Loop U.

Packed with students, dorm rooms and educational facilities, the 1.65-square-mile area bounded by the Chicago River, Wacker Drive, Roosevelt Road and the Lakefront is THE LARGEST COLLEGE TOWN IN ILLIN.
By Patrice M. Jones
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In a patch of perfect lawn across the street from Buckingham Fountain, Mike Perry and two other Roosevelt University students took a break from classes downtown recently to enjoy a game of Frisbee in Grant Park.

There was the Sears Tower gleaming in the distance in the afternoon sun to one side of them; the iconic fountain and the lakefront on the other.

"Where else could you find a campus quad better than Grant Park?" said Jesse Hernandez, 19, who met Perry only a few weeks ago when the two started the fall semester living in the massive downtown dormitory called University Center that houses students from Roosevelt, Columbia College Chicago and DePaul University.

"You can't beat it," he said.

You can find the backpack- and iPod-wearing set hanging out in droves near University Center, the high-rise that opened two years ago at 525 S. State St. The lobby and sidewalk outside the "UC" are informal gathering spots where South Loop dwellers share ideas about the best places to eat, find a book or bar hop. College students also are invading Grant Park for the free concerts and festivals, and trolling downtown for other
Last year, an economic analysis confirmed the trend, dubbing a 1.65-square-mile area bounded by the Chicago River, Wacker Drive, Roosevelt Road and the lakefront, the "largest college town in Illinois." It boasted 52,000 students and more than 20 institutions of higher education occupying more than double the space of the Sears Tower.

The economic study was conducted by the Regional Economic Applications Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and was sponsored by the Greater State Street Council and the Central Michigan Avenue Association, which merged last year and is now called the Chicago Loop Alliance.

The study -- meant to track the growth of Loop facilities devoted to higher education -- also found that the number of residential beds offered by academic institutions in the Loop numbered almost 4,000. That number is not huge in comparison with some other institutions. The University of Illinois at Chicago alone, for example, has 3,100 student beds. But the figure was an unexpected bright spot for campuses downtown that had been long known largely as commuter schools.

"We were pretty surprised by the numbers," said Ty Tabing, executive director of the Chicago Loop Alliance. "We planned to look at higher education as sort of a new recruiting tool for businesses interested in the area, but when we started doing the research, we found out a number of universities were experiencing tremendous growth and adding facilities at a rate we hadn't expected."

The higher education study found some additional interesting facts: Loop colleges and universities collectively represent one of Chicago's top 25 employers with over 12,000 workers; college students spend more than $25 million annually at area businesses in the Loop; and seven institutions alone hosted events in one year that attracted a half-million people.

Big plans

Ten institutions alone also spent $159 million in facility construction and improvements over a five-year period and collectively the Loop's schools plan to spend almost $340 million in capital projects by the end of the decade.

The higher education study now is more than a year old, and the downtown growth continues.

Farther north, Loyola University Chicago -- though not part of the Loop study -- cut a giant red ribbon on its new $51 million, 25-story high-rise downtown student residence last month featuring furnished apartments at 26 E. Pearson St. near Water Tower Place. The facility, which includes 627 beds, has been a big draw for students such as Thomas Marcuccilli of Fort Wayne, Ind.
"Growing up in a small town in Indiana, this is the kind of place where I could go to on vacation, and right now, it's right outside my door," said the gregarious junior. "People come to visit, and I can walk them straight out into the shops on North Michigan Avenue."

University officials say the reason for the growth is multifaceted: it is a collision of positives that have come from the growing allure of Chicago's downtown that has shed much its gritty image and now boasts Millennium Park, museums, and a thriving arts and theater scene.

At the same time, schools such as Columbia College and Roosevelt University with a longtime downtown presence increasingly have been transforming themselves from commuter to residential campuses -- attracting younger students and recruiting nationally and internationally. They also have been using their urban backdrop as a key selling point.

"Students come to downtown Chicago for the museums, the galleries, the bookstores, the performances -- all of it gets wrapped up into the experience of being at Columbia," said Mark Kelly, vice president for student affairs at Columbia College.

Columbia transformation

Columbia probably has had the biggest transformation. Columbia had about 15 percent of its freshmen living on campus three years ago; now that figure is about 58 percent. In addition, Columbia plans to add another 434 beds next fall, Kelly said. The university also has seen its enrollment jump about 16 percent since 2003 to 11,500 students.

Still, students say there is room for improvement -- in a survey accompanying last year's Loop study, students reported there was a need for more affordable restaurants and parking, and the majority female students expressed concerns about walking alone in the Loop at night.

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Life in the Loop. Students who study and live in downtown Chicago note a variety of reasons for loving their environs. Here is what some of them had to say:

MIKE PERRY, a junior at Roosevelt University from Glen Ellyn, mentioned some distinct advantages to living downtown -- like dancing under the stars:

"Within my first couple of weeks here, there was a Latin night in Grant Park. I went with some friends and we just walked over there. There was a free, hourlong instruction period for tango and salsa. . . . Definitely, an icebreaker. Later, they were rotating partners, so I danced with a few ladies from Chicago that I would have never met otherwise."
BRITTANY NASH, a Columbia College freshman from Milwaukee, said:

"I know for me, coming from Milwaukee, our downtown is small. It all shuts down at 10 o'clock. So I just have been having fun walking around and seeing so many people outside, particularly at night. I actually just love looking out the windows and seeing all the lights from the city. I guess things like that people from Chicago take for granted."

GRAHAM HOPPE, a senior at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from Indianapolis, said he thought living downtown would be an amazing chance he might never have again. He said the major downside is the Loop's need for more affordable restaurants:

"Absolutely, cheaper, non-fast food would be great. We would all love that. And more community spaces where you don't feel compelled to spend money."

KEVIN MERKELZ, a Columbia College senior from Rolling Meadows, said he also is focused on employment opportunities:

"I find that a lot of students don't miss the frat house or sorority scene on a traditional campus. A lot of students who come to school down here are very self-motivated. I am a film and video student. Chicago is a booming market for editing and sound. So I am here to make friends, but ultimately I want to find a job and this is a good place to find internships. It is the best place to be -- not out in some cornfield in southern Illinois."

CHIOMA NWAKIBU, a DePaul University junior from Gaithersburg, Md., actually does a reverse commute, traveling from downtown to most of her classes at DePaul's Lincoln Park campus -- just because she likes living downtown.

"My sister lives on a traditional college campus and she has had problems finding a job. Down here, there are just so many places downtown to work, do internships and so many other opportunities. I just feel I am a few steps ahead by living down here."

--Patrice M. Jones

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State's largest 'college town'

In 2005, researchers decided to look at higher education as an economic sector and study its impact on the Loop and South Loop. They were floored by what they found: The 1.65-square-mile area bounded by the Chicago River, Wacker Drive, Roosevelt Road and the lakefront is the largest college town in Illinois.

They found 52,000 students and more than 20 institutions of higher education occupied nearly 7.5 million gross square feet of Loop real estate -- more than double the space of the Sears Tower.

School residence facilities in the Loop offered almost 4,000 beds.

Loop colleges and universities collectively represented one of Chicago's top 25 employers, with more than 12,000 workers.

College students spent more than $25 million annually at area businesses in the Loop.

In one year, 7 academic institutions in the Loop attracted a half-million people to their events and programs.

Source: "Higher Education in the Loop and South Loop: An Impact Study"

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