branded merchandise, school supplies, gifts and other items on the main level, and course materials on the lower level. The River Hawk Shop also features an expanded general book section with everything from children’s books to the latest New York Times® Best Sellers and offers plenty of space for in-store events including author signings and children’s reading hours.

To achieve UMass Lowell’s vision of creating a store fit to support both the campus and local community, Follett worked closely with the university and their outside design team on store design, visual merchandising and store fixtures to ensure a world-class feel. The university’s mascot, athletic marks, athletic font and spirit colors are strategically integrated into every aspect of the campus store including signage, vinyl graphics, wall colors, carpet, finishes and furniture.

Another benefit of partnering with Follett – access to the nation’s largest textbook rental program, designed to help students save up to 65 percent the cost of purchasing new books (to date students have saved more than $1 billion with Follett’s text rental program). The process is simple -- students simply pay to use the book for the duration of the term and return the book to the campus store after finals. Normal wear and tear is expected during the rental period, so students can highlight and write in the book as needed to help them retain information.

Finally, to provide ongoing support to the UMass Lowell community, Follett ties in with campus community events, participates in campus committees, partners with student groups, and even travels with sports teams to sell Lowell merchandise where and when fans want it.
A vibrant space for the campus and community, University Crossing and the River Hawk Shop have surpassed student, alumni, staff and faculty expectations, all of who eagerly show off the building and store to visitors and potential students.

More than 200 students, faculty and staff and Massachusetts state and local leaders helped officially open the center in Fall 2014 with a ribbon cutting ceremony, student performances and week-long in-store events designed to drive traffic, including talks and book signing events by United States Senator Elizabeth Warren and Piper Kerman, prison reform activist and author of Orange is the New Black. Kerman’s event was attended by 400 customers purchasing 250 copies of her book for the autograph session.

On the financial front, thanks to the superior quality and assortment of merchandise in the River Hawk Shop, sales have quadrupled. And the textbook rental program has well surpassed expectations, growing from $88K in 2010 to a projected $780K in 2015 through the access of 40,000 rental titles. This program has helped make course materials more affordable for students, yielding a savings of $3.1M for UMass Lowell students over the past four years.

Further solidifying the success of the River Hawk Shop, the university was awarded the bronze award in overall branding from the prestigious Higher Education Marketing Report 30th Annual Educational Advertising Awards, the largest educational advertising awards competition in the country. Go River Hawks!

“Our students finally have the world class bookstore they deserve at the quality of other student life spaces at UMass Lowell.”

LARRY SIEGEL
Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs & Events

“We set out to consolidate our three outdated campus stores into one centralized world-class operation. The ideal setting for this world-class campus store was in our new state-of-the-art University Crossing building that has transformed our student life experience. Now our students, faculty, staff and visitors have access to the merchandise, course materials and savings programs that they deserve.”

TOM HOOLE
Chief Procurement Officer