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Cover Story

QUARTERLY ECONOMIC REPORT: Ashford turns the page

By Steven Martens | [Email this story](#) [Print this story](#) [1 comment\(s\)](#)

When Mitch Seifert enrolled at Ashford University in 2005, Bridgepoint Education had just taken over operations of the former Mount St. Clare College. Enrollment had been declining, debt had been piling up, the nearly 90-year-old institution's future was in doubt, and it showed.

Seifert, a DeWitt native who had spent a year studying at Scott Community College, said he got a "good vibe" from the school, but in everything from the computer equipment available to him as a graphic design student to the demeanor of some on campus, he could tell the college had been through hard times.

"When I left this last December, it was a complete 180," he said.

Since Bridgepoint took over operations of Ashford at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, the college has continued to set new marks for enrollment and graduation, added hundreds of jobs and in 2007 became the first tenant in the Lyons Business and Technology Park when the college opened a call center there.

In May 2005, Ashford graduated 145 students at its spring commencement ceremony. This May, there will be two graduation ceremonies for the first time in its history because the college's athletic facility is not big enough to accommodate the 565 graduates who will go through commencement and their families.

Many of those students are participants in the university's online education program. University officials expect online students from 44 states to come to Clinton to accept their diplomas.

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With so many online education options available, Ashford attracts students by offering "just plain good service," said John Ballheim, vice president and campus director at Ashford.

Ballheim said the college offers assistance to prepare students to enter the work force not only by educating them in their chosen field but in what it is like in a modern workplace.

That was a lesson Seifert said he needed as he grew close to earning his bachelor of arts degree in graphic design. Seifert said his instructors told him getting by wasn't going to be good enough to get a job once he graduated, that he needed to do the best work he could do. Seifert said the "tough love" approach helped him get a job in marketing and graphic design at the Putnam Museum in Davenport.

"They're definitely willing to go the extra mile to help students prepare," Seifert said.

Ballheim said Ashford offers the personal attention that larger university cannot offer. He said many Ashford staff members have been at the university for 20 years or more, and have helped continue the intimacy the college has had since the days of the Franciscan sisters who founded Mount St. Clare.

"I think a lot of that culture that the sisters built a foundation on still exists in our culture," he said.

During his time at Ashford, Seifert said the university also made significant upgrades in the technology available to students studying graphic design and animation.

In its first year of operating the college, Bridgepoint increased the number of employees at the college from 80 to 124. Ashford now has about 450 full-time jobs in Clinton, either on campus or at the nearby call center. Ballheim said about 300 of those jobs could be located anywhere in the country, but Bridgepoint wanted the jobs in Clinton.

"We want to be an integral part of the community," Ballheim said. "We want to be part of the economic growth and viability of the community."

Clinton Mayor Rodger Holm said the university has enhanced Clinton's local education system, which also features quality public schools at Clinton Community College, and has enhanced Clinton's economic prospects.

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Bryant

wrote on May 7, 2009 8:05 PM:

" It's about time something happens. Now we are going to see some real change "

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