University President Rev. Scott R. Pilarz, S.J., announced at a Jan. 31 news conference the largest and most ambitious building project in the 118-year history of the Jesuit university, a $30,000,000 new campus center that will transform the heart of the campus.

The roughly 118,000 square foot, four-story building will be located along Mulberry Street in the rear of the existing Gunster Memorial Student Center and Weinberg Memorial Library. Construction is expected to begin in the late spring of 2006 with an anticipated completion in the fall of 2007.

Once construction of the new building is complete, the existing Gunster Center will be taken down to create a campus green in its place that is nearly the size of a football field.

“Among the hallmarks of The University of Scranton is our extraordinary sense of community, an essential element that sets us apart from many colleges,” said Fr. Pilarz. “We intentionally refer to the new building as a ‘campus’ center, since it will encourage interaction among students, faculty and staff at the same time that it serves as a crossroads for the broader Scranton community.”

In the announcement, Father Pilarz referenced dramatic growth and development of the University that has taken place over the more than four decades since the Gunster Center was dedicated in 1960.
“Over the past four decades, Scranton has evolved into a broadly regional, comprehensive institution with students coming from more than 30 states and more than 35 countries,” Father Pilarz added. “The university has simply outgrown the 77,000 square foot Gunster Center, which was built for a time when only 228 of our total student enrollment of 2,300 lived on campus,” Father Pilarz added.

Scranton’s student enrollment for the fall of 2005 is 4,846, of which 2,075 are resident students. The university also employs 832 full-time and 253 part-time faculty and staff.

According to Vincent Carilli, Ph.D., Vice President for Student Affairs, the new campus center is designed to address the Gunster Center’s limitations in dining and meeting spaces.
How does the Gunster Memorial Student Center measure up?

At roughly 50,000 square feet, the original building was designed to serve an undergraduate student population that included just 228 residential students out of an undergraduate student body of almost 2,300.

In the four decades since the center’s dedication, Scranton evolved into a broadly regional, comprehensive institution, drawing students from more than 30 states and more than 35 countries. As the student population grew, so did the demands on the student center. A 1993 expansion added 19,000 sq. ft. to address the shortfall in dining and kitchen space, but accommodating the growing need for dining and support areas came at the cost of lounges and gathering spaces.

Today, new and prospective students consistently mention Gunster’s inadequacies, pointing to the building’s inability to serve even basic needs for club and activity meetings. Amid generally high satisfaction ratings, a 2005 Student Climate Study at the University revealed a lack of designated areas on campus for students to congregate and socialize and specifically identified the need for a student center where “everyone can come to...regardless of the weather” as among the greatest detractors to creating and nurturing community on campus. Students also point to the building’s inability to meet even their most basic needs for meetings for the more than 60 active clubs and organizations of the University.

Faculty and staff express similar concerns stemming from a greater desire to foster formal and informal interaction with students. Once the hub of campus activity, the current student center is now an impediment in our efforts to provide space for community interaction and fellowship – the essence of the University.

“With the help of our architects and the benefit of scores of visits to other campuses, we have developed an exciting design that addresses our serious need for increased dining areas and student gathering spaces, while consolidating many important functions that are now spread throughout the campus,” Dr. Carilli said.

The first floor of the building includes a grand lobby, campus bookstore, retail dining with seating for 250, a student mail center and coffee shop. The second floor offers a fireplace lounge, offices for Student Affairs, Mission and Ministries and the student forum. The forum will serve as the nerve center for student clubs and activities, Wellness Center, Women’s Center, Multicultural Center, and Center for Social Action and Service Initiatives.

“The design of the student forum will encourage interaction among clubs and organizations, and will also include our leadership library,” said Dr. Carilli.
The third floor will serve as the primary dining space in the building and will have seating for 800. The fourth floor will be a hub both for student events and for the many University activities that are open to the public. It includes a subdividable 7,000 sq. ft. ballroom with dinner seating for 425 and lecture seating for more than 700, a theatre with 260 fixed seats, and three multi-purpose meeting rooms.

The design of the center by Philadelphia architects Burt Hill Kosar Rittleman incorporates windowed atriums and two-story open spaces into an airy interior design.

Scranton Mayor Chris Doherty, who attended the Jan. 31 news conference, referred to the new campus center as “a tremendous addition to the Mulberry corridor.” In his remarks, Mayor Doherty reflected on his father’s years as President of Scranton City Council during the 1970’s.

“At the time, the discussion was to build a campus for the University so the kids could have a place to walk back and forth and not be worried about crossing Linden Street. Today, that dream has almost come to fruition because you have the green space,” said Mayor Doherty, referring to the new campus green that is part of the project.