

The Vision for Mountaintop Campus

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Three songs. Sometimes four.

That's how junior Emma Valle, '26, measures the bus ride from lower campus to Mountaintop Campus at Lehigh University.

Mountaintop Campus is home to the Art, Architecture, & Design (AAD) program, the School of Education, and graduate school programs, among other interdisciplinary studies. It sits, perched among hills and trees - especially admired by students in the autumn, where the foliage is a week or two ahead of the changing leaves at lower campus.

The classrooms at Mountaintop are clean and crisp, refined with an industrial edge. Minimalist, unlimited, and open. There's much possibility for creativity, productivity, and community.

But despite its beauty and potential, Mountaintop often feels underutilized. Students frequently mention challenges such as long bus waits and limited food options as barriers to a more vibrant community.

Here's where Ruth Traldi comes into the picture.

A New Perspective

Joining Lehigh in 2024 as part of the university's 10-year strategic plan, Ruth Traldi brings a wealth of experience from her previous role at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. There, she planned events ranging from academic conferences to interactive community gatherings.

At Lehigh, Traldi's mission is ambitious yet straightforward: transform Mountaintop into a thriving hub of activity - a "small city" within the university, as she puts it.

In her mind, it means "making it a more vibrant place that is attractive to students and faculty, staff, research, companies, industry leaders, community members, both within the Lehigh community and broader Bethlehem community."

Her approach combines strategic planning with grassroots collaboration. She emphasizes that student voices are central to shaping the campus's future.

"Students should have a voice about things that are happening up here," she said. "We need a formalized way of having students engaged on a regular basis."

Traldi wondered if there was a way to facilitate this level of engagement, and she discovered a simple solution.

Building a Community

One of Traldi's initiatives is the Mountaintop Makers, an unprecedented established group of students and faculty dedicated to enhancing the campus experience.

Traldi understands that students have shared these challenges but prior to establishment of the Mountaintop Makers, lacked a clear platform to voice their opinions. Through this group, she hopes to bring together a group of ambitious volunteers who want to be heard and drive meaningful change.

For junior Jeffrey Torres, '26, an intended design major, these efforts are critical. The bus ride, often stretching past preference, is a recurring frustration. While recent updates to the bus schedule have introduced a more frequent cycle and a direct route, students like Torres feel there's still room for improvement.

Senior Alex Burmeister, '25, shared a similar thought about food options. "I spend a lot of time here and always end up eating the same thing. Some variety would definitely be nice," she said with a laugh.

Despite these pain points, students also highlight the unique sense of community on Mountaintop.

"The community here is so valuable," said Sophie Appel, '25, a design major with a marketing minor. "It's something that makes our Lehigh experience [so special]. The friendships we make here feel like they'll last a lifetime."

Burmeister agreed, noting the supportive atmosphere among peers. "It's a big commitment to get up here and stay up here to work," she said. "But I like that I know people here. Everyone's very friendly and collaborative."

Space to Be Creative

For students like Burmeister, Mountaintop isn't just a place to study or attend classes - it's where they've found their creative spark.

"I really felt like a graphic design student for the first time in my freshman year," Burmeister said. "We had to make a zine, and it was the first project I designed completely on my own - from start to finish. Printing, cutting, figuring out the tools - it all came together to create something real."

Building C, with its open spaces and creative energy, has become a go-to spot for design and art students seeking inspiration.

“Building C is one of my favorite spaces to do creative work,” Burmeister said. “I love the atmosphere and the community here. With smaller numbers and the big commitment it takes to come up and stay here, you really get to know everyone. It’s such a friendly, collaborative environment.”

Looking into the Future

For Traldi, the goal is to ensure that Mountaintop becomes a place where students want to spend their time - not just a destination for class. This means tackling the practical issues, like transportation and dining, while also creating opportunities for connection and engagement.

“If we make it exciting enough, the extra five minutes on the bus won’t feel like a big deal,” she said.

From karaoke nights to plans for using the lawn as a gathering space, Traldi’s vision is already taking shape. And as students, faculty, and community members collaborate to reimagine what Mountaintop can be, the campus is beginning to reflect its full potential.

“With every idea and every event, Mountaintop is becoming more than just a destination,” Traldi said. “It’s becoming a community.”