

# Halls of learning: universities in *Mage: the Ascension*

*text by Adrian BK, images credits at the end of the article*

Of all the Storyteller system games, Mage has perhaps the greatest affinity with the pursuit of knowledge. The resources and locations of the chronicle need to reflect this. One asset to the chronicle is the presence of a local (or nearby) university that can serve a range of functions from information resource, to employer, or even recruiting ground for the next generation of Ascension Warriors. This article aims to outline some of the uses of the university for Mages that can be applied to both Tradition- and Technocratic-based stories.

The university is an institution that has remained relatively unchanged over the last eight hundred years. In Western civilisation, education was held as the purview of the church until the early 1200's when universities formed to meet the needs of secular education. As the middle class gained traction in society a need arose to train individuals for the increasingly bureaucratic roles for which the church-based education system was not equipped. The trappings of higher education - syllabus, assessment, accreditation, and research - have remained relatively unchanged. As such, the university is one of the only institutions (aside from the Catholic Church) to be readily recognisable against its' medieval counterpart. As such, some of the ideas presented herein could be used for *Vampire: the Dark Ages*, or *Victorian Age Vampire* (or any other historical game).

In the modern era, a university degree is pursued for a number of reasons, whether to

secure employment (advancing a career, changing a career, or securing one's current position), as a rite-of-passage, or simply as a way to buy time whilst figuring out what a person really wants to do with their life. Despite rising tuition costs (and mounting student debt), textbooks, and the loss of income whilst studying full-time (or the balancing act for the distance or online learner), universities still enjoy respectable growth both domestically and internationally.

A university can also be perceived as an economic boon for a city. The idea of the 'university town' denotes a location where most of the prosperity can be attributed to higher education, and is easily recognised. This will include the various jobs (in smaller university towns, they may actually be the largest employer next to government departments) as well as the influx of spending that occurs during semester by the on-campus students (many of whom will have travelled to live there). Local businesses may employ students part-time, and the financial ebb and flow of the town is linked to the semester.

The university represents an establishment useful to Mages of both the Traditions and the Technocracy and can become the focal point of influence struggles to control institutional resources (ever under threat by government funding cuts).

## **By the numbers**

If your Mage chronicle makes use of extended Backgrounds, Influence (University)

is an obvious choice for characters. For those Storytellers familiar with the *Mind's Eye Theatre* Influence system, the tiers of the background can be used as a rough gauge for plausible actions. More details can be found in any of the *Laws of* series of rulebooks.

Other Backgrounds can be equally useful such as Allies and Contacts (from a student club all the way to a Dean of Faculty), Mentor, and even Resources (explained as research grant money, or simply a wage from the institution) and it is possible to provide story hooks that link to academia at character creation.

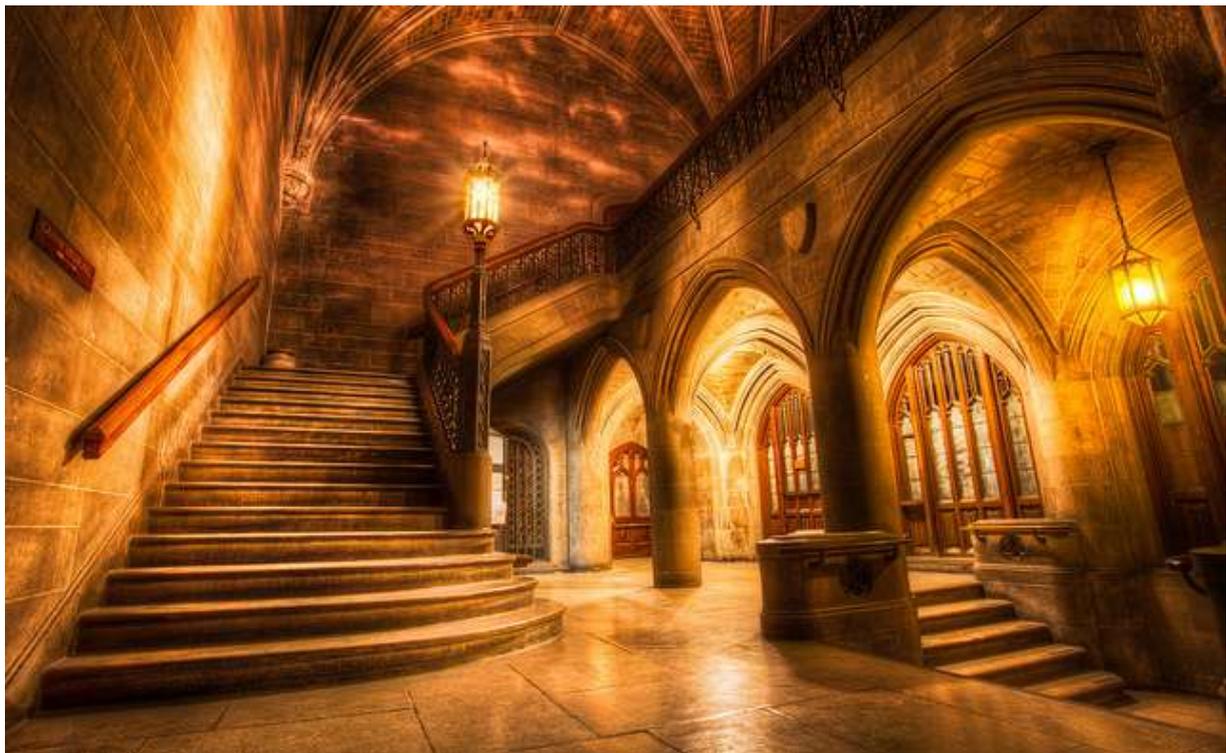
### External or internal resources?

The needs of every chronicle are different, but the role of the university can broadly be broken into two categories. As an external resource, Mages use the university but aren't a part of the organisation. Libraries provide free access, they can access parts of the grounds, and interact with students. Remember that most campuses are very open; visitors are rarely challenged on the grounds (unless they are doing something clearly suspicious) and most spaces are easily accessible. Campus libraries are open to the general public and only a few services

are generally charged out or restricted in some manner (such as borrowing, use of computer facilities, or access to Special Collections).

The university as internal resource presupposes that the Mages are affiliated with the university. Perhaps they are prestigious alumni, scholars-in-residence, research grant recipients, or teaching faculty. This gives them access to certain perks (like access to information resources and physical locations, prestige, reputation) but it also acts as a balance that tethers the Mage to the mundane.

It is well worth noting at this stage that when most people think of universities, it is the teaching (Academic) staff that generally spring to mind. In most universities, however, the Professional Staff outnumber their Academic colleagues at a ratio of either two (or sometimes three) to one. The Professional staff include everyone from the cleaners, finance clerks, groundskeepers, administrative assistants, ICT support, Librarians, counsellors, gym instructors, tradespeople, security officers, mail clerks, and many other roles. Interestingly, Mages might find the Professional Staff to sometimes be of more use. For example, the staff in Buildings & Facilities (or Security)



have far greater access to the physical spaces of the campus than any tenured Professor (who probably has the keys to their own office and maybe the front door of the building at best). Likewise, many of these staff will have been on the payroll for an extended period of time and this local knowledge can sometimes be exactly what the Mages need. The lead electrician who recalls the old access tunnels under the quad (and still has the maps somewhere in her office), or the cafeteria manager who has been around long enough to have blackmail material on everyone can be a valuable asset to any cabal.

Many universities are well-established and have undergone a lot of structural change during their decades (or centuries) of operation. Mages may find a certain element of 'urban exploration' on the campus as they discover abandoned rooms (sometimes entire buildings are disused), tunnels, storage sheds, access shafts, and even roof spaces. In many cases, these changes to facilities aren't documented well, so none but the longest-standing staff members may recall these details (until they are 'rediscovered' years later by the new administration - if at all).

As a starting point, Storytellers are encouraged to search university websites as most will have a campus map that could be used in the chronicle (even as a prop to hand out to players). Likewise, a search of news sites might yield some interesting stories about the institution.

### The total institution

The concept of the 'total institution' has been used to describe the psychological effects of closed communities (mostly applied to prisons and asylums, but there is evidence to suggest the model works with gated

communities too) and applies well to universities. The campus needs to be considered as a micro-community that has its' own social capital, reputation, politics, and sense of justice. Many staff (especially academic) work very long hours and so they only see their home and the campus (and wherever they purchase necessities such as fuel and food) for extended periods of time. Many campuses will include essential services on the grounds (such as post offices, banks, and small grocery stores) or nearby (such as take-away restaurants and petrol stations), so often staff and students do not need to travel far. This can lead to a very 'particular' view of the world and Storytellers are encouraged to think about the social dynamics of the institution if the university is to be a focal point of the chronicle. It is highly recommended that the relationship charts from *Vampire: the Masquerade* are used to map the inter-related NPCs (and their departments).

### Mage: the next generation

Unsurprisingly, Mages on both sides of the Ascension War look to universities as potential recruitment grounds. The Technocracy are able to use medical schools, information technology programs, even sociology and archaeology programs, as well as the gamut of finance, economics, politics, marketing, psychology, and engineering - there are few degrees (if any) that the Technocracy would find useless (although some that are less appealing to the mindset associated with a Pattern Essence). Whilst it is unlikely that every campus would have a 'secret Technocracy building', it would be reasonable to assume that they maintain an interest in aspiring scholars and researchers. Monitoring may not actually even be the remit of Mages but rather a network of Unawakened staff who can be prodded to talk about the new batch of





graduates (or Doctoral students) at social gatherings, conferences, or any other location where staff can discuss their work.

The Traditions can monitor universities in much the same manner and below are a few ideas for involvement on-campus. Each entry lists the Tradition and some possible ideas for contacts, synergy, or general interest.

There are plenty of stereotypical roles for Tradition Mages (and their Technocratic counterparts) in this setting. From the Akashics in the martial arts club, Choristers in the music courses, and the Ecstatic party animal, other opportunities arise for these Mages. Some ideas for cross-over activities (see below) could be refined for Mage-only chronicles or could be the catalyst for other ideas.

for example, the Virtual Adepts could fund a research team to include more virtual reality tools in the classes (both on-campus and online) to expose more people to a near-limitless environment. A group of electrical engineering students might be subtly

influence by their Son of Ether Professor as they question current scientific principles. A debating team that includes a Chorister might start to re-examine controversial topics, and the film club with an Akashic could start to push the boundaries of what is really possible without a stuntman.

The ability to influence thought and perception on a wider scale is one of the most appealing aspects of this location to all Mages, so it is worth bearing in mind that not every plot needs to be a global-spanning conspiracy. Sometimes, profound change is possible in small amounts and not felt for years after the event.

### **The Others**

For those Storytellers who enjoy mixing other supernatural elements into their Mage chronicle, the World of Darkness™ does not lack factions interested in the university setting.

Anarchs could use the campus as a tool to stir civil unrest and student protest to

destabilise Camarilla or Sabbat influence. They (like any other vampire) could see the campus as a prime feeding ground, and depending on the edicts of the local Prince (or Bishop) this area could be off-limits or assigned to an individual, pack, or coterie. Followers of Set would covet access to campuses for their trade and particularly enterprising Snakes might even have infiltrated the Administration as well as the student cohorts (a ghoul security guard who will 'look the other way', or a blackmailed Senior Manager becomes a very powerful piece in a Setite's strategy). Tremere might be found on the grounds too, either pursuing knowledge, cultivating contacts and allies, gathering influence, or looking for potential progeny. Woe betide the student who comes to the attention of the both House Tremere and the Technocracy.

The Arcanum may keep some of their treasures in plain sight (in Special Collections) or maintain a ties with colleagues who are either retired Investigators or sympathetic to the organisation. Conferences can be used as a reason to transport Arcanum secrets across borders, or even act as convenient gatherings of disparate Cenacula.

A Mummy could see the local university as a personal project and may have served on the Board a number of times over the last few centuries. Generous bequests and other sources of funding could be maintained by one of the immortals for any number of reasons. Or perhaps their role on campus is simply a cover - the groundsman who seems as though he's been here 'forever' might actually be one of the Shemsu-Heru. In this case, a group of Ecstatics seeking to halt Setite influence on the campus (see above) might find an unusual ally in their endeavours.

Universities are also places of personal tragedy. A cursory examination of the campus may yield small memorial gardens, plaques, and other ways to remember students and staff who have either died on the grounds or during their studies. The local Hierarchy may keep a watch on the university and could have a designated Circle to reap

those who cross the Shroud here. Using the notion of the total institution, consider the university as having cultural norms - including stories and local legends. This could include haunted places (such as buildings, sporting fields, dorms, or the office that was simply left alone after the last owner passed away at work), well-known local ghosts (such as the phantom librarian), or even items known to possess strange qualities. These all give the Restless a chance to interact with the Skinlands and gather Pathos; or a character might become one of the Restless only to find that they are now the centre of local stories. A Euthanotos, Dreamspeaker, Verbena, or even group of Hollow Ones would be well-suited to helping such a spirit resolve their Passions.

Changelings have an innate love of the university from prank days (a Pooka favourite), the quiet removal from society that the late night library offers (for Sluagh and a potential Hermetic), the rowdiness of rebellion and party (for everyone from Redcaps, Satyrs, Eshu, and even the odd Sidhe who may party - without being any the wiser - with the Ecstatics), to the student clubs (many a Boggan can be found here), the inventor clubs (shared by Sons of Ether and Nockers alike - can you imagine a robot combat club run by these two groups?) and even the stoic Trolls can be found among both staff and students (one could even be in the boxing or martial arts class run by the local Akashics). Universities have an odd balance of Glamour and Banality though, as they are places of freedom of expression and learning, whilst also places of evidence-based research. However, every faculty has staff that are best described as 'eccentric' (as does every class of students) and those folk who simply don't see the world as others do might be either Kithain or Kinain.

These are only a few ideas to start your stories and it will depend on the level of cross-over you want.

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