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Members of NU Community Express Opinions on New Student Center During Focus Group

By Jessica Floum

Northwestern students met with representatives from Brailsford and Dunlavey consulting firm to discuss potential renovations to the Norris University Center in two focus groups Wednesday.

"We're exploring the need for expanding Norris or repurposing another building and trying to reassess student opinion," Norris Executive Director Rick Thomas said. "This building serves, in a majority of ways, students, and the University has been grappling with what to do with Norris for some time."

Wednesday's focus groups were made up of Greek-affiliated students and students in multicultural student groups; additional sessions in the future will focus on other students' needs.

The first two groups acted as a preliminary step in the Student Center Needs Assessment Project, which aims to compile student feedback on what they want in a new student center. Several student groups' lobbying efforts for a new or improved student center led to the launch of the project. One such initiative grew out of the Associated Student Government, which conducted research and lobbied NU administrators to have a more centrally located student center. The University Budget Priorities Committee also placed preliminary research on this project at the top of its priority list.

"There has been sustained and strong student support for student center improvements for decades now," UBPC Outgoing Chair and Weinberg senior Jonathan Green wrote in an email. "Since this study is a necessary first step for any practical improvement one way or another, our group saw it as a high priority. It's financially sensible and very feasible, and obviously had a good deal of administrative support, too, so really it hit all our marks."

UBPC's lobbying efforts led the University to hire the consulting firm, Thomas said.

"This is the result of the University listening to students," said Dr. Julie Payne-Kirchmeier, assistant vice president for student auxiliary services. "At the end of the day, we hear you."

The NU administration knows some student frustrations with Norris include a shortage of space and "cold architecture," Thomas said. They hired Brailsford and Dunlavey, who had previously assessed Norris in 2005, to further research what students want in the building. The research will help the consultants create a general survey to send to students in May, Thomas said. He also

said he anticipates the process will wrap up with a proposal from the consulting firm at the end of fall 2012.

"It's a long iterative process with a lot of feedback from the students and the University," said Assistant Project Manager Ryan Jensen, one of the firm's representatives present at Wednesday's focus meetings.

Although the process may be long, Weinberg junior Calvin Osei Poku, who participated in a focus group, is optimistic.

"I do have high hopes after this meeting," Osei Poku said. "Norris has always been this place that could be really popular. It has a lot of space that could be used for a social space."

Osei Poku said he liked that the focus groups gave students that want to see the student center change the opportunity to voice their opinions.

"It's a real grassroots strategy," Osei Poku said.

Students from both groups Wednesday agreed that increasing social space in a new student center would be beneficial, saying that Norris currently serves more of an executive purpose, the firm's representatives said at the the meeting.

Bienen junior Sergio Alvarez said he appreciated that the focus group opened discussion for creating more space for students.

"There definitely needs to be a space to just be," Alvarez said.