

CAMPUS CENTER PLANNING OR HOW TO AVOID GOING BUMP-BUMP-BUMP

Introduction

Here is Winnie-the-Pooh coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump on the back of his head behind Christopher Robin. It is, as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way if only he could stop bumping for a while and think about it.... Planning is one way of avoiding the bump-bump-bump routine. It allows us to step back and think about our broader philosophical goals, to search for and test alternatives, and finally, to implement a coordinated initiative. The goal of this piece – which is by no means all inclusive – is to provide some gentle direction for planning campus centers. Such facilities are ideally suited to a coordinated planning effort and involvement on the part of the entire campus.

Origins

Campus centers as a distinct and separate building type are just 100 years old. Historically known as student unions, the first such building in the United States was built in 1896 at the University of Pennsylvania. Initially, unions mirrored their English counterparts and served as debate forums. Gradually, they grew into community recreation centers where students could spend their leisure time in a sheltered environment. During the post World War II period, it came to be recognized that the student union had a significant role to play in the educational mission of a campus. As such, the union assumed cultural and educational overtones in addition to its purely social ones. The influx of new students brought with it a significant boon in the construction of new student unions.

Many of these unions were close to the geographical center of campus, reflecting their (rightfully) perceived centrality to the institution. They typically contained a variety of multi-purpose spaces to serve the needs of the campus, particularly where such amenities were unavailable in the surrounding community.

What's in a Name?

In the early 1960's, it was estimated that 43 percent of such buildings were referred to as unions, 17 percent were called a center of sorts, 18 percent were referred to as "memorial" in one form or another, and 9 percent contained "house" or "hall" in their name (Packwood, 1977). "Union" was apparently preferred because it implied an activity, that of unifying the campus. The terminology of choice today appears to be "campus center." The use of the word "campus" implies that the space belongs to the institutional community as a whole. "Center" is not just a locational designation but a reflection of the fact that the facility is programmatically central to the institutional mission, as well. Indeed, there is very little centrally located, buildable land left on many campuses. Consequently, a new campus center may have to be a little less centrally located than it once was.

Learning Outside the Classroom

It has been estimated that approximately 70 percent of what students learn while attending college is the direct result of experiences which occur outside the traditional environment (Kuh, 1991). This is no real surprise given that full-time undergraduate students typically occupy classroom spaces on the order of 15 to 20 hours per week, or roughly 10 percent of a week's worth of time.

In addition, anywhere from 60 to 80 percent of campus space is non-academic in nature. Thus, there are extracurricular opportunities not only in time but in space. Pretty heady stuff for a college freshman away from home for the first time. A campus center is in a significant position to make a lasting difference in the lives of students.

Campus Center Planning

Planning for a new or renovated campus center needs to well up from within. Although outside assistance can be valuable, there is much homework to be done by student affairs staff prior to contracting out the design. Each campus is unique, and one size or type of campus center does not fit all. Care must be taken not to superimpose a perceived solution. What works well on one campus may prove ineffectual at best – and disastrous at worst – on another campus. For example, a number of campuses that I have consulted with have pointed to the relatively new student center at Bryant College in Smithfield, Rhode Island as their preferred image of what a campus center should look like. The Bryant Center was completed in 1989 and serves a student population of approximately 3,000 in a building containing approximately 36,000 assignable square feet. The feature frequently mentioned as most desirable is the three-story central atrium and open balconies. As a result, there is high visibility both within and between floors. Northeastern University is the model choice for larger campuses, particular where new construction is not feasible. A recent renovation project, Northeastern’s Carl S. Ell Student Center was originally constructed in 1965.

The four-story center houses dining and lounge spaces, student services, administrative offices, student organizations, a post office, meeting and conference rooms, and a special events hall. Open balconies, multiple levels, and a sweeping stairway between the first and second floor permit students to see and be seen. Here are two recent, viable models for campus centers. Yet, when I recently assisted the Rhode Island School of Design in the development of a campus master plan and entirely different model emerged. During a student focus group, the participants were asked to describe their particular “vision” for a new campus center. The response was unanimous and firm: “Please don’t give us what they have at Bryant College!” And this with absolutely no prompting whatsoever on my part!

Whereas the Bryant College center is cited by many for its compact centrality, the culture at the Rhode Island School of Design is such that it encourages more decentralized student support services, with access to large spaces for occasional campus-wide events. Art school students are a “herd of loners” according to campus administrators there, and a traditional campus center is simply not the solution for their somewhat atypical student culture. Hence, the traditional student center, in and of itself, would most likely fall miserably on this campus. At the least, there needs to be decentralized opportunities for student interaction to occur with encouragement to bring larger numbers of students together for more formal, programmed activities.

Again, it is up to the student affairs staff to understand the unique student culture and keep an open mind while steering a straight planning course. For many, this may also be the one opportunity in their professional career when they are able to contribute input on a facility of this magnitude. Judicious coordination is required to keep a project like this on track.

Where to Start?

First, develop a mission statement for the campus center if you do not already have one in place. What are the institutional goals? What philosophy do you wish to embrace for the campus center? It can be a simple re-statement of ACUI-I principles or as complex as you choose to make it.

Think about what you would like to call your new building as part of this exercise. (If you are fortunate to have received a large donation, the decision may be halfway made!) The decision will have a long-term impact on how the building is viewed and even used.

Form an internal planning committee consisting of a cross-section of institutional representatives including students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Individuals from the surrounding community may be invited to participate at appropriate planning junctures. Remember that the goal of the campus center is to serve the campus as a whole. Test the name and the mission statement with this group. Regularly report back to the campus community as a whole and to the trustees, as required. Also keep in mind that no individual or group contains all requisite knowledge to plan a campus center in its entirety. Seek additional input by conducting a survey, visiting other facilities researching the literature, analyzing emerging trends, and soliciting consultant assistance, as needed.

Articulate and shape the preliminary space program for the new or renovated student center. Such a program details the various activities to be contained within the building (frequently on a room-by-room basis) as well as the characteristics of these spaces (room sizes, adjacency needs, any special requirements of the spaces such as ceiling height, lighting, etc.) Draw upon appropriate space guidelines, looking first to internal policies and practices. For example, what is the size of a typical office on campus, according to the facilities inventory? What support functions are required? Where internal guidelines are unavailable or inappropriate, look to other sources for input and inspiration.

Historically, campus centers typically contain some combination of the following in its functions: dining space, bookstore, social space, meeting rooms, student organization rooms, and a post office (Dober, 1996). Of course, the nature and extent of the functions included will depend upon the nature and extent of similar and complementary functions available elsewhere on the campus and in the community. Take advantage of the location of the campus. Think beyond the immediate campus boundaries. Work directly with the business community, which will most likely welcome students as customers. Thayer Street in Providence is a prime example of a cooperative effort. Brown University worked closely with area merchants and the results are evident. Just check out the vibrant activity there, both day and night.

Consider the significance of the outdoor spaces immediately adjacent to the campus center. These spaces are frequently left until last, the first to go if budgetary constraints are imposed, or simply ignored altogether. Outdoor spaces can serve as extensions of interior spaces and programs.

“Conversational groupings” throughout campus, whether these are benches or well-placed rocks, are equally significant as they promote informal student interaction.

And, on some campuses, special treatment is given to various indoor spaces throughout the campus, as well. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, “stairway culture” is encouraged by naturally lighted stairwells and chalkboards in the hallways. While there is a formal student center at MIT, there are also low-key opportunities for informal, serendipitous contact.

What about decentralization? Although not advocated for all campuses, it may work well on some. For example, on a large campus it may be easier to keep several satellite units operational at off-peak times. A decentralized approach may also be a necessity dictated by lack of space to expand the student center proper. In either instance, care must be taken to avoid fragmenting the programming which occurs in these facilities. Plan ahead. Is the anticipated operating budget sufficient to operate the facility? Is it possible to establish capital reserves to offset future renewal costs? Are there opportunities for future expansion? No matter how comfortable the building, there should be a provision for expanding it at some future point.

Some General Guidelines

The majority of college unions were constructed after 1950. In the mid-1970’s, it was reported that the median size for college unions was 75,000 gross square feet (Packwood, 1977). This would equate to approximately 45,000 assignable square feet.

Keep in mind that not all space within a building is “assignable” to specific functions; some spaces are contained in mechanical rooms, janitorial closets, and wall thicknesses. For building type such as a campus center, roughly 65 percent of the gross square footage is typically usable, although this factor can dip below 60 or nudge 80 percent.

Ultimately, it is the gross square footage that determines construction cost. Costs can vary dramatically by area of the country and are dependent upon site constraints and building components. There is a premium associated with constructing a collegiate Gothic-style building with a slate roof over a more low-key design with basic finishes and components.

A general “rule-of-thumb” range for a “basic” building might be anywhere from \$100 to \$150 per gross square foot. Can’t make do with anything less than a state-of-the-art collegiate Gothic building? Then be prepared to double some of your construction estimates.

It may help to keep a cost-per-square-foot figure in mind when programming new space. Does someone want to work in some additional square footage? Let them know how much it will ultimately cost. A private conference room for ten, you say? Tell them \$40,000. There is no such thing as free space. But don’t sell yourself short; it is less expensive to build the space you need now than it is to add it on later.

How much space do you need? Ideally, there should be a detailed space program for the building, developed (literally and figuratively) from the ground up. This additive program reflects the nature and sizes of the various spaces to be contained in the facility as indicated previously.

Barring the development of detailed program, there are some rule-of-thumb guidelines. Among these are the Council for the Advancement of Standards which recommends 10 square feet per student. The Council of Educational Facility Planners recommends nine assignable square feet per FTE student when

planning a campus center. Again, these are general guidelines. A campus center could diverge significantly from these numbers depending upon the content of the physical program for the facility.

What Do the Next 100 Years Hold in Store?

It does not appear that the “virtual campus center” is going to replace the traditional bricks and-mortar building any time soon. Witness the fact that larger and larger libraries are being built in increasing numbers despite dire (and apparently premature) predictions over the past decade of their imminent demise.

In a related vein, the recent completion of a library-cum-student center at George Mason University presents an interesting model (Geraghty, 1996). This facility houses the academic library, departmental offices, and classrooms as well as the traditional campus center functions including no less than a 310-seat movie theater. This 320,000 square foot, \$30 million center may presage things to come.

Another trend is the spurt in the construction of student recreation centers. This new building type, which has emerged over the past 15 years, is a hybrid of sorts between the old gymnasias and the traditional student unions (Body, 1996). The author notes that whereas these earlier facilities tended to serve different sets of students, the new student recreation facilities draw from across the entire campus community. As a wellness center, it is seen as a logical extension of an institution’s educational mission.

These examples are provided not necessarily as the models of the future, but as an indication of why it is essential to think outside of the traditional campus center box. Students have changed and so must campus centers. But one thing will remain unchanged: the campus center, in whatever physical and programmatic form, will continue to be at the social, cultural, and educational heart of an institution.

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