

A STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN FOR STUDENT CENTERS & COLLEGE UNIONS

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BY

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Introduction

Student affairs professionals across the country intend for a student center to be a hub of community and activity, collection of services, premier programmatic space and safe haven for students on college or university campuses. In 1971, Porter Butts, one of the most beloved college union professionals in the history of higher education, published a book titled *The College Union Idea*. In the text, he outlined the mission of the union building and the union professional to serve as a “unifying force” for the entire campus community, providing necessary facilities and services, and actively providing opportunities for students to develop as leaders, citizens, scholars and human beings. The union affirms values of community, cooperation, service, diversity, free expression and student self-governance (Keintz, 1996).

As an undergraduate at Ohio University between the years of 2004-2008, I had the privilege of experiencing the transition on campus from an outdated, poorly-located student center to an award-winning, state of the art facility that was constructed in the middle of university grounds, connecting upper and lower campus buildings and truly becoming the crossroads of the institution. Thus, driven by my personal experiences and growth at the John Calhoun Baker University Center and also my career goal to be

involved in the development of students through the student affairs field, I have set out on a mission to better understand the need for and use of a college union or university student center by post-secondary students and greater campus communities.

The idea has evolved through many facets, including my role as a Graduate Assistant for Student Center Programs at Ball State University, my membership in the Association of College Unions-International and through a class project where I constructed a research study in efforts to identify the student demographics that were utilizing the student center at Ball State University, for what purposes, how often and at what length, and the impact it had on the collegiate experience. Though I was certain of the great impact involvement at the student center had on my undergraduate career, I needed to assess its impact on other students. During conversations with students I gained information regarding their participation at the center, the roles they held on campus, the needs of their student organizations and their desires for enhanced student life offerings. Finally, by fusing interview data, industry trends, the expertise and best practices of union professionals, and case studies of a few institutions together, I have created a Strategic Action Plan for College Unions and Student Center.

Student union professionals are seeing a great deal of change within the industry, including: more diverse student body demographics; increased need for cutting edge technology; a mitosis effect of student organizations which further complicates programming efforts; an emphasis on sustainability that is here to stay; decentralization of community within campus facilities; and the renewed effort for student focused facilities all while facing significant budget cuts. What follows is a review of literature, explanation of findings, prompts for self-assessment and ideas to help reconceptualize the

role of the union on your campus. It is my hope that these ideas can be utilized by current practitioners to increase the participation, excitement and sense of community at a variety of institutions student centers.

Literature Review

Student Unions: The Early Days

The history of the modern day student center on university campuses dates back to the 19th century when students at Cambridge and Oxford established unions where they could gather. With the separation of Church and education, came heightened scientific research along with changes to university life outside of the classroom, including: organized games and races, college clubs, competitive scholarship, club blazers and ties, and Council of the Senate. But most importantly, students met to debate. While debating societies had existed for some time, debates on public issues began to draw incredibly large audiences and the need for reading and writing rooms, debate halls, lunchrooms and other meeting facilities became apparent. Thus, the idea of a formal union facility came to fruition at Oxford in 1823. The Union was for members only, included billiards and allowed smoking and was considered the social center of campus (McMillan, 1989).

Harvard's debate club, known as The Spy Club, served as the foundation for the Harvard Union of 1832. However, the first union building in the United States was not built until Houston Hall at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896. Modeled after a YMCA, Houston Hall included a swimming pool, bowling lanes, gymnasium, dining

rooms, billiards and chess tables, reading, writing and meeting rooms, an auditorium and a photography darkroom.

In 1914 officers from the Midwest unions organized to form the National Association of Student Unions. At the first meeting, representatives from nine institutions drafted a constitution and bylaws for the organization. The union was defined as the “most vital force in unifying the student body, molding the college spirit, and promoting democracy, thus tending to break down arbitrary class and social distinction. Without such a unifying force any student body, which is naturally broken up into difference departments and classes, is apt to center its interests and enthusiasm in some particular department or organization, rather than in the school as a whole,” (p. 11).

Throughout the Twenties and Thirties, colleges unions saw many changes on American campuses. The decades, marked with extreme financial struggle, also represented the beginning of a modern student personnel perspective, a more diverse student population which included women, a push for increased programming and recreation (organized primarily through the Greek system), a dedication to student employment at the union, and an emphasis on leadership from dedicated union staff (most notably Porter Butts from Wisconsin).

The Forties brought war to campus. For college unions early in the decade this meant shortages in many areas, including staff and student personnel who had gone to war and food services due to war rationing. Toward the end of the decade college campuses were overwhelmed by the demands of increased enrollment due to the G.I. Bill of 1946, which gave veterans the opportunity to earn their degrees. According to the

Annual Report from the Administrator for Veterans Affairs, by April of 1947 enrollment of veterans had peaked at 1,208,952 enrolled. With the increase in students came the increased need for space, thus by the end of 1948 more than 60 institutions across the nation were planning to build new unions as war memorials.

Though students of the Fifties are often known as The Silent Generation, stuck between a decade of war and the social upheaval of the Sixties, they are also known for their sincere enthusiasm for campus life and academic achievement. In 1956 members from the United States National Student Association outlined the role of the college union, naming four following components:

- “1. The union is the community center of the college, for all the members of the college family – students, faculty, administration, alumni and guests. It is not just a building; it is also an organization and a program. Together they represent a well-considered plan for the community life of the college.
2. As the “living room” or the “hearthstone” of the college, the union provides for the services, conveniences, and amenities the members of the college family need in their daily life on the campus and for getting to know and understand one another through informal association outside the classroom.
3. The union is part of the educational program of the college. As the center of college community life, it serves as a laboratory of citizenship, training students in social responsibility and for leadership in our democracy. Through its various boards, committees, and staff, it provides a cultural, social, and recreational program, aiming to make free time activity a cooperative factor with study in education. In all its processes it encourages self-directed activity, giving

maximum opportunity for self-realization and for growth in individual social competency and group effectiveness. Its goal is the development of persons as well as intellects.

4. The union serves as a unifying force in the life of the college, cultivating enduring regard for and loyalty to the college. (Green, 1958, p. 4-5).

In large part, these standards have held true since. Though student unions have been forced to continually meet the times and keep up with modern needs of university campuses and their student bodies, this expectation of the union to act as the unifying center for education and community continues both functionally and ideologically.

Facility Operation

In order to best meet the needs of an exceptionally diversified campus community, student centers have been faced with the challenge to include a wide variety of functionality in daily operation. In addition, needs for the facility differ greatly based on the needs of each campus. Small campuses are often recognized for their requirement to combine facilities due to smaller budgets and student population. In contrast, on larger campuses where distances are so great that students cannot reach a central union, branch or satellite buildings exist offering additional food services and opportunities for gathering and recreation. Differences also exist between residential campuses and urban campuses. Residential institutions must find a balance between recreation and programming within the residence halls in comparison to the union facility and directors of each department are encouraged to work in tangent with one another. On urban campuses, where a central meeting space is key to cultivating community, sometimes finding central space for a new building is the most difficult task, especially space large

enough to accommodate the large number of commuter students who need a place to stay during breaks once they reach campus. Plus, programming becomes a very difficult on an urban campus when most students have left the university by early evening (Noffke, 1965).

After determining the role of the student center on each unique campus, the most important decision to be made is location.

“For the union to be a ‘cross-roads of the campus’ figuratively as well as literally, it is necessary that analysis from the perspective of the long-range plan of the institution be made carefully. The union should be placed at a point where it will be on the main traffic axes of the campus of the future. Future location of buildings, size, extent of program, curriculum, etc., must be at hand as this decision is made,” (p. 11).

The site is most often decided by officers of the college or university who are tasked with looking into a crystal ball and predicting the future of an institution. The decision must be intentional, logical, and supported by the professionals who will continue to uphold the mission of the institution through operation of the facility in years to come.

Often, an all-encompassing student union creates relationships with other university buildings. When located in close proximity to the library, for instance, it offers students a convenient opportunity to break from study, but still “amplifies its service role in the academic process. More importantly, it seems to become a part of the heart of the academic emphasis of the institution,” (p. 24). At some universities the student center is built in conjunction to athletic facilities continuing the theme of physical activity. In

elaborate cases, swimming pools, exercise rooms and gymnasiums are even included within the union. The addition of bowling, billiards, darts and ping-pong also adds to the recreation theme. Arts are integrated within the union in the form of theaters and galleries, offering performance space for students and showcasing student voice through their works of art. Most importantly, perhaps, is the fine line between the operation of the student center and residence life. While both are dedicated to the creation of community outside of the classroom, the student center should truly facilitate as the “living room” of the institution at large.

When considering the blueprints of any college union, one would find facilities primarily utilized in one of two ways – either as service-driven space or program-driven space. Service-driven space is by definition, space that is dedicated to providing a specific service to the campus community. Common examples of this would include, but are not limited to: an information desk, bookstore, Post Office, bank, barbershop, food court or cafeteria, coffee shop, recreation center, hotel and offices for student life, student organizations, center administration, parking, judicial, legal, international, multicultural, disability, catering and dining services. On the other hand, program-driven space is space that is versatile and multi-purpose in order to host university-sponsored events and programs and cater to the opportunity to gather as a community. Student center spaces such as the lobby, ballroom, meeting rooms, lounges, library, gallery, theater and chapel (on private campuses) are considered program-driven spaces and are set dependent upon the needs of each separate audience. Planning for a student center requires a great deal of estimation on needs of the university, size and scope of events and budget, especially in designating space. Plus, once the facilities to be included and their sizes are determined,

then comes the most intricate part of college union planning: “the proper functional inter-relationship of the various facilities, including a determination as to floor level,” (p. 17). The structured and purposeful layout of the facility will greatly influence patterns of use by students and staff.

Just like the layout of a college union varies greatly due to the needs of the campus community, so does the formula for staffing. In 1986 the Association of College Unions-International published *Standards for professional staff preparation in college unions and student activities*. At that time, more than one-third of college union directors were the only professionals on the staff, though at other institutions directors had several assistants. Approximately half of the directors surveyed were also in charge of campus activities and programs. “In general, the number of staff positions required to carry out the maintenance and business functions of the union is proportional to the size of the facility, the numbers of services offered, the number of patrons served by the union, and the budget of the operation,” (Plakidas, 1986, p. 3). Titles commonly seen in student center operations include: director, associate director, assistant director, program director, director of student activities, recreation director, promotions or marketing director, business manager, operations manager, maintenance manager, reservations coordinator, hotel manager and food service director. Staff includes full-time professionals formally trained in facility operations or student affairs, maintenance and service crews and student employees who often serve as desk staff, building managers or clerks.

In recent years, the college union has operated more commonly as a conference center. In a study developed by the Association of College Unions – International,

professionals discussed the benefits of combining the student union and conference center on college campuses. The study states that

“not only are they (conferences) an accepted part of the educative function of the college; they widen the influence of the college and strengthen support for what it is doing; and, when held in the union they are an enormous aid in paying the union bills, reducing what students have to pay in fees and prices,” (Association of College Unions-International, 1966, p. 19).

Though some institutions have built separate facilities for hosting special groups or events, most have planned a multi-purpose facility. Because both groups need the same style rooms and accommodations, economic advantages include the ability to utilize the same staff for both styles of use and operate one, full-service kitchen. The major concern, voiced primarily by students to whom facilities are named, is that conference planning will interrupt daily campus life within the student center. However, most facility directors believe that with proper planning conflict can be avoided by scheduling conferences during the academic off-season. Considering this opportunity for multiple use must also be considered during the planning stages to allow for thoughtful attention to building layout. By keeping conference facilities (primarily registration areas, meeting rooms and dining facilities) somewhat separate from the student traffic, a variety of events can take place at the same time. Plus, most union directors try to avoid too strict a separation between students and conference guests, believing that students can benefit from the awareness of other organizations and educational programs and that conference guests appreciate the opportunity to see student life in action.

Perhaps the most used space within the student union is the food service facility. During a presentation in 1962 Porter Butts called it the most important service of all.

“If you consult students you will find this strictly true from their point of view. In all the surveys of what students want most and need most in a union, conducted on campuses large or small, residential or non-residential, liberal arts or technical, co-ed or men only, a place to eat is the number one demand among all the union possibilities,” (Osterheld, 1967, p. 1).

Food service must consider three main components: quality, service and pricing. Plus, facilities should be prepared for a variety of diners, including students, faculty, employees and guests (both in the form of prospective students and community members). Food can also be offered in a variety of ways from vending and snack bars to sit-down waiter service dining and catering to self-service food courts and to-go options. Most institutions employ a combination of a full-course meal, salad bar and deli, traditional American grill and one or two nationally recognized chain restaurants. Food service is often recognized as a campus leader in two facets: the largest student employer and a substantial portion of an institutions’ gross income.

Most importantly, professionals have historically focused on the student center or college union as a facility capable of multiple functions. Outlined here from an operational standpoint, the differences between institutional needs, location on campus, relationship with other facilities, layout features and staffing are all crucial components of this social-cultural-recreational center for all the members of the college family – students faculty, administration, alumni and guests,” (Association of College Unions-International, 1966, p. 19).

Ideological Role of the Student Center

Four main points emerge from the literature when considering a student center from an ideological perspective: the creation of community; education outside of the classroom; emphasis on citizenship and service; and student development through student activities.

Throughout the history of the union on college and university campuses, it has always been considered a place for cultivating community. In *College unions: A handbook on college community centers*, Edith Ouzts Humphreys (1951) wrote:

“The union is a center for everyone – regardless of class, social status, economic status, race or religion. It inevitably works against any caste or class system.

Within the union there is self-determination by students of the kind of college life they will live, through the democratic elements of the majority vote and student control of governing boards and committees,” (p. 37).

In order to create community, student centers across the nation need to reconceptualize the needs of students. As the student body continues to diversify including students of color and nationality, from different socioeconomic backgrounds and who do not fit into the traditional four-year degree program. The model of community that has been employed throughout the decades will be forced to adjust to build on the commonality of individuals across cultures and focuses on the benefits found in diversity. The college union also has a responsibility and opportunity to assist students in becoming full members of the campus community it creates by finding new ways to increase student interaction and understanding (Levitan & Osteen, 1992).

Student centers are also expected to continue with the educational mission of an institution and are often responsible for the kind of learning that happens outside of the classroom. Two of the most important factors in educating students come from the opportunity for employment or holding a position in a student organization and through opportunities to attend educational programming. Programs that deal with ethics, values, politics, religion and culture have the ability to challenge students to explore new areas of thinking that are not always included in the college curriculum (Green, 1958).

“Recognizing the union as an integral part of the educational program of the college implies entertaining a philosophy of education whereby all experiences are regarded as having educative aspects. It is an approach recognizing that whereas for the majority of students the intellectual capacities on the one hand are developed and trained in a more or less formal manner through direct teaching, on the other hand the emotional, aesthetic, social, and moral adjustments and appreciations are attained largely through informal experiences and situations. Because the task is that of educating the whole individual, neither the one nor the other can bear neglect, (Humphreys, 1951, p. 38).

Emphasizing the opportunities for creating community and cultivating learning, participation in a student center also encourages an “unselfish citizenship, the necessities of give and take and the satisfaction of working and playing together cooperatively,” (p. 38). It works to instill a sense of the *meaning* of citizenship, social responsibility, and service as well as an obligation to accept leadership within their immediate surroundings (Milani, Eakin, & Brattain, 1992). The goal of faculty and administration alike is to produce quality individuals who will be sent out into the world to further affect and

integrate with the community they choose. While the student center helps to cultivate the civic, political and social lives of students, it offers a place for students to embody their welfare for their peers and practice citizenship (Minahan, 1957).

Finally, the student center plays a large role in how students develop throughout their college experience. The growth of new skills, confidence, maturity and knowledge can be fostered through challenges presented with the union. Students who are affiliated with organizations registered through student life or who are employed by the union are faced with many opportunities to develop skills in ethical decision making and problem solving. Examples of this might include freedom of expression, building accessibility, management of funds, selection of performers, challenging group think, recruiting and recognizing peer successes and using current issues or events to engage discussion and consider diverse viewpoints (Keintz, 1996). College union and student activities practitioners have the opportunity to be student development specialists because of their proximity to the experiences of many students.

“...they knew college students were entering a new stage of life between adolescence and adulthood. They knew that peers, the campus environment, and student culture dramatically affected students and that students had to mature emotionally and socially. They knew extracurricular programs should enrich student’s lives and complement academic pursuits as well as entertain. They knew the college experience should help students develop a solid value system, that students inherently had to come to grips with who they were and who they wanted to be, and that they had to overcome innate problems in the process. They knew

that leadership, work experiences, and participation in student organizations taught valuable lessons for life and enhanced learning,” (Milani, 1996, p. 6).

Trends in Today’s Student Centers

A trend is defined as a general course or prevailing tendency, a drift, style or vogue. On occasion it is easy, and perhaps even expected, that trends are considered a passing fad or fashion and are given very little reflection. However, ignoring trends can prove very dangerous, especially in an institution as progressive as higher education and an industry like college unions, which relies on customer service. In a world that is becoming more and more connected each day, we have the capabilities to stay ahead of the trends and learn from recent trends, which have also made a permanent footprint in the operation of our society. After all, at one point, Facebook was just a trend. Current trends in our industry include: sustainability, technology and decentralization, among others.

As more eco-friendly, educated and conscientious students join our campus communities, so must student centers and college unions stay at the forefront of the sustainability movement. At some colleges and universities, sustainability has become part of the curriculum and vested professionals no longer consider sustainable changes as a sacrifice, but as an opportunity to provide long-term benefit to the campus community. Factors in our society such as diminishing natural resources and rising operational costs are pushing students to demand energy-efficient and green buildings on campus. Union professionals and architects, in turn, are using green materials when constructing or renovating new spaces; are considering waste management, indoor air quality, recycling opportunities and water conservation in planning; are harnessing natural energy sources

by utilizing daylighting, solar panels, wind turbines, geothermal heating and green roofs; and are competing to become LEED certified by the U.S. Green Building Council (Hatton, Farly, Cook & Porter, 2009).

Many competitions are also being held to encourage colleges and universities to participate in the green movement. The Environmental Protection Agency is conducting the 2010-11 College and University green Power Challenge in which it tracks green power purchases. At Indiana University, residence halls, academic buildings and Greek houses competed during 2010 to gauge who could save more energy and water. The water saved during the competition, which only lasted one month, was enough to fill four Olympic-sized swimming pools. Recyclemania, which started as a competition between two MAC rivals, Ohio University and Miami University, has become a national competition in which schools compete against one another to increase recycling and reduce waste on campus. In 2010, more than 600 institutions participated and together collected more than 84 million pounds of recyclable material. Other projects address water bottle usage, food waste in dining facilities and alternative forms of transportation (Ihrke, Wilkins & Stringer, 2010).

Even the Association of College Unions-International has begun publishing *Sustainability Smarts*, the organizations effort to “apply the core principles of sustainability on campus.” The publication addresses the green movement from three perspectives: ensuring the Earth will be better for future generations environmentally; the investment of funds committed to green companies and sustainable programming, in addition to long-term financial gains; and how individuals can interact with others to

encourage sustainability efforts and be involved with the betterment of the greater community (Sustainability Smarts, 2011).

Another requirement of university facilities is to maintain the most cutting edge technology capabilities. When considering the needs and lifestyles of student users at the college union, personal connectivity would be near the top of the list. “The relentless pace of technology development will pressure higher education facilities to keep pace with ever-increasing expectations of students, faculty and staff. These must be state of the art facilities that can be adaptable for future technologies,” (Hatton, Farly, Cook & Porter, 2009). Suggestions include hiring staff that are informed, knowledgeable, and current and then providing them with the necessary resources to develop a relevant plan for technology in the facility. Plus, the quality of wireless Internet coverage, capability for live streaming, 3-D viewing and using Organic LED technologies will become even more prevalent. Gaming and virtual environments will play an even more prominent role in academic and non-academic lives and DIY media will continue to grow, increasing the need for recording studios and video production suites.

Union professionals will also need to be prepared to grapple with the ever-growing decentralization of facilities on campus. While student centers started as the only facility on campus to specifically cultivate student life and learning outside of the classroom, other campus facilities have quickly caught up. Some reasons for this include large institutions that require multiple facilities, a geographically separated campus, a union building that cannot be updated due to historical ties or site limitations, the push by other university departments to strengthen identity and community, and the requirement

of today's millennial student to have everything right at their fingertips (Johnson & Clutter, 2009).

Models for these arrangements include developing "mini-unions" that provide certain union-type functions within another facility, "satellite" unions that offer a limited range of union functions in a stand-alone facility, and "mixed-use" buildings where a major group of union functions are collocated but space is shared with another primary function.

Many academic buildings are now including lounges, cafes, meeting rooms and even programmatic space in their layout. At other universities, such as Michigan State University, decentralized model are used regarding student centers within their residential life offerings. This organizational model places the union as a component of the Division of Housing & Food Services where revenue from the entire division, including offerings found in the residence halls, helps to support the union and allows it to provide services not available in residential complexes. Creation of these "mini-unions" is often done with revenue generation in mind, with little consideration to the reality that they will counteract community building at the student center because students will choose to stay with others in their academic disciplines or residence halls as opposed to mingling at a more diverse college union.

In line with the diversity at college unions and student centers, the demographics of student bodies on campuses across the nation are continuing to evolve. While the largest demographic is still the ever-discussed Millennial Generation, there has been an increase in the percentage of –non-traditional students. This is due in part to many factors, including a down-trodden economy that is encouraging adults with families to

return to school and veterans who are returning from combat to pursue higher education. Additionally, the Institute of International Education reported record high enrollment of international students in 2007-2008 and a 2007 issue of *University Business* predicts that by 2020 students of color will represent 46% of the student body (Hatton, Farly, Cook & Porter, 2009). Due to the diverse makeup of our campuses, union professionals and student organizations have been challenged to provide an equally diverse repertoire of programming efforts and communicating culture through the union building's physical environment.

Our ability to promote the growth of student services programs and of individual students is significantly influenced by the environment and culture in which we do our work. Campus environments are comprised of such variables as policies, procedures, symbols, images, architecture, activities, programs, values, beliefs, social climate, behaviors and group norms, and the characteristics of individuals (including demographics). Simply stated, students' behavior is influenced by their interaction with the institution's physical spaces, policies, and people (Henthorne, 2010).

In 1990, Ted Hoef and Nanci Howe authored a publication titled *Marketing the College Union* that began almost immediately with the statement "the notion that union and activities programs enjoy a captive market is seductive." While many believe that marketing within a college union is unnecessary, the authors outline why it is just as important as advertising in other spaces due to competing services, prices and programs. In fact, they outline 12 characteristics that indicate a need for a marketing program, including: the traits, needs and desires of the population being served are changing; the

numbers of people being served are changing; programs and services are meeting increased competition on or off campus; financial resources on campus are diminishing, and competition for those resources is increasing; and the union has lost its corner on the market (Hoef & Howe, 1990). For almost every union one of these reasons rings true, especially considering the current industry trends previously discussed.

Thus, the importance of branding services within the student center, utilizing effective and attractive signage that offers helpful and welcoming information or direction, and creating an online advertising presence within the realm of social mediums is more necessary than ever before.

This compilation of literature demonstrates the history of the college union, its' operational and ideological responsibilities to cultivate student development throughout the collegiate experience and current trends facing the industry. Decisions for location, layout and the offering of multiple services are made with intention of impacting student life with convenience and utility. In addition, student well-being and growth is encouraged through opportunities for community, citizenship, learning and maturity through student activities. Plus, emphasis is placed on the student needs, interests, demographics and lifestyles through the consideration of current trends and their impact on the college union across the nation.

Methodology

Over the course of the last nine months, this project has evolved to incorporate three different research components. It started with an academic research study, moved into my personal participation in professional organizations within the industry, and included case studies of five student centers.

Research Study

During the academic research study, “A Study of Student Behavior and Some Patterns of Use at a University Student Center,” I identified participants who were students at Ball State University engaged in some form of activity at L.A. Pittenger Student Center. The criteria for participation excluded faculty, staff, and community members. Participants were contacted through university email and were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. After agreeing to participate, individual, personal, and semi-structured interviews were scheduled with each student. Interviews revolved around a set of 10 pre-determined questions (see table below), lasted approximately forty minutes on average, and were conducted in mutually agreed upon locations. For the purpose of this specific study, analyzing use and perceptions of university unions, the student center was the location of choice.

Pre-Determined Interview Questions

1. To begin, will you tell me a little bit about yourself as a Ball State student? Perhaps what year you are in school, what you're studying, whether you live on- or off- campus and what involvements you have outside of the classroom?
2. What role do you believe a student center should play on a college campus?
3. Have you visited the L.A. Pittenger Student Center here at Ball State University? If so, when and for what purpose?
4. Do you feel that the student center is student friendly? Why or why not?
5. Is there anything you do not understand in regards to the student center? For instance, policy or structure?
6. Are you pleased with the accessibility of the student center? For instance, location, hours of operation, etc.?
7. How would you classify the purpose of the student center? For instance, academic, social, practical, extracurricular?
8. What is your favorite aspect of the student center? What aspect would you change? Why?
9. How do you believe other Ball state students utilize the student center? What reactions to the building have you heard from your peers?
10. How do you think your use of and involvement in the student center has affected your career as a student at Ball State University?

Through my interaction and conversation with students, assessing the role of and patterns of use at L.A. Pittenger Student Center at Ball State University, nine overwhelming themes came to light: location of the building; competing buildings on campus; student and administration discrepancies regarding building policies; use of the student center as a conference center; participants' personal use of the center; importance of community at a student union; the need for student voice throughout the space; the role of programming; and influence of a student center on student development.

All of the participants discussed the number of students who do not utilize the student center on campus because of the poor location. Whether too far to walk in the cold or at night or requiring too much time between classes, spending time at the student center is not always possible. They all agreed however that it *should be* located at the heart of campus, offering convenience to visitors and being a hub of activity and

community. Due to this poor location, participants agreed that members of the Ball State community were utilizing other university buildings instead. They also cited another reason for choosing other spaces over the student center as the differences between the needs and wants of students and those of the administrators responsible for the space. On a couple of occasions study participants admitted to not feeling welcome in the space, believing it was an administratively driven university building, or thinking it was better intended for operating as a conference center than a true university hub.

Even though students shared their frustrations with the space, participants still commented on their personal patterns of use. Most often the students said that they utilized the center work, to attend programs that were hosted within the student center or because they were affiliated with organizations that were housed at the student center. However, many of them made clear that their use of the space was not because of its ideological purpose, but simply because that is where the work or organization was located and that they would not come to the space if it were not for that particular affiliation.

One of the most highly emphasized themes was the expectation of the student center to create and cultivate community. However, the majority of participants did not believe community was being shaped successfully. A couple of participants suggested that increasing the opportunity for student voice and input in the student center would benefit this creation of community. For some participants this meant creating spaces that better fit the needs and desires of students or utilizing programming to attract students to the building and encourage them to feel at home.

Even though many criticisms were offered, it was clear that each participant's involvement at the student center had shaped their development through college. Being that this is the goal of many university administrators, including student center professionals, it seemed that the L.A. Pittenger Student Center at Ball State University was on the right track. While they may have been a little off the mark expected by their students, a few changes could help to make a big difference in the level of community created within the space.

Professional Organization Membership

The second part of my information and research gathering involved my membership in the Association of College Unions – International (ACUI). ACUI is the organization of choice for men and women who work in the college union industry. Founded in 1914, ACUI is described as a nonprofit educational organization that brings together college union and student activities professionals from hundreds of schools in seven countries. The mission of the organization is to assist its members in the development of community on their respective campuses through education, advocacy, and the delivery of services. In addition, the organization also maintains eleven core competencies as guiding principles for work in the college union industry: communication; facilities management; fiscal management; human resource development; intercultural proficiency; leadership; management; marketing; planning; student learning; and technology.

Defined by ACUI, the role of the college union is to operate as the community center of the college, serving students, faculty, staff, alumni, and guests. The organization believes that by offering a variety of programs, activities, services, and facilities, the

union represents a well-considered plan for the community life of the college, complements the academic experience, and serves as the “living room” and gathering place for the university community.

Because of my position as a Graduate Assistant for the Office of Student Center Programs at Ball State University and my interest in learning as much as possible about college unions, I joined the Association of College Unions – International this past fall. As a member, I have access to an infinite amount of information and a vast number of resources. This includes opportunities to participate in Communities of Practice or ACUI Forums on specific topics; utilize directories of professionals, institutions and vendors; receive *The Bulletin*, a bimonthly industry publication, and *The Commons*, a weekly email newsletter; and attend seminars, webinars, institutes and conferences.

Since beginning my membership I have read multiple resources, participated in surveys and conversations on a variety of topics, and have attended both the joint Regions 8 & 9 conference at Valparaiso University and the Annual Conference in Chicago, all of which have contributed to the final suggestions in the next chapter.

Student Center Case Studies

The final component of research gathering involved studying successful student centers from other universities. By benchmarking successful components of each facility, I was able to generate ideas for this project. The schools I chose to include are Georgia Institute of Technology (GT), Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), Ohio State University (OSU), and Ohio University (OU).

When I selected these institutions, I worried that critics of this project would feel they were inappropriate comparisons, namely because three of the four unions I’ve

selected are brand new facilities. While each highlighted union operates under very different circumstances and serves a unique campus community, I believe that many of these successful elements could be easily implemented in any college union. The following highlights the reasons why they were chosen and the strengths they clearly offer to their respective campuses.

Georgia Institute of Technology

I had the opportunity to visit Georgia Tech on a class immersion trip to Atlanta, Georgia this past May. After doing a great deal of research on college unions, when I set foot in the Georgia Tech Student Center I felt very excited. The building brings together a combination of elements that I believe are crucial to a student union. It was very clear that the professional staff takes large strides to keep the space student focused. The building boasts a warm and friendly color palette of yellows, greens, and reds and beckons guests into the building from the entrances. Just beyond the clearly marked information desk is a large staircase leading both upstairs and downstairs and multiple, well-lit lounge spaces are immediately visible featuring overstuffed arm chairs or tables for working.

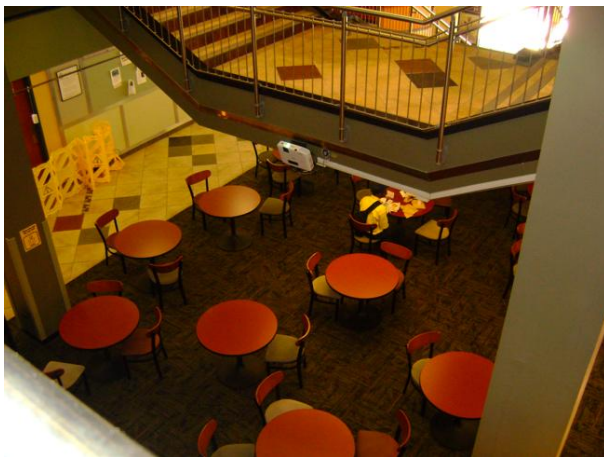
While the building is a few decades old, a recent renovation added post-modern décor to the space. The building has many components including two food courts featuring a variety of food concepts and chain restaurants, a Post Office, spirit shop, copy center, craft room, Kaplan testing center, and Famous Hair. Designated spaces in the building include a ballroom, theatre, recreation room, and multiple student organizations offices and meeting rooms. The Georgia Tech Student Center is a very successful one-

stop-shop for Tech students located at the heart of the GT campus with numerous positive components.

When considering the top two elements of the Georgia Tech Student Center, it is very easy to identify their programming space, and the dedicated advertising and promotional space throughout the building. With programming space that is built to accommodate both small and large groups in a variety of capacities, the Student Center is ideal for bringing community together. Within Tech Rec alone, students can come to bowl or play pool, video games and arcade games. A multi-purpose space is also offered within Tech Rec, where groups can be accommodated for events at seated round tables or clear the floor and utilize the suspended light system for performances or dances. During renovations architects even thought to put a small stage in the middle of one of the dining areas, ideal for hosting mealtime concerts, lectures, or comedians. Plus, by offering specific advertising and promotional spaces, students are encouraged to come and interact with their peers. Televisions are mounted on the walls for more passive advertising, while “Promotional Nooks” can be reserved and set up for more interactive advertising opportunities.



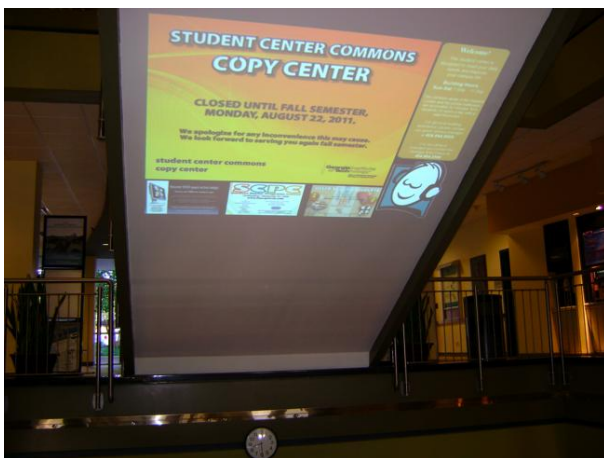
The Georgia Tech Information Desk is bright and welcoming for guests visiting the Student Center. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Members of the GT community are invited to relax, work, or socialize in a variety of lounge spaces. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



This small stage is located in the Student Center Commons, ideal for concerts or other performances during lunch or dinner hours. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



A multimedia projector displays advertisements on the underside of the staircase. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Dining areas keep the same color scheme as the rest of the building and have exposed ceilings. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



The Student Center Ballroom has high ceilings ideal for programming and showcases a lot of natural light. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



The Theatre offers a more intimate programming venue for small performances or lectures. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



In an effort toward greater sustainability the entire building utilizes skylights that even lighten office spaces with large windows. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Many televisions are displayed throughout the building like this one dedicated to Student Government advertisements. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



“Promotion Nooks” are available in high traffic areas where student organizations can set up and interact with other students. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Tech Rec is an interactive programming space or hangout for students in between classes and on the weekends. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



This Multipurpose Room is part of Tech Rec and can be used for dining, dancing, or hosting concerts. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Tech Rec boasts billiards tables for students to play pool. Other games include foosball, shuffleboard, and arcade games. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Multiple gaming consoles, including Xbox, Playstation and Wii, are available to students in small seating areas. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Space is also dedicated to arts and crafts in the GT Student Center, where students are invited to showcase creative talents. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Bulletin boards display Georgia Tech's commitment to sustainability, recycling and their partnership with local farmers. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.

Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis

Very different that the Georgia Tech Student Center, the intentionally- and aptly-named Campus Center at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is a hub of activity for a very diverse university community on a metropolitan campus. Opened in 2008, the IUPUI Campus Center is dedicated to complementing the academic mission of the university through service, partnership, and collaboration with students, faculty, staff, and the greater Indianapolis community. Plus, the facility has won numerous honors and awards for excellence in architecture and design. The four-story facility features a very modern and industrial design scheme, with sturdy concrete and metal beams, exposed duct work, polished stone floors, and escalators running between every floor at the front of the building. Plus, the escalator ride from the first floor to the fourth floor boasts urban views via floor to ceiling windows.

The Campus Center at IUPUI is not only a one-stop-shop for food, entertainment, and campus involvement, but also boasts offices for many student support services like the Dean of Students Office, Registrar, Student Financial Services, Office for Veterans and Military Personnel, and Office of Admissions. The building has 12 meeting rooms in a variety of styles and sizes, each with built-in audio and visual technology; a large Multipurpose Room with pre-function space and an outdoor terrace for large events; a television lounge; game room; art gallery; Barnes and Noble bookstore; food court; and theatre, which is still under construction.

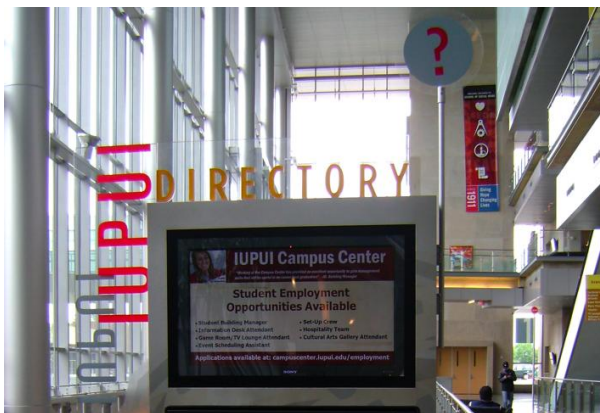
Of all the positive elements at the IUPUI Campus Center, the two most impressive components about the facility are the directional signage and technology, followed very closely by sustainability and assessment. Because it is such a large and

open facility, the administration has implemented a very savvy directional system. Starting with an information desk on the first floor, question marks lead guests to other digital, touch-screen directories throughout the building. A system of signs directs traffic up and down the escalators with large numbers, arrows, and lists of offices located on each floor. Restrooms are visible by icons that stand out from the wall and computer-printing stations are available on each floor, identified with large, tech-themed pictures and words. The Campus Center staff is also very dedicated to sustainability and assessment, which work in conjunction with one another in multiple ways. By utilizing a counter system, they are able to track the number of guests who utilize the building on a daily basis. In 2010, they reported that 1,682,414 people had come through their doors. They also track the number of events that take place within the building in addition to attendance at each. Other assessment figures include computer and printer usage at hubs throughout the building, the number of patrons in the game room, and the attendance at events in the arts gallery.

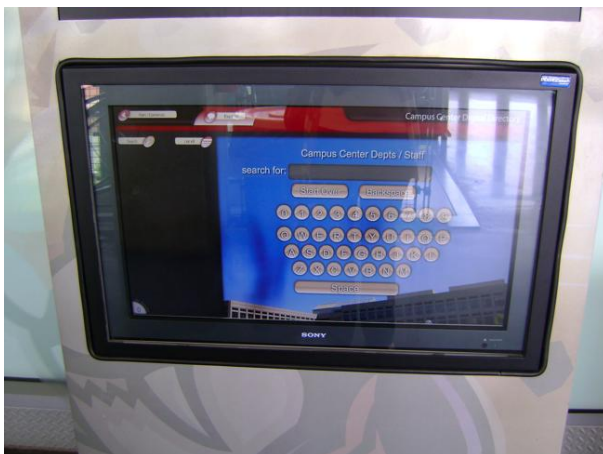
After assessing this data, Campus Center administrators were able to make adjustments to the operation of the facility that encourage sustainability and cost-saving. Some of these efforts include adjusting the facility's hours of operation based on traffic patterns, closing down rooms such as the game room and art gallery on Sundays when classes are not in session, being more cognizant of staffing, and shutting down escalators when the building is not open to the public. Plus, sustainability was part of the design plan as the facility is LEED Accredited, features recycled and natural building materials, and included solar heating, fully disposable light bulbs, chemical-free HVAC systems, and low-flow water efficiency systems.



Welcome signs are located at each entrance at the IUPUI Campus Center. Other room signs throughout the building also use this format. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



These Directory stations are located throughout the facility. Identified by the Question Mark, these screens run a loop of advertisements. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



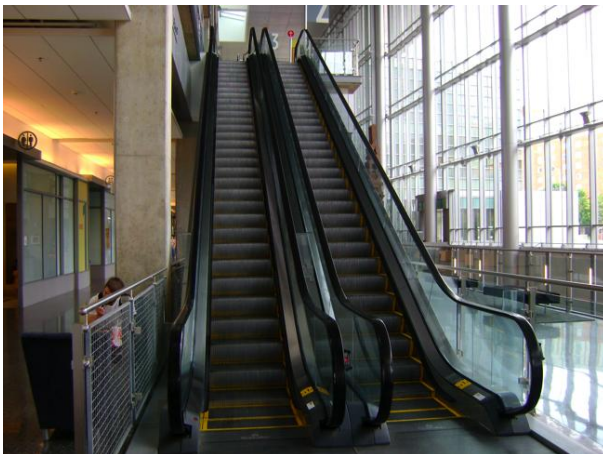
The lower portion of the Directory stations feature a touch screen where guests can search for administrative offices, schedules, or meeting rooms. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



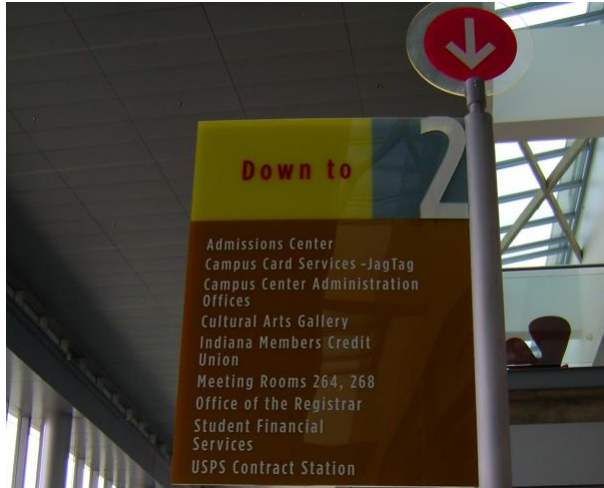
Digital signage is also found at the entrance to every meeting space throughout the building displaying the date, time and schedule of events. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Large numeral signs help guests navigate each level of the building on their trips up and down the escalators. Exposed duct work show at right. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



These dual track escalators run between every floor of the building. Cement beams shown at left and floor to ceiling windows at front of building to right. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



These signs are also found at every level near the escalators. Listing the offices and features located on each floor, they assist guests navigating the building. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Computer and printing stations are located on every floor, visible by technology identifiers, opposite the elevator banks near vending machines. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



The restrooms are visible both by the typical signs on the walls and doors and these icons that stand out from the walls and are visible from a distance. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



Titles of offices are displayed about doorways with these metal plated letters. While certainly practical, the multi-dimensional format is also decorative. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



In the hallway outside of the Campus Center Administrative Office is this wall of photographs displaying the history and evolution of the facility. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.



The lettering used about offices inside the building is also consistent with the lettering used at the exterior doors of the facility. Copyright 2011 by Elizabeth Vaccaro.

Ohio State University

The Ohio Union at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio is perhaps the queen jewel of student unions. Using space, color and iconic Buckeye symbols creatively and cohesively, the Ohio Union tells the story of Ohio State tradition and serves as the “living room” for the Ohio State community. In an educational session at the Annual ACUI Conference in Chicago this past February, I had the opportunity to hear three members of the Ohio Union creative design team, including Beth Ullum who oversaw the interior design and branding efforts, speak about how the project reached its full potential. During the process, the creative team worked while centered around eight main themes – learning, community, tradition, diversity, service, friendship, involvement, and leadership – which were then etched into the staircase.

More apparent than anything, when you set foot in the Ohio Union, there is no question what campus you’re on. In fact, even the door handles at one entrance say “OH-IO.” The Ohio State University seal is in the floor, light fixtures are decorated with “O’s” in the Great Hall, carpets and furniture fabrics are a variety of patterns in Scarlet and Gray, and the University Alma Mater is etched into wood panels above office doors and onto the backs of chairs. Even the ballroom chandeliers are in the shape of “O’s” and the color scheme is largely gray. While specifically neutral to accommodate a variety of events, if you add touches of scarlet the room becomes essentially “Buckeye.” In planning, the design team utilized a variety of artwork, non-traditional elements, and local vendors to complete the look, a strategy that added to the flawless appearance and saved money while supporting local businesses. There was also a very specific effort to save materials from the old union facility that could be used to add history and character

to the new union. Refurbished wood panels and stone were used in the building of new fireplaces and the décor of the new Woody's Tavern. Plus, the dedication to history is shown in the collage of OSU memorabilia, recognition of noteworthy alumni, collection of doors that showcase the timeline of OSU union facilities, and even in the Maudine Cow Room, a meeting room decorated with floor to ceiling murals depicting cows and farm life in an effort to honor OSU's tradition as a land-grant institution.

In addition to many of the expected administrative- and student-oriented office spaces, the facility also boasts features unique compared to its' fellow unions, including dance rooms, an instructional kitchen, a performance hall, and an interfaith prayer and reflection room. Woody's, Sloopy's Diner and Union Market provide dining options; Station 88 is a convenient collection of retail stores; and the Multicultural Center, Center for Student Leadership and Service, Off Campus Student Services Center, and Alumni Association Office help make this a hub of activity for the entire OSU community.

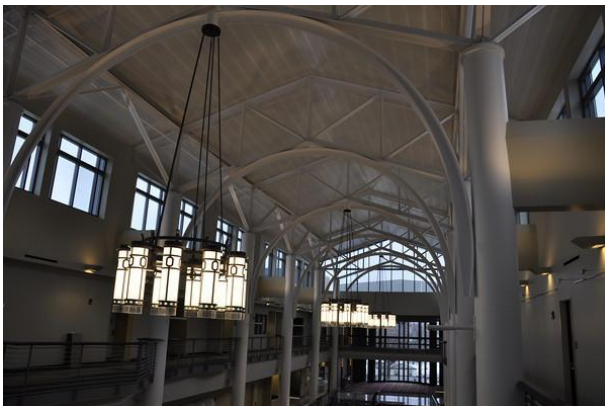
When considering the two strongest elements of the Ohio Union, it is impossible to deny the unique and thorough effort of branding the entire building, especially when you can have your photo taken with a bronze statue of Brutus right inside the Great Hall. Plus, the representation of student voice and student life is wildly apparent as a true celebration of the Ohio State community.



Guests to the Ohio Union at Ohio State University are greeted by door handles that chant “OH-IO!” Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



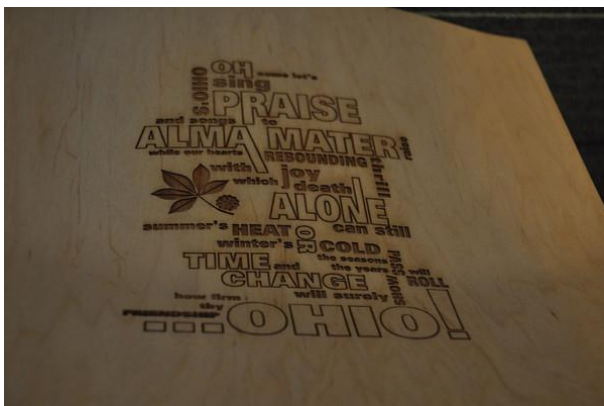
The OSU seal is found on the floor in the Great Hall surrounded by tiles of scarlet and gray. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



The Great Hall is cavernous, visible from multiple floors, and features chandeliers that are decorated with OSU “O’s.” Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



Plush furniture is found in small seating areas throughout the Great Hall. Plus, lines of the OSU Alma Mater are etched above doorways. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



The Alma Mater is also etched into the backs of these chairs found in the facility. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



In this lounge space, all fabrics and colors, including the carpet, are scarlet and gray. Sets of chairs at the round tables are also made with seatbelts. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



One of the meeting rooms boasts this “O”-shaped conference table. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



This fireplace, made with some materials from the old union, also features an OSU “Buck” on the mantel. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



In the Maudine Cow Room, with cow print carpet and farm-themed murals, the land-grant history of OSU is celebrated. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



Behind these doors, salvaged from the old union, are facts and photographs telling the history of the building. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



This collage wall showcases pictures and memorabilia from long-standing OSU traditions. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.



Before leaving, guests are also encouraged to take their photo with this bronze statue of OSU's mascot Brutus. Courtesy of the Ohio Union, The Ohio State University Copyright 2010.

Ohio University

The final case study is of Ohio University's John Calhoun Baker University Center in Athens, Ohio. In January 2007, Baker University Center opened at the heart of OU's campus connecting the largely administrative and academic upper campus to the largely residential and recreational lower campus. In its' new location, Baker has the opportunity to capture the vast majority of student, faculty and staff traffic. Built with the same Georgian-style architecture as all other OU facilities, Baker is clad in red brick, with white columns and trim, and numerous windows offering natural light into the building and boasting campus views to Baker guests.

The interior of the facility is more modern, with high ceilings, practical furniture and a warm color scheme of cream, mocha, plum, and sage. At the center of the building under large skylights, an escalator connects four floors of office, programming, and service spaces, organized throughout different wings of the building. The facility has won numerous awards since completion. In 2007 The International Masonry Institution awarded Baker two Golden Trowel Awards and the Grand Prize as best project in the state of Ohio. The awards recognized the facility for the terrazzo floor art installation; being the "Best of Interior: Brick/Block/Stone;" and having a highly superior design and construction of masonry. In 2008 the building won grand-prize honors from the Education Facilities Design Award contest sponsored by Learning By Design, the annual guide for architectural achievements in educational facilities. Plus, ACUI named Baker University Center the 2008 Facility Design Award Winner. The honor is given to facilities that ACUI judges believe are student-centered; encourage and support campus

community and student learning; and display positive use of space, creative design features, and a collaborative planning and design process.

The building features a food court with multiple food concepts, a fine dining restaurant, coffeehouse, convenience store, computer lab, billiards lounge, theater, art gallery, ballroom, and a variety of conference rooms. The Dean of Students is located in the building along with the Multicultural Center, Leadership Center, LGBT Programs Center, Women's Center, Career Center, and Student Help Center. Plus, multiple student organizations have office space in the building including Senate, Greek Life, the student run newspaper, radio station and television station, and the three large programming boards. With a parking garage in the basement of the facility and outdoor programming space on both the first and fourth levels, Baker University Center is truly the hub of activity for the OU community.

In comparison to the strengths of the previous case studies, Baker University Center is most successful because of its' location at the heart of the Ohio University campus and the architectural design employed in the facility. Though visibly newer than some of the surrounding buildings, university administrators and project architects did an impeccable job of keeping with the OU architectural standards and tying a brand new building into a campus that dates back to 1804. Known for its' "Main Street effect," Baker unites campus both literally and figuratively



This photograph of the fourth floor of the John Calhoun Baker University Center showcases large, white-trim windows. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



This upper campus entrance, located at the end of Court Street, comes into the fourth floor of the building. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



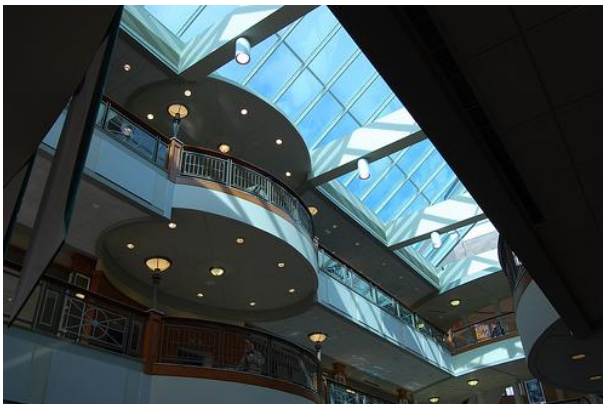
From this view at the back of the building, both the first floor entrance and all five floors can be identified. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



This terrace located right off of the food court on the first floor, showcases Georgian-style columns and other exterior architecture. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



The escalators run between the first and fourth floors at the heart of the facility. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



This photo, taken from the third floor, captures balconies on the fourth and fifth levels and the skylights at the roof of the building. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



From this lounge, and others, guests of the building can people watch or enjoy views of campus. One wing of office spaces goes off to the left. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



Though the escalators do not access the fifth floor, this curved staircase does while also adding an additional design element to the building. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



The Leadership Center follows with the Georgian-architectural style with white columns and a curved panel of windows. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



This fireplace, located in the coffeehouse, earned the building one of it's Golden Trowel Awards. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



The theater, located on the second floor, is an intimate setting with woodwork, dark colors, and stage lighting. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.



Credited for earning the second Golden Trowel, the art installation on the first floor is done on terrazzo flooring. Copyright 2007 by Ohio University.

A Strategic Action Plan for Student Centers and College Unions

This strategic action plan is created for the purpose of assisting college union and student center professionals to enhance the sense of community at their college union or student center and increase the number of community members who utilize the offerings, events, and services provided within their respective facilities. While originally intended for the community at Ball State University's L.A. Pittenger Student Center, it is my hope these tenets and suggestions could be employed by professionals at other institutions who also recognize a need to reenergize any area of their student center offerings. The mission of the plan is to generate conversation and consideration regarding the role of our student centers and offer suggestions for practice, all toward the ultimate goal of creating a safe, lively, and comfortable hub of activity and camaraderie on our campuses.

The plan is organized based around six strategic objectives: student voice and representation, operations, marketing, programming, sustainability, and a collaborative relationship with other university departments. Whether utilized collectively or as separate ideas, this plan is meant to be an effective tool for student center professionals.

Student Voice and Representation

The first objective of the strategic action plan is to increase the presence of student voice and representation in the facility. It is important that student center professionals complete this objective before moving on to other objectives. For an individual to feel welcome in a space or encouraged to visit a place, they must be able to visualize themselves *within* that place. This can be done in two ways, either by showcasing people who look and act like they do or by displaying a community they are hopeful to join.

University Pride Branding Effort

Modeled after the success shown by Ohio State University's Ohio Union, adding institutional flair can help create community at any student center. With banners, flags, pennants, or signs, a facility can be transformed from a cold space to one that is exciting and proud. If in a position to bring in new furniture or accents, be as creative and detail oriented as possible. Find fabrics and patterns in university colors for new pieces. If existing furniture will continue, take a more topical approach by decorating the walls, adding lamps, vases, or university-themed artwork. Plus, the more "homey" the space can be, the more comfortable people will be to spend time there.

This is also a great opportunity to incorporate history and tradition into a facility. Statues, figurines, or plaques that represent important or unique stories and facts offer a great opportunity to rally a community together. On the other hand, it could be a great opportunity to create new traditions. Take a poll from students about what they would like to see in the space or what details they believe tell the university story. Find out why

your community members are proud to be a part of the university community and then display it in the facility.

Photographs

Framed photographs are a great way to increase student representation within the student union. Perhaps the student section cheering at the game against the university's biggest rival or students walking through the quad on their way to classes in the spring. With black and white prints, a more classy and nostalgic feeling can be implemented, while color is bold and lively. With consistency in the way photographs are formatted, framed, and displayed it is a sleek addition to the aesthetic elements of the facility.

This can be a great opportunity to work with the institutions marketing professionals who are known to collect images that tell the positive story of the college or university. Or perhaps it is an opportunity to have an annual photography contest, creating connection between student and institution, where members of the community can submit photographs showing the university in action. Remember that significance is shown in the photographs selected for display. Choose images that show members of the community in a variety of settings and capacities. If you focus too much on athletics, it can make guests believe they are more important than academics, and vice versa. Also, it is important to display different members of the community from students to faculty to staff. Show diversity in age, gender, fashion, ethnicity, and religion.

Jerseys

With respect to the earlier recommendation to not focus solely on athletics or academics, displaying athletic jerseys is a great way to display color, pride, and student voice. There are many different options for displaying athletic gear, ranging from

hanging jerseys from rafters in the food court to showcasing them in display cases in the hallways. Take time to consider whether you would rather display current jerseys or those with historical significance. They could be rotated based on the sports that are in season, but should be a balance between women's and men's athletics teams. If the display case is the best option for your institution, bats, helmets, pom-poms, and goggles could be on display with team photographs as well.

Art Galleries

Sometimes the best way display student voice in university facilities is to showcase artistic elements that have been *created by* members of the community. There is a great opportunity to showcase the work and talent of the university family in art galleries at the union. It is natural to think first of more traditional exhibits displaying forms like paintings, sketches, photography, and sculpture. While these are great options, other work can be displayed in art galleries as well, including architectural models, excerpts from creative writing courses, marketing or graphic design portfolios, engineering projects, short films, or even musical performances and interactive demonstrations of scientific research. With the right invitation and preparation, these transferable spaces can accommodate the accomplishments of all community members.

Murals

Murals can be another positive way to increase student representation at a college union. Again, many options are available when incorporating murals into a facility. These artistic representations can be of campus icons, facilities, or people. A university mascot, bell tower, football stadium, campus gate, aerial view, or group of students in university apparel are all great options. Displayed on large walls in highly trafficked areas like food

courts or building lobbies, murals can also showcase the work of a talented community member.

“Look What We’re Doing” Display Cases

Another great option is installing display cases on walls in hallways or pre-function spaces where student organizations, athletic teams, or academic departments can showcase what they are doing. Different than advertising space, these cases could display a successful food drive or Habitat for Humanity project, a championship season, or research project. Display cases give the students the opportunity to decide what photographs or artifacts are most important and should be shown to the greater community and encourage multi-dimensional objects versus relying solely on posters or pictures. The cases could be reserved for certain lengths of time through the student center administrative offices and would only display materials deemed appropriate by professional staff. Plus, even simply building the display cases could be a project for members of the university community. By asking architecture students to design this element, it showcases even more student work, creates an academic project, and can help to cut installation costs.

Operations

The second objective of this strategic plan considers the operational offerings of the college union. Similar to Student Voice and Representation, this should be considered during the earlier stages of planning though will have to be reassessed as the understanding of traffic patterns and community needs evolves. However, by including some of these elements early, professionals can make their facilities more appealing to students on their campuses.

Computer Labs & Printing Stations

Two of the most apparent needs of college students are computer access and printing capabilities. Even with large national efforts to go paperless and the overwhelming use of smart phones, providing computer labs and printing stations in the student union is a great way to increase use of the facility. Whether for email or Facebook, to make last minute changes to an assignment, or play a game between classes, the opportunity to use a computer is irreplaceable. But perhaps even more enticing is printing capabilities at the union. For students who do not own a printer, cannot afford a new ink cartridge, or do not have time to make it to the library, a printing station or kiosk can be a life saver – especially if you're already stopping by the union for a bite to eat. If there is a way for your institution to provide printing for free, all the better. If not, allow students to log in using their student usernames and charge it toward their student accounts. Plus, using recycled paper and having recycling bins for documents printed in error shows the institutions commitment to the environment.

Gaming Lounges

One of the biggest trends of the last few years has been the increase in video and computer games. Thus, offering dedicated space to playing video games is a great way to invite students to the union. Not only does this increase the number of people using the building, but it is a safe place for students to hang out for long periods of time and encourages social interaction with other students. There are many ways to approach gaming in your facility. If you have the option to buy a collection of video game consoles and games, making these available to students in intimate and comfortable seating areas is the ideal opportunity. Based on how great the demand is for these areas, you could set

up a scheduling system where students can reserve time to play and then require students' turn in their student ID when checking out a game. If providing the consoles is not fiscally possible for your union, providing console hookups in lounge spaces with televisions is another option. Then professional staff must simply advertise this amenity and invite students to bring their personal consoles to play. If possible, offering these services to students should be free. Otherwise, they will just stay at home.

Another opportunity exists with online gaming. A large portion of college students are playing games like Call of Duty and World of Warcraft in their rooms, some for hours at a time. I've learned, from conversations with students, that on occasion these gamers will bring their equipment to a mutually convenient location for "land parties," where they essentially play in the same room with other gamers. There is huge potential for this kind of an event to happen at the union. With the right technology and a little food, professionals could incorporate a brand new kind of program for students who are often overlooked with traditional programming. For this to be successful, there would need to be research done on each individual campus before implementation. It seems that some students are afraid to admit that they are gamers, because of the potentially negative connotation associated with it by society. Gauge the interest of your students before going to the cost of attempting this style of "land party" gaming event and make sure that you can either provide the appropriate level of equipment or encourage students' to bring it with them. If you can make connections with a handful of students who are a part of this subculture, ask them to participate. By gathering a few students to do a trial run, much could be learned about the greater potential of gaming at the union.

Craft Space

Another large trend in on-campus programming features the opportunity for students' to craft. Providing space in your facility for students' to showcase their creative talents is the largest form of encouragement. This is especially important to consider as union professionals are building or updating facilities. When thinking about crafting, it is easy to envision paint spills, hot glue guns, and carpet covered with sequins and glitter. Thus, allowing space specifically for these kinds of activities protects the rest of the building and encourages many community members to visit the facility. If building a new union, consider paint, furniture, and flooring that can withstand some accidents and be easily cleaned. If designating space in an existing facility, select older furniture that you are not planning to use in the future other than for crafting. Mismatched chairs and tables in a space like this will not deter people from visiting it, but could instead add to the eclectic appeal. The operation of this space will require union professionals to make some decisions about hours that it will be available and what it will offer to the university community. Purchasing and offering basic crafting tools and offering large tables would accommodate individuals who would like to bring their projects from home to the space to complete. On the other hand, working with the art department or campus programming board could lead to a potential for lessons or events that revolve around crafting. If the concept becomes very successful, hiring a few art students to man the space during high traffic hours to help other students could be another option.

Prayer Space

One option for increasing the feeling of inclusiveness in your student center is to offer an interfaith prayer space. A conversation about this type of operational offering on

your campus should be very unique compared to other institutions. If a private, religiously-affiliated college or university, there is likely a chapel on campus where students are invited to worship and pray. Historically, public institutions have not included this type of offering because of separation of church and state, while still encouraging student to organize in order to worship if they so chose. However, many institutions are beginning to consider and incorporate prayer and reflection spaces in the union in order to accommodate the very diverse needs of the student body. Ohio State University made the decision to build an interfaith room in their new Ohio Union and Georgetown, a Catholic institution, is preparing to build a worship area that will include a Muslim prayer room, Jewish sacred space, interfaith prayer room and Kosher kitchen for members of their student body who do not practice Catholicism. An interfaith room should be located somewhere quiet and less trafficked, would preferably have a calm color scheme with natural light, and could feature elements like an altar or ablution fountain. The room could be reserved by groups, but should also be available for individual and unscheduled use at specific times of the day.

Outdoor Space

Outdoor space on college and university campuses is always in huge demand and providing it around the union facility is a great way to increase use of the facility. However, this type of space offers very unique challenges as the needs for outdoor space can vary greatly. From the opportunity to toss a frisbee to a student life cookout or picnic to space for students to sit and study in between classes on a sunny day, outdoor space at your union should offer tables, benches, and lawns large enough for less sedentary activities. In an outdoor seating area, be sure to incorporate electrical outlets, trashcans,

and tables with umbrellas. If possible, a covered patio or pavilion increases the opportunity for outdoor activity at the union exponentially. Plus, lining these outdoor spaces with flowerbeds, bushes and trees is also a great way to make the facility more attractive externally. Ultimately, increasing the appeal and liveliness of the outdoor spaces can also encourage members of the community to explore what opportunities await inside the building as well.

Digital Signage, Wireless Internet, & Electrical Outlets

Finally, increasing technological offerings within the student center is essential as our university communities are becoming more and more tech-savvy. If there is an opportunity to incorporate digital signage within your facility, do it. Whether in hallways, at entrances, or meeting rooms, being able to display information, directions, or schedules electronically is convenient and environmentally friendly. Touch screen panels are also helpful at specific locations throughout the building in case guests are not able to get to an information desk easily. In fact, even when the digital screens in our unions are simply monitors, some guests are still trying to manipulate them like they are touch screens. Having exceptional wireless Internet coverage in the facility is another way to encourage use to the building. While many campuses are moving to being entirely wireless, if your campus is not, including wireless access in the union is imperative when trying to create community. Finally, offer as many electrical outlets as possible throughout the space. If building a new facility or renovating an older building, take the opportunity to double the number of outlets available, if not more. Because of all the digital gadgets people use on a daily basis, guests to your building will need to charge computers, tablets, phones, and cameras. Not only does having plenty of outlets reduce the number of wires and cables

crisscrossing the floors and walkways, but it also keeps people from returning to their rooms in between classes and meetings.

Marketing

After incorporating more student voice and representation into your facility and considering the operational offerings provided within the space, the next step is to advertise. By assigning advertising job duties to a professional, creating and implementing a branding strategy, and advertising on a variety of external and internal mediums, a student center or union can increase its' position within the campus community.

Marketing Professional

The best way to ensure a focused advertising effort for your facility is to task a member of your professional staff with the responsibility. If you are in a position to have one dedicated marketing professional, it will serve your union best. If you are unable, then you can incorporate these job responsibilities in the description of one of your existing staff members. Select a professional who is people-oriented and creative, as they will likely be working with a variety of student center clients, from student organizations to university administrators and special guests to external guests visiting campus or hosting events. Job responsibilities could include: creating verbal and print marketing strategies; writing, editing, and designing brochures, flyers and promotional announcements; managing the union website and social mediums; interacting with multiple university departments; and working with external vendors and media sources. Thus, choosing a candidate with communications, journalism, and public relations skills; experience in marketing and graphic design; familiarity with Adobe Creative Suite; and

strong written and verbal communication skills is highly encouraged. This professional will also likely be responsible for advertising and promotional spaces within the facility, including passive spaces that can be reserved and more interactive monitors or touch screens. It might also be fiscally necessary to assign this professional additional responsibilities. Related duties could include event and conference planning and facility reservations, as these events would potentially be part of the professional's responsibility to advertise.

Branding Strategy

It is imperative that each union has a specific marketing plan and branding strategy. It used to be assumed that there was a guaranteed audience on college and university campuses, but with so many other opportunities capturing students' interest, student unions must join the advertising game. Start by analyzing the offerings of your facility and how they meet the needs of your university community, focusing specifically on elements they cannot get anywhere else on campus. Create an advertising concept that is exciting and appropriate using bold colors and language along with eye-catching images of people using and enjoying the building. Determine which mediums will best fit the message you are sending and your intended audience. If you want to reach students, consider social and interactive advertising mediums. If you are hoping to reach faculty and staff, consider hard-copy advertising mediums in offices, academic departments, staff newsletters, or break rooms. If you would like to share information with parents, consider brochures and pamphlets available through admissions and orientation offices or sharing information on the university website. Using student surveys and focus groups before drafting a marketing strategy is a great way to gauge student interests and needs and how

best to reach the demographic with advertising tools. Quality and satisfaction surveys are also important after implementing new events and initiatives to evaluate student opinions of initiatives and assess how they gathered information about union events and services. Having a comment box at the union information desk and providing the opportunity to submit suggestions on the union website are other great ways to interact with guests of the facility.

Social Media

In order to connect with students on your campus, utilizing social mediums to advertise is very important. While student center professionals should expect that new mediums will come and old mediums will go, there are three that should be used as much as possible – Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Facebook offers the greatest variety of these three mediums, giving unions the opportunity to post photos of reserveable spaces and events, connect directly with students, conduct surveys and polls, offer teasers or links for upcoming programs, or run contests. Twitter should be utilized more for quick promotional items. It is a great tool for announcing popular, daily menu items in the union food court or quick facts about the building or institution. Whatever information you decide to share via Twitter should be supported by more detailed information in formal capacities. YouTube is a wonderful way to share short videos or clips, especially in conjunction with your Facebook page. Union staff could share informational videos touring the building, music videos by artists who have upcoming concerts, the campus mascot hanging out in the union game room, or students' playing during an Open Mic Night. Asking students to help manage these tools is a great way to engage them in union operations and increase the opportunity to catch the attention of other students. Especially

when it comes to creating noteworthy Tweets or fun and creative videos, incorporating students' ideas and technological expertise is a priceless opportunity available to college union professionals.

Advertising in the Union

As you are working to make your union a hub of activity on your campus, providing plenty of advertising space for community members to use is also important. While there is a big push toward electronic advertising, there is also still a demand for more traditional formats. Thus, a combination of digital monitors and bulletin boards, fits the unique needs of multiple union clients. Another great option for advertising is implementing reserveable postering locations throughout the building. Some facilities use display cases in stairwells and at building entrances, while others offer sign and poster stands that can be moved throughout the building. Whichever option is more convenient on your campus, these advertising spaces will need to be reserved through the union administrative offices and will potentially include a sign or poster approval process.

Programming

The best way to make your union a lively and inviting place is to offer a variety of programs and activities for members of your campus community to participate in or attend. By filling your hours of operation with events that satisfy the diverse needs of students and staff, you will increase their desire to come and spend time in the facility, and in turn increase the community building that takes place at the union. Two things are imperative when working to offer engaging and entertaining programs – sufficient

programming space and a commitment to programming from the union administration office to the campus programming board.

Welcome Week

Welcome Week is a great time to host events as the campus community is buzzing with excitement and energy for the start of the new academic year. Plus, it is the perfect chance to set the tone for the programming that should be expected of the union for the year. This week of programming has additional benefits that help to make it so ideal, namely the opportunity to cosponsor or collaborate with other university departments for large-scale events or entertainers and an engaged student body that is looking for something to do. Events should range from a welcoming picnic or cookout as students' are moving into the dorms to the involvement fair where students' learn about extracurricular opportunities on campus to a spirited pep rally in preparation for the first home football game to a large opening concert or comedian. Smaller scale events should also happen throughout the week featuring crafts, games, contests, union or campus scavenger hunts, candy drops and other giveaways. Because of high attendance expected for Welcome Week activities, being able to provide information to students' about upcoming events is crucial. Whether pens or highlighters with websites for more information or an actual calendar of events for the semester or even just the month, there is not a better time to continue notifying students' of other events they should also plan to attend. Other great ways to increase attendance for this week of events is to provide information about activities to parents who can encourage their son or daughter to participate and through a working relationship and presence in the residence halls. Whether simply a door hanger or magnet in each room featuring the Welcome Week

schedule or collaborative events that encourage residence hall staff members to bring their resident's to events, Welcome Week is a great opportunity to bring campus together.

"The Pitt"

A big part of the commitment to programming comes from providing student-centered space ideal for hosting special events or offering lounge space during off hours. One of the most successful models for this type of programming space is the idea of an "underground." Historically this included rooms in the basement or on the lower level of the union specifically dedicated to student use. The space was often connected to the bowling alley, recreation and game rooms, snack bar, lounge space, and multipurpose room. These spaces are often brightly colored, boast lots of posters or spirited university memorabilia, and are full of tables and overstuffed furniture. Kept purposefully separate from meeting rooms and formal ballrooms, the "underground" is fun, lively, loud, and sometimes considered slightly ragged due to high levels of casual use by students' on campus.

In order to offer this type of programming space at Ball State University a few rooms in the basement of the L.A. Pittenger Student Center could be transformed into "The Pitt," mirrored closely after the traditional "underground." The title of the space is a play on the title of the union and confers the grunge idea that is parallel to any underground space. This transformation would require both a small aesthetic renovation and a large branding strategy. Starting with new paint scheme in the Multipurpose Room, the installation of lighting and sound systems, and construction of small stage, the space would become ideal for music and entertainment. Right across the hall is a newly renovated lounge space with comfortable furniture and multiple big screen televisions,

ideal for students' to gather and hang out. Cardinal Lanes is already a wonderful bowling alley, billiards hall, and game room and could continue current operations. Finally, the transformation of a small meeting room at the heart of this space into a small snack bar operated by dining services would round out "The Pitt" offerings.

The key to this transformation would be student involvement. From choosing color schemes to food offerings to programming, students' should be at the heart of this project. The effort could be led by the campus programming board with help from academic departments like architecture for structural designs, interior decorating for art and color, music production and theatre for stage and audiovisual installation, and communications for the public relations strategy. Decisions on colors and decorations could be made through student surveys or voting and a large, grand opening celebration should kick off use of the space.

Because unions are evolving rapidly in terms of usage, dedicating this space to students' specifically is an ideal way to reconnect to the student body on your campus. It reminds students' that there is always a place for them to come and hang out at the union, away from offices and meetings, and should reflect that in hours of operation. Plus, it is a direct representation of the student culture on your campus, both in design and programming. With a dedicated marketing effort and regular programming lineup from student organizations, students' will know that there is always something going on at "The Pitt."

This idea could be easily adjusted to fit any union on any campus. With the agreement of union professionals to dedicate a certain amount of space specifically to the

idea of an “underground” and the involvement of students, the name, color, and programming of the space would be specific to each individual facility and institution.

Programming Series

After establishing a space for programming, creating a programming series is the next step. One of the best ways to organize your events calendar is to host the same types of events on the same days of the week. While special programs will not happen routinely, series programming works best for smaller scale or niche events. These events can be administratively driven or organized by the student programming board and can operate on a very structured budget because of their similarities. Consider the following schedule:

- *Monday's For A Cause* – Organized with the help of voluntary services, activities on Monday nights could revolve around volunteering within the campus or greater surrounding community. Different options could be available to students ranging from after school tutoring sessions with elementary school children to working with the elderly to physical labor raking leaves, shoveling drives and sidewalks, or beautifying local parks. Students would meet at the union at specified times and work in groups to accomplish tasks. Mondays could also be dedicated to events raising awareness or relief funds when areas of the world are experiencing times of crisis or to programming around a cause or issue during awareness months like Black history, women's history, literacy awareness, breast cancer awareness, or AIDS awareness. While a great way to encourage

citizenship among students, it also has great potential to increase the town-gown relationship for your campus and community.

- *Useful Tuesdays* – Student participants could expect workshop-styled events on Tuesday nights at the union on helpful and current topics. The workshops could be facilitated by different professionals or campus departments invited by union administrators. Topics could include money management, financial aid, time management, resume building, internship searching, interviewing, legal protections regarding property rentals, academic researching, software training, health and wellness, self-defense classes, alcohol and drug awareness, or other sessions sponsored by university counselors, among many others. Learning does not always happen in the classroom!
- *Wednesday's "Halfway There!" Craft Night* – Though it would happen every week, each Wednesday would be a new project. All materials would be provided at the union and a staff person or guest artists would be on site to assist participants. Different styles of crafting could be offered, including drawing, photography, knitting, needlepoint, paper mache, decoupage, scrapbooking, card making, calligraphy, origami, jewelry making, painting, pottery, candle making, and even cooking or gardening. Crafts could be scheduled around different holidays, seasons, campus events, or themes. Always take suggestions from participants on crafts or activities they would like to see in the future and host Student Choice craft nights once a semester at minimum.

- *Thursday Evening Entertainment Café* – University campuses are the best communities for entertainment, whether music, comedy, poetry, or theatre. Thus, having weekly entertainment offerings will likely attract large crowds, especially when it is free. An entertainment café could be successful either during happy hour with appetizers or as an after dinner, dessert program. This is a great event for inviting members of your community to share their talents, which also guarantees audience as friends, classmates, and coworkers will come to support one another. A great model would be to have a contracted artist or entertainer the last week of every month to bring in outside talent as well. Allocating approximately \$500 to this contracted performer is very acceptable with so many musicians, comedians, and poets looking for a break in the entertainment industry and is fairly reasonable for a successful programming series. The event should be located near the dining facility to attract a greater crowd around the dinner hour. Plus, by setting a little ambience with special lighting, centerpieces, and seating, this simple event is very exciting.
- *Friday Night Filmworks* – A great way to bring students to the union is to feature a weekly film series. By establishing a relationship and extended contract with Swank or Criterion, universities can buy the rights to films at a reasonable cost and show titles before they have been released for rent or purchase. With the help of students, set the schedule of films for the semester and publish it to the campus community during the first week of

classes. Make light refreshments like popcorn, candy, and soda available to movie-goers either for free or at a small cost and you have offered a low-maintenance, weekly event to your campus that is guaranteed to attract an audience.

- *Saturday After Hours* – Reserved for alcohol-alternative programming, Saturday is a great way to bring students' together for large-scale, interactive programs, in a safe environment. With the help of the campus programming board and other student organizations, make each weekend unique. Saturday After Hours events could include live music, movies, food, games, contests, and novelty items. Always wanted a reason to invite a mentalist to campus? Have a lot of requests for air brush tattoos? Want to provide carnival inspired foods? This is the place for just about anything. Whether operating around a specific theme or providing an eclectic collection of activities requested by students', be sure to advertise the event lineup well before the weekend arrives.
- *Sunday Tailgate* – During the fall and early winter, Sundays mean football. A great way to reach other demographic of students is to host a tailgate on Sundays to support your local professional football team. Make arrangements to show the game on the big screen, offer tailgate-appropriate foods like wings, hot dogs, burgers, chips and dip, and soda, and organize raffles and contests. Perhaps attending every Sunday enters a student to win tickets to the final home game of the season. Or, if students' are interested, professional staff could organize a trip to attend a game at

some point throughout the season. If football is not a priority on your campus, consider this tailgating model for other sports or for home games on your campus.

After organizing a series of events that students' should expect at the union, spend significant time, money, and effort publicizing the lineup. Provide information during Welcome Week, in the residence halls, on the university website, and through social mediums. In addition, provide a formal calendar of events to the campus community. Though some might think a calendar is an outdated way to share information with the increased use of social mediums, providing a formal schedule of events is still a great tool when programming for your campus. Whether a printed monthly brochure or a glossy semester-long calendar, formal calendars help promote programming series and signature events. It could also feature dates that students' need to know from other university departments including the registrar and bursar, along with dates for all athletic home games. Plus, this is a great opportunity for students' to showcase their creativity and design skills by creating and publishing a calendar that will be widely viewed on campus.

Recreation Center

In addition to a series of programs that happen throughout the union, another set of events should be scheduled specifically through the union recreation center. If there is a bowling alley in your union, a great way to guarantee participation is to host bowling leagues a couple of evenings throughout the week. Another option is to offer discounts to certain groups of students on certain nights. Perhaps Greek students get discounted rates Monday, while students who live in the residence halls are eligible for discounts on Tuesdays, off campus students earn discounts Wednesdays, and clubs and organizations

can reserve lanes at reduced costs on Thursdays. Bowling could also be offered through the intramural program on your campus for a small fee and themed bowling could happen on Saturdays in conjunction with After Dark programming.

In addition to bowling, tournaments and leagues could be organized for billiards, ping-pong, darts, and shuffleboard. Other recreation options could include poker, euchre, and cornhole tournaments, Wii and Playstation competitions, or open gaming for interested students at certain times. Prizes could range from university merchandise to recreation center “bucks” or coupons to games and recreation equipment. Gift cards should also be available for purchase on the university website, especially by parent’s for their children, as another way to encourage attendance at the union recreation center and game rooms.

Commitment from Student Organizations

When considering the programming that happens within the student union, a great way to ensure a busy and lively schedule of events comes from creating a relationship with student organizations on campus. This relationship is built in a few ways. First, there should be very student friendly policies in place at the union, allowing organizations to reserve spaces before allowing outside organizations or groups to utilize the facility. Second, after the reservation has been made, union administrators can help organizations promote and implement events by providing helpful staff members, multiple advertising opportunities within the building, and a great amount of patience and flexibility. Finally, there needs to be an agreement between the union administrative offices and student organizations that are run out of the union administrative offices, namely the union programming board, that events be held within the building. While programming boards

are often attracted to outdoor events, hosting programs at other venues on campus, and taking trips off campus, a requirement should be set that the board be responsible for hosting at least 40% of programs within the union. If the campus program board is housed through the Office of Student Life, a requirement for programming within the union might not be an option. But if the board is structured as a part of the union operations, programs should be held within the space and be largely responsible for creating community and offering entertainment on campus.

Sustainability

In the global effort for greater sustainability and environmentally-friendly living, college students are some of the most conscientious citizens. From organic foods to environmental organizations and charities to sustainable majors and careers, many students on college campuses are dedicated to living environmentally-friendly lives. Some are even considering green institutions in their college application process, thus college and university administrators are paying attention too. From the societal expectations toward building Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified facilities and standards set by The College Sustainability Report Card, institutions are taking large strides to increase their green operations. While institutions at large should reassess their operations regarding green energy, transportation, investments, and administrative policies, student unions professionals can focus on green food and recycling efforts, programming, and facilities.

Locally Grown & Organic Foods

As unions are one of the main, if not primary, dining options on campus, making a commitment to providing locally grown and organic foods is a great way to support the

sustainable effort. Things to consider when choosing food vendors or suppliers include: ensuring that foods have been grown organically, without use of pesticides, fertilizers, additives, hormones, or other genetic modifications; making sure that suppliers operate with fair wages for employees and humane treatment of animals; and supporting companies and farmers in close proximity to your institution. While making some of these changes in your current operation can mean changing suppliers and adding additional cost, the reward of student support and patronage will be well worth the effort. There is also a great opportunity here for programming. Because students are so dedicated to sustainability, there may be interest on your campus to start vegetable or herb gardens near the union. With the help of the science department, dining services, and student-power, starting and maintaining a garden is a great community building, cost reducing, and green supporting initiative. Another great way to build relationships with local farmers is to start a farmers' market on your campus. Located on the green space near the union, a monthly farmers' market is lively, colorful, fun, and environmentally-friendly, while also bettering the town-gown relationship.

Recycling & Composting

While considerations should be given to providing, and even growing, sustainable foods, effort should also be given to how you dispose of them in your facility. Recycling bins should be made available for paper, plastic, aluminum, and glass. If possible, you should avoid using disposable products in your dining facilities like paper or plastic plates, cups, or utensils. When unavoidable, make effort to use biodegradable products that are made from renewable materials. Plus, setting out bins for uneaten food items for composting significantly reduces waste. Making a commitment to composting is an

incredible way to increase sustainability efforts at your institution. Food waste should be collected both during preparation of meals and after dining hall patrons have eaten. If able, composting can happen on university grounds, though this requires significant time, space, and consideration for EPA guidelines and regulations. After the decomposition process has been completed, the final product is organic compost that can be used as fertilizer around campus to help keep flowerbeds and landscaping vibrant and healthy.

Sustainable Facilities

Administrators of sustainable facilities have considered their operations from the perspectives of energy, heating and cooling, building materials, roofing, windows, ventilation, and air pollution. When determining how your facility will operate, give special attention to these details. Utilize reusable building materials during construction or renovation, rely on natural lighting whenever possible, incorporate use of environmentally-friendly products within dining and custodial services, and realistically assess the needs of the campus community when determining efficient scheduling. When you are ready to increase the sustainable efforts in your union, refer to the LEED standards available to achieved certified status.

Collaborative Relationship Building

After taking previous strides to increase the feeling of community at the student center or college union on your campus, the finally step is building relationships with members of the community and invite them to participate in the space. By establishing strong working relationships with certain groups on campus, you can guarantee traffic to the facility. From there, it will be up the first impression of the building to keep people coming back for more.

Campus Tours

The most critical time for people to see the student center or union is during an initial tour of campus. As a high school junior or senior and his or her parents are school shopping, they will be visiting campuses in order to assess fit. Thus, it is crucial that arrangements are made with admissions offices on your campus to bring official campus tours through the building. In some instances, these groups will meet in the building before beginning a walking tour, but in others, they will only have the opportunity for a brief walkthrough or lunch in the building. Whether tour groups are able to spend a lot of time for a little, be sure to provide thorough information about facility services, spaces, programs, and hours of operation so students can visit the space again when they arrive on campus. You could also consider offering incentives to visiting groups to return to the building when they have time after their formal tours. Some options might be inviting them to relax with a specialty drink at the coffeehouse or play in the recreation room before leaving campus for the day.

Orientation

Continuing the first impression of the union should be carried into freshmen orientation as well. In order for incoming students' to understand that the union is the center of community on your campus, continue organizing events at the union while they are working to feel comfortable and at home. Orientation offers a great opportunity for both students and parents to become more familiar with the space and do it separately. In a session with parents, union administrators can reiterate the options that are available in the facility that will be crucial to their son or daughters success. While parents are focused on the students' well-being, the students' are likely looking for social

opportunities to make friends and have fun. Thus, hosting events at the union during orientation is imperative. Even though orientation typically happens during the summer, programming professionals should be on campus and able to help organize events that hint at what should be expected of the school year. Live music during lunch, free bowling during session breaks, or a movie at the end of the day are all fairly simple options that will still make a huge impact with brand new students. This is also a great time to incorporate a small involvement fair, where incoming students can gather information regarding opportunities to be involved when they move onto campus.

Learning Communities

Another great way to familiarize first-year students with the union on your campus is to hold learning communities sessions within the building. Some might be opposed to this idea because of the residential connection that is almost always tied with learning communities and the desire to meet in the residence halls. However, one of the most important elements of any learning community is the effort to make participants feel more at home on campus. Thus, it seems fitting that part of this should include spending time in different locations on campus, including the union. Whether it is a formal session in a meeting room, a community meal, or a social hang out, hosting events for these groups will help build their impressions of and use for the building. This is also a great opportunity to continue increasing the working relationships between academic affairs, student activities, and housing and residence life.

Housing & Residence Life

On some campuses there seems to be a divide between the student activities and housing and residence life sides of student affairs. If this relationship is strained on your

campus, a great uniting force can be the student center or union. Residence halls are becoming more and more self-sufficient. Some facilities have workout rooms, recreation rooms, computer labs, and even food options, and have becoming miniature, decentralized versions of unions. In these circumstances, it is not even necessary for a student to leave their hall other than to go to classes. While it seems students' are entering post-secondary education expecting these amenities in their residence halls, it has the potential to lessen the opportunities for community building that exist when students' are forced to visit the dining halls, recreation centers, library, or student center for services and programs. Because it seems these additional amenities are a solid part of the future for our halls, we must find other ways to continue this relationship. Have regular conversations with professional staff members in the department of housing and residence life on your campus. Make efforts not to plan large programs at the same time or work jointly to provide events for students' in order to increase attendance and save money. Find ways to invite groups from the halls to participate at the union, perhaps by hosting an event that has halls compete against one another in friendly challenges. Whatever solutions work on your campus, work hard as professionals to create as seamless an experience for students' as possible.

Conclusion

As union professionals work to increase the offerings of facilities at their respective campuses, I hope that some of this information will be of use. When considering the role of the student center or college union, it is important to understand both the history and evolution of these facilities in addition to the current trends that are facing our campuses. With dedicated staff and an energetic campus community, transforming the facility into a hub of activity is certainly achievable and should be pursued on every campus. The six strategic objectives outline within the action plan – student voice and representation, operations, marketing, programming, sustainability, and a collaborative relationship with other university departments – can be used in whole or in part and should be adjusted to meet the idiosyncrasies and unique needs of your campus community.

In the future, I would be very interested to see further research on the role of the union as a venue for hosting campus guests and conferences. It has been suggested by some, especially during interviews with students, that this conflicting interest to generate revenue through off-campus organizations conflicts with the relationship between the administration of the facility and student organizations on campus. Whether this conflict

is due to difficulties making reservations and availability of spaces within the building or due to policies regarding use of the building because of campus guests, researching and discussing the need for amending this relationship could prove very interesting.

Another worthy topic might be considering the relationship between the union and residence halls on campus. While the union is tasked with providing space, services, and programs for the entire university community, there is certainly competition with events and offerings within the residence halls. As halls continue to be a one-stop-shop for student residents, the task of attracting students' to the union becomes more difficult. In fact, there can even be communication divide at times between members of residence life staff and student life staff on some campuses and programs within the halls are often organized in direct conflict with programs at the union. While this relationship is certainly specific to each individual and unique campus, better understanding the relationship between these facilities on our changing campuses could be more cost-efficient, calendar savvy, and ideal for bettering the rapport between many different organizations and departments at any institution.

The final piece that is absent in this project is any form of assessment or evaluation on the suggestions given within the action plan. As I begin my career, I will be anxious to begin putting some of these strategies into use and track the results of each. While the suggestions are made based on research within the industry, conversations with students and staff, and successful situations at other institutions, success would be different for each individual campus. Not only would it be intriguing to assess the impact of each individual strategy, but also to see how the plan would work if instituted in whole at any college or university. Though too, this offers a challenge. While tracking and

evaluating change in hours of operation, services offered, number of programs, cost-saving, or attendance within the building after implementing any of these strategies is certainly possible, gauging the increased levels of community and buzz within the facility is much more difficult and subjective. Some might argue that the two go hand in hand. But perhaps creating an additional rating system for the ideal level of community and activity at a student center or college union would also be necessary.

Whatever your specific needs for this plan, more than anything I hope that it will mean a renewed effort toward offering a wide and positive variety of services, operations, and programs in our facilities, in addition to a rededication to the work we do to support student development and growth on our campuses. While we certainly must consider rules and regulations in our daily work, and are often armed with much greater information and experience than the campus communities visiting our facilities, there is an energy on college and university campuses that is unparalleled to anywhere else. It is our job to embrace it, encourage it, and help to produce more of it for the institutions and students we serve.

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