



TRENDS AND BENCHMARKING DATA FOR THE MODERN UNION

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College unions have a distinct opportunity to help create a positive student life experience. Although each college union is different because each campus is different, progressive student life professionals have learned that in addition to accommodating student activities and services, unions can offer economic sustenance to their institutions.

As campuses compete for students and student dollars, colleges and universities are working to build memorable first impressions for prospective students and cultivate positive experiences for current students. Kevin Kruger, associate executive director of the National Association of Student

Personnel Administrators, notes that “Campuses are trying to attract the best students, and amenities catch people’s attention” (in Leonard, 2002, p. A1). Some of these amenities can be found in the college union; according to Lewis (2003): “Because the prospective student, parents in tow, will probably visit a battery of campuses in quick succession, it is inevitable that these facilities will be carefully compared. As students increasingly select colleges based on what they can see, colleges will spend more money on that which can be seen” (p. B7).

But what trends exist among those facilities and what benchmarking data is out there to help those college unions

looking to embark on a renovation or construction project or simply make adjustments to their offerings to keep pace with the times? Brailsford & Dunlavey and WTW Architects have created a database of qualitative and quantitative information on more than 40 union construction and renovation projects throughout the United States (Brailsford & Dunlavey & WTW, 2005). The institutions in the database represent the range of colleges and universities, from small liberal arts schools and private institutions such as Elizabethtown College and Duke University, respectively, to large public universities including Pennsylvania State University and the University of Connecticut.

The database was developed using 13 categories to sort information. These categories were developed based on common components seen in college unions throughout the United States. The 13 components are: food service, bookstore facilities, ballroom facilities, student organizations, administrative offices, conference/meeting rooms, theater/auditorium space, additional retail services, recreation/entertainment, lounge space, special/miscellaneous components, academic space, and multicultural centers (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005).

While the location and characteristics of the institution certainly affect the final program and design of its union, several trends are commonplace throughout these building projects. More specifically, within the 13 components, trends can be identified regarding the size and scope of contemporary college unions, regarding the relationship between the size and scope of the union and the size of the institution, and regarding services and programs found in these facilities.

COMPONENT 1: Food Service

Dining options and quality increasingly reflect the diversity of student interests. A variety of food opportunities is essential for modern dining operations. Additionally, the size of retail dining areas is growing on university campuses with certain areas that can be divided off so that service can be open during some hours when the union is closed (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005). Large amounts of daylight and flexibility of seating arrangements have a positive impact on the quality of the dining spaces, and successful dining operations are located on the entry level in high-traffic areas with flexible seating provided both indoors and outdoors. Back-of-the-house spaces tend to be smaller as a majority of food is prepared in front of the customers, but a dedicated loading dock is still preferred. A recent trend on numerous campuses is to build many satellite dining services within libraries and academic buildings,

thus decreasing the overall demand for dining service in the union (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005).

The last few years have seen many campuses integrate retail dining with residential dining, often located in or adjacent to the union (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005). The “dining hall” or “board plan” model, formerly restricted to residence halls, is now a successful component of new and expanded unions. At the University of Virginia, approximately 40 percent of students pay for a meal plan. Edward Gutasukas, Aramark’s associate vice president for campus services in Virginia, credits much of the board plan’s success to the all-you-care-to-eat dining hall found in the union. “The location is huge in terms of the population of that facility,” said Gutasukas (personal communication, November 2004). While the university’s other dining halls draw the residential population, the dining hall in the union caters to the institution’s commuter population. At Old Dominion University, students requested that the current retail operations in the union be converted to board dining when the facility is renovated in 2006. Gutasukas noted, “They wanted the convenience and program of an unlimited” dining experience (personal communication, November, 2004).

Interestingly, for the unions on campuses enrolling fewer than 8,000 students, food service space makes up almost 37 percent of total assignable square footage in the union (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005). This might reflect unions serving smaller institutions as the primary dining venue for the campus.

COMPONENT 2: Bookstore Facilities

Bookstores are increasing in size and scope within the union despite the threat from online bookstores. A few years ago, a good rule of thumb was one square foot dedicated for the bookstore for every full-time equivalent. This has increased dramatically because of the demand for more soft goods and gifts, including T-shirts, hats, and leisure books.

Coffee houses and convenience stores are being integrated into bookstores, as well as the concept of moving the back-of-the-house offices directly onto the selling floor. According to Michael Lopez, a university bookstore consultant, “Many bookstores are locating buying offices on the sales floor, which heighten the perception of service to the customer while adding the factor of security to the sales floor” (personal communication, March 2005). Often, larger institutions and those with urban campuses are home to freestanding bookstores. Many of these campuses are starting to develop “campus gateway” projects, often with a new bookstore as the anchor tenant. Rochester Institute of Technology is developing a mixed-use college town project that includes many union-type spaces. The anchor tenant is scheduled to be a Barnes and Noble bookstore. However, many campuses continue to maintain a bookstore within the union and have expanded their unions to cater to a larger audience including visitors, faculty, staff, and alumni. For example, the University of Vermont’s bookstore is estimated at 20,000 square feet for an enrollment of about 10,000 students.

COMPONENT 3: Ballroom Facilities

Well-designed and equipped ballrooms often become the “show pieces” of the union. These ballrooms are flexible, proximate to accessible parking, and can play host to many kinds of student, staff, and alumni events. Most contemporary ballrooms seat an audience of at least 1,000 and are preceded by a pre-function/lobby area. Typically, ballrooms are equipped with movable seating and high-tech audiovisual equipment. Built-in stages and large storage areas are standard, and small control booths are often incorporated into the ballroom for audiovisual or slide projections and small-scale theatrical productions. For banquets and other large-scale events, proximity to a warming kitchen/catering area is desirable.

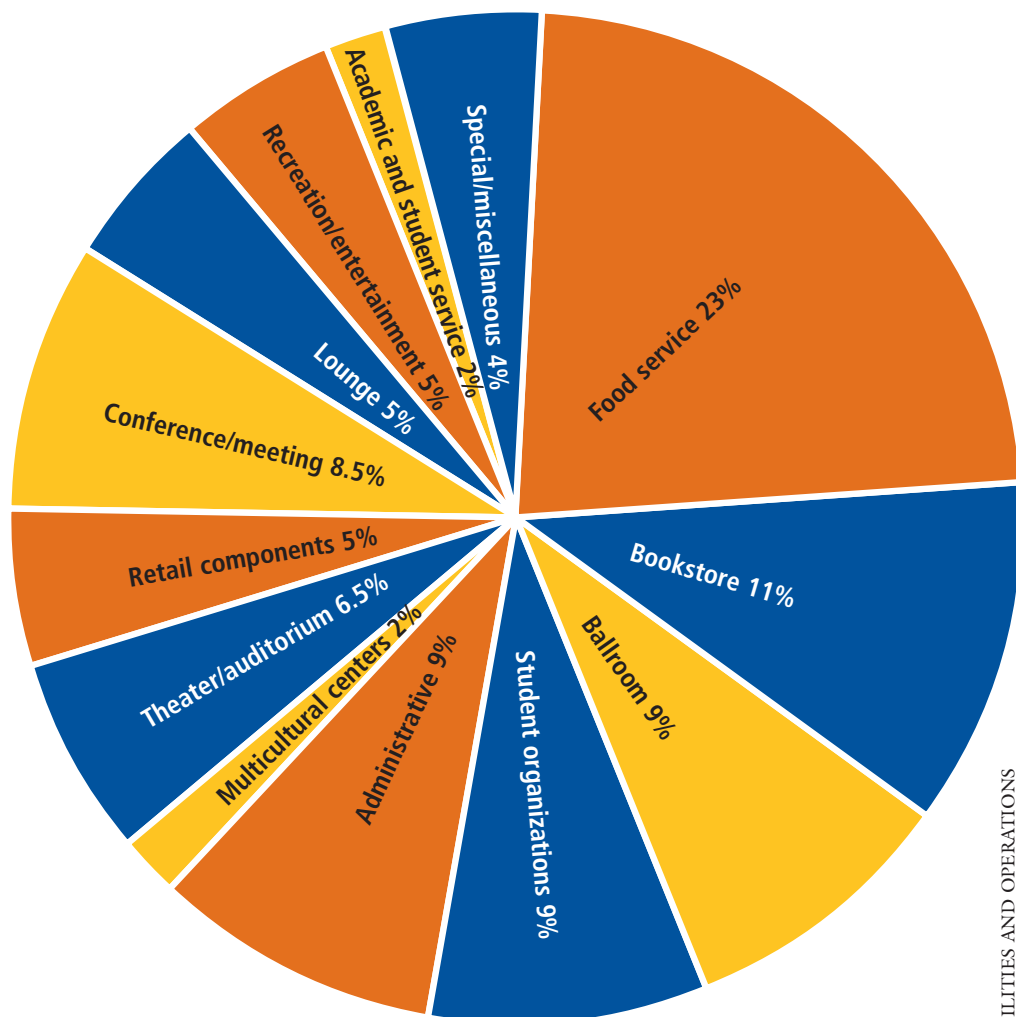
In terms of specific space guidelines, 12 square feet per seat is the standard allocation for most new ballrooms (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005). When planning to build, institutions should consider the primary function of the new space; 15 to 20 square feet per seat is typical for banquets, whereas 10 to 12 square feet per seat is common for a ballroom that will principally serve as a lecture hall (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005). Particularly after Sept. 11, fire marshals and other planners are taking a detailed look at the egress of assembly spaces, often impacting the size and efficiencies of new ballrooms.

COMPONENT 4: Student Organizations

Office suites usually contain a mixture of dedicated offices for “anchor” student organizations (e.g., student government, union board, campus newspaper, etc.), cubicles for student groups assigned on a yearly basis, and shared student work space. Shared space often includes storage lockers, a banner storage room, office supplies, and new photocopier machines, computers, and printers. Facilities may include a telephone bank with individual voice mailboxes and physical mailboxes for each club. Student organization space varies from one-half to one square foot per student FTE (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005). As more unions expand, this average of the total square footage continues to increase.

COMPONENT 5: Administrative Offices

In contemporary unions, administrative offices are located on the upper floors or in other spaces away from high-traffic areas of the facility. Owing to the popularity of electronic mail and networking, offices can be dispersed and decentralized to make the best use of space. A reception area at the entry point of primary offices (e.g., union director, director of student activities, dean of student life) aids in orienting students and other visitors. Dedicated restrooms and kitchenette areas are



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SOURCE: Brailsford & Dunlavy and WTW Architects, 2005.

frequently located nearby for the benefit of staff. Administrative office areas usually are accessible during business hours only. As more unions expand, the average of the total square footage dedicated to administrative functions will likely decline.

COMPONENT 6: Conference/Meeting Rooms

Meeting rooms in modern union buildings are located on upper levels away from noisier, high-use areas. Usually, new conference/meeting rooms are built to complement ballroom spaces in size and location, so that meeting rooms can serve as break-out spaces during conferences. Additionally, meeting rooms are in close proximity to one another and to a server to accommodate large conference groups and smaller conventions. Flexibility of seating arrangements is provided to facilitate seminars, lectures, and con-

ferences/meetings, with high-tech equipment included in the architectural program. The conference/meeting room technology program is based on a state-of-the-art audio-visual capability, employing standard and market-proven technologies for media production, storage, delivery, and display. Most spaces used for meeting and conference activities will provide for display of computer-based information, ranging from small-group collaboration using laptop interfaces and flat panel displays, to classroom, lecture, and performance spaces with large-screen displays.

COMPONENT 7: Theater/Auditorium Space

Contemporary unions house a range of theater options, particularly because of the growing interest in dance and flexible performance venues. Spaces typically found in the milieu are a large,

formal theater/auditorium with professional-grade lighting and sound, a 75- to 300-seat “black box” theater, dressing rooms and a green room, a set shop, and a loading dock (Brailsford & Dunlavey & WTW, 2005). Many universities with advanced performing arts needs or academic interests are finding it difficult to house all of these components in a central union space. Consequently, the range of contemporary unions includes those with a tremendous amount of square footage devoted to theater/auditorium space and those with minimal space devoted to this purpose.

Many campuses are observing a recent increase in student organizations not traditionally associated with theater or dramatic productions requesting auditorium space for specific program needs. Examples of this phenomenon include the design club that wishes to sponsor a fashion show and the Chinese Student Association that wants to expand its annual Lunar New Year event. A contemporary theater/auditorium space is able to support a variety of needs and interests and inspires student use.

A new hybrid theater is called the “Student Activities Theater.” Flexible, adaptable, and technology-enriched, this facility combines the performance requirements of a commercial movie theater, lecture hall, comedy/jazz club, dinner theater, and a venue for student skits and entertainment activities. This is a theater that accommodates a diversity of events and is quite different from other theaters/auditoriums typically found on the college campus. The University of Connecticut has one of these theaters in its union.

COMPONENT 8: **Additional Retail Services**

Retail components are playing a larger role in unions as a means to entice students and keep them in the union. They are actively becoming a part of the union experience. Union managers are increasing revenue by catering to specific student requests, often drawing on local trends and interests. At Brigham Young University, for exam-

ple, students enjoy the Campus Craft and Floral store at the Wilkinson Student Center. In addition to selling flowers, plants, gifts, and balloons, the store offers scrapbooking classes and supplies. More schools are looking to expand their convenience stores into full-service grocery stores, partially the result of more student apartments being built on campus with full kitchens. According to Klein (2005), these grocery stores can range anywhere from 4,000 to 12,000 square feet, although many are built in buildings other than the union.

COMPONENT 9: **Recreation/Entertainment**

Many unions have replaced their arcade games with group activities. Games areas typically include pocket billiards, table games (foosball, air hockey, etc.), and table tennis. Few schools are building brand new bowling centers in their union. However, the bowling trend varies from region to region; many institutions in the Western and Midwestern United States are finding that students remain interested enough to retain older bowling centers for revenue. Campuses that choose to update older bowling facilities do so at a price, as renovations are both time-intensive and costly. However, some schools believe that the cost is worth it. At the University of Alaska–Fairbanks, the renovated bowling center boasts new pin-spotting, electronic scoring, and display panels—and students love it. The staff at the university’s Wood Center observes that the bowling center is a draw for commuter students and a quality of life enhancer throughout the cold, dark winters in Fairbanks.

Modern recreation areas often include a small programming area for entertainment (e.g., a stage or raised platform with adjacent seating for an open mic night or comedic act), a small group gathering space, and a dining service option or warming station. Such program components also incorporate ingress and egress that allow for late-night activities. Lighting, fixtures, and finishes are competitive with retail facilities in the nearby community.

COMPONENT 10: **Lounge Space**

Two types of lounges are prevalent that enhance the sense of campus community and take advantage of the high-traffic nature of a union. “Social” lounges are often adjacent to dining services and rely on relaxed, noninstitutional furniture in a choice location to attract students. As Lewis (2003) says, “Since the American campus was wired for computers, studying is no longer a private affair of reading and typing, which involved prolonged and quiet concentration. Studying has become more intermittent, more gregarious, and more mobile” (p. B7). Students’ primary complaint with social lounges prior to renovation is that the spaces are too “sterile,” that they “feel like waiting rooms,” and that they do not invite extended use for studying (Brailsford & Dunlavey & WTW, 2005).

Conversely, study lounges are located in quiet parts of the union and utilize low-impact lighting and more formal seating. Students appreciate large tables that facilitate small group use and project planning, and lamps that can be positioned and employed according to students’ needs. The most up-to-date unions include wireless lounges with accessible electrical outlets for laptop computers.

Both kinds of lounge spaces usually are distributed throughout the building for maximum use and versatility. For example, lounge seating at Duke University doubles as a pre-event space for the theater. At the University of Virginia, one of the lounges is a quiet study room by day and a pre-event space to the ballroom by night. In every setting, lounges are equipped with comfortable seating and movable furniture.

COMPONENT 11: **Special/Miscellaneous Components**

In contemporary unions, this category might include art galleries, child care facilities, or other components unique to the priorities or historical legacy of the particular institution. For example, at Indiana University, the

Indiana Memorial Union includes the Memorial Room, which displays the Golden Book and plaque symbolizing dedication of the IMU, “In memory of the sons and daughters of Indiana University who have fallen in the wars of the republic” (IMU, 2005).

COMPONENT 12: **Academic-Related and Student Services**

Many institutions avoid placing academic facilities in the union with the exception of computer lounges and e-mail stations. Because the majority of buildings on most campuses are devoted to academics, student life administrators generally seek a different feel for unions. However, in some instances, minimal academic space, such as high-tech classrooms or lecture halls, can serve dual functions in the union and can draw students inside. In addition, some institutions are responding to student requests by placing satellite offices of a limited number of student services, such as the bursar and registrar. In these cases, specific offices may have a union window “face” with the central office located elsewhere. This “one-stop shopping” concept has been interpreted in many forms ranging from an enhanced information/referral desk staffed by generalist-trained assistants to the recently opened 80,000 square foot addition to the Oklahoma State University Student Union called the Center for Student Services.

COMPONENT 13: **Multicultural Centers**

The big question for this component is whether multicultural centers should be located in the union or housed in a separate facility. Proponents of placing the multicultural center in the union argue that a union location underscores the significance of multiculturalism as a community value and encourages a wider audience of passersby to explore the services offered therein. Those who advocate housing the center elsewhere believe that a separate location legitimizes the center as an entity in its own right and

allows students who visit it to have a private, “safe” place on campus. Many new union projects including the Price Center expansion at the University of California–San Diego (UCSD) are planning the best of both by building a new multicultural center as part of the complex but allowing it to have its own identity. According to Gary Ratcliff, director of the University Centers at UCSD, “If done properly, a multicultural center can be sited in the union and designed to achieve all the aims that proponents of a separate structure advocate for” (personal communication, March 23, 2005).

Overarching trends

Three overarching trends become visible when all 13 components are taken as a whole. First, program components are being built to accommodate flexibility and variety. Second, program components increasingly cater to specific student feedback and trends. Third, program components exceedingly create a union that is student-friendly.

With the fast pace and diversity of today’s world, it is no wonder that union facilities must accommodate flexibility and variety. Ballrooms typically have portable stages and high-end, moveable sound equipment, rather than fixed stages. Retail options have expanded to include convenience stores, mini-grocery stores, floral shops, video/DVD rental, clothing, and other less-traditional sales items. Lounge spaces include options for multiple users. The “airport waiting room” look has been replaced with overstuffed couches, quiet study areas, television lounges, “Great Rooms,” and casual dining areas. And these casual dining facilities incorporate creative options, such as cooking in front of the customer, small group spaces for eating and working, and less back-of-the-house kitchen space. With more eating venues being located in various academic buildings and libraries, the overall demand for dining service at the union has decreased; however, at least one food service component was included in every union in the database (Brailsford & Dunlavy & WTW, 2005).

Additionally, specific student feedback and trends are being used to design program components. Why? Because students today are savvy consumers. The institutional, academic textbook store has been replaced with a bookstore similar to what you might see off campus. These spaces, which often include coffee shops and seating, have expanded to sell greeting cards, gifts, and sundries.

Dining services include ethnic options or “lifestyle” choices (vegetarian/vegan, low-carb, kosher, etc.), depending on the requests of the local population. Some campuses have replaced chain venues such as Taco Bell and Pizza Hut with local vendors. However, chains still play a large role in the college union because they provide a branded item, something today’s students value. Changes in dining, especially, have been met with great success and additional union income.

A union has always been a student-friendly gathering place on campus, and this is still a prevalent trend in how unions are designed and organized. Campuses promote and encourage leadership by devoting increased space to student organizations. Contemporary unions include a student organization suite that includes private offices for permanent student governance agencies; reservable conference tables and rooms; shared work space; phone banks, mailboxes, and storage spaces.

Administrative offices have been moved out of prime real estate in unions, and front-line student services have moved in. Student services are often used as a hook to get students to the union. Students rarely make a special trip to the union to visit the campus catering office, which is more often being done online. They will, however, meet a friend for lunch at the union after visiting a centrally located registrar’s office. Several universities are incorporating financial aid, bursar, and registrar facilities in second floor and wing spaces of the newest unions. These one-stop service centers are becoming increasingly common. Also, universities are replacing traditional student service models with more of a

generalist approach that has staff “cross-trained” in many areas. Now a student can go to one location to pay a library charge, parking ticket, and fill out their financial aid forms. According to Kevin Ciotta of JM Associates, a university technology consulting firm, “Universities are transitioning from organizational-based services to student-centric and delivering these services both physically and virtually” (personal communication, February 10, 2005).

Future Trend: Programmable vs. preprogrammed spaces

Student use of a union relies heavily on students’ willingness to feel uniquely connected to the activities that occur within the facility. Recognizing this phenomenon, contemporary unions accommodate varied and often social needs of students; that is, they are often “programmable” rather than “preprogrammed.” An example of a programmable space is the lounge/lobby on the entrance floor of a union. This space is often co-located with a food court or other dining component and contains an informal stage space. Furniture includes round tables, “tucked away” booths, and couches. During different parts of the day, this space is used for informal studying, dining, concerts, or “tabling” for student organizations.

Preprogrammed spaces are being built less. These spaces are designed and are furnished to facilitate a certain, specific function. Information desks,

proscenium theaters, student activities office suites, and bookstores are examples of preprogrammed spaces. While the furniture and fixtures of these spaces may be updated, the spaces are intended for set purposes that require major renovations to alter. Certainly, these spaces are necessary in a union; they serve crucial functions within a campus. However, increasingly these spaces are being designed to include programmable elements. An information desk, for example, could be equipped to also serve as a meeting place for admissions tours or a ticket counter for special events. The lobby or pre-function space of a proscenium theater could be designed to accommodate banquet seating and dining. And a bookstore might use an upper-level textbook shop for poetry readings during the textbook “off” season.

Regardless of such special accommodations, preprogrammed spaces are less versatile than fully programmable spaces. Consequently, students will visit these spaces only with incentive and for specific reasons. If a union contains more preprogrammed than programmable spaces, students will not be inclined to “drop by” or gather informally in the building. This is analogous to the difference between a couch (a programmable item) and a hard-backed chair (a preprogrammed item). Different students at different points during the day may use a couch to sleep, study, meet with a professor, eat, relax, watch television, read a magazine, or wait for a friend. More

than likely, those same students would do only half of those activities in a hard-backed chair.

If current overarching trends reflect the diversity, fast pace, and opinionated nature of students today, then it is almost guaranteed that programmable spaces in unions will become even more of a necessity in the years to come. In the near future union professionals will need to think critically about how to ensure their facilities have a proper balance of programmable versus preprogrammed spaces. This is not a trend that will diminish; it is one that will remain with colleges and universities long into the future.

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