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A More Perfect Union

Big Ten Schools Pour Money Into Student Centers

By Libby Nelson
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A few lattes can make a lot of difference.

Two weeks after the Starbucks opened on the first floor of Norris University Center, the lounge continues to draw a steady flow of students to study and drink coffee in a space that once was almost empty.

The change comes at a time when universities in the Big Ten and around the country are significantly modifying their student centers to make them more vibrant.

A major renovation or reconstruction at Norris, however, is probably not coming any time soon, Norris Executive Director Rick Thomas said.

"We'd love to, but we don't have the resources," Thomas said. "There was a long talk of a renovation or an expansion, but the university never made the commitment."

Other universities that are making such commitments offer amenities such as travel agencies, post offices, hair salons and expanded fast-food franchises in their rebuilt unions, competing for the free time of current students and the applications of prospective ones.

"It all boils down to the fact that a student union should be a place where students can feel welcome, where they can gather, where they can feel like a part of the university," said Jay Schumacher, Associated Student Government president and former member of the Norris Center Advisory Board.

"Norris is constantly struggling with that."

CHALLENGES FOR NORRIS

Although Norris doesn't have as many of the amenities as the more ambitious projects elsewhere in the Big Ten, the schools do share a consulting firm.

Brailsford and Dunlavy - a Washington, D.C., firm that also examined Ohio State University and the universities of Wisconsin and Iowa - collected more than 3,000 responses to a campus-wide survey in spring 2005 that asked what students wanted from their student center. They then compared the results with those gathered at other schools.

The survey found that Norris' problem wasn't attracting students, but keeping them: NU students came to Norris about as often as students at other schools went to their unions, but stayed for only about an hour on average.

In response, NU administrators elected to add the Starbucks because it was a project that could be completed "in a reasonable amount of time with a reasonable amount of money," Thomas said.

The unions undergoing major overhauls all belong to significantly larger state universities. NU made "seven or eight" attempts to expand Norris, but these failed because no donor stepped forward.

A five-year, \$1.5-billion fundraising drive built, renovated or expanded 18 campus buildings between 1998 and 2003 - but Norris was not among them.

"People were all frustrated that Norris hasn't been a priority in terms of expansion for this current administration," said Schumacher, a Communication senior. "The Board of Trustees and the president's office has to see the importance of building a top-class student center."

One challenge that has consistently turned up, according to Thomas, is the building's architecture.

"Norris was built in the early '70s, so there's an architecture that's not as human and friendly as the old, classic buildings (at other schools)," Thomas said. "As such, we have challenges creating spaces that are comfortable to be in."

The design - solid concrete walls and no central staircase, so that each section of the building can be locked down separately - was a response to riots on college campuses in the 1960s, said Helen Wood, the associate director of the Center for Student Involvement.

Wood, also a regional director for the Association of College Unions International, said Norris uses its space well - giving student groups separate offices rather than cubicles, for example. However, she said, the fact that NU's student services offices are spread across campus instead of being contained inside Norris differs from other student unions.

Schumacher said a student union should be a "one-stop shop" for student amenities: a place where students could visit career services or alumni relations, eat lunch, shop for groceries and hang out. Currently, he said, Norris is not.

BIG TEN FACELIFTS

In 1999, the University of Minnesota's Coffman Memorial Union was faced with a dilemma similar to Norris'.

Once "the living room of the campus," according to the university's Web site, Coffman had become a place where students would run errands and leave.

So when a refurbished Coffman opened its doors in 2003, like Norris, it had added a Starbucks. But unlike NU, Minnesota didn't stop there - the new Coffman also has a Chick-Fil-A, an Einstein Bros., a student travel agency and a bowling alley.

The University of Iowa Memorial Union recently finished an 18-month, \$30-million renovation to modernize its 80-year old union, expanding its bookstore and study space and adding a new food court and coffee shop.

This week, Ohio State University will vacate its student union to build a new facility - a process that will cost \$100 million.

The University of Wisconsin recently passed a student initiative to modernize its central union and to demolish and rebuild a satellite building built in the 1960s, adding a sports pub, a climbing wall, another auditorium and more event space.

AN "AWKWARD SITUATION"

Other Big Ten unions' renovations, however, were driven by problems that Norris does not have, Thomas said.

Because Norris is a newer student union - built in the 1970s instead of being renovated from an existing foundation - it does not suffer from the heating, cooling and electrical issues that plague older buildings.

While conference rooms at other universities do not meet the needs of advancing technology, meeting rooms at Norris have been updated with wireless Internet and digital projectors.

Schumacher said because of Lisa's Café on North Campus and Crowe Café on South Campus, a centralized student union might be less necessary.

"If you have all these different things, do you need a big student union? I don't know," Schumacher said. "Students are going to have to speak with their feet and their dollars about what their needs are."

Another reason commonly given for renovation is to give the school an edge in recruiting - a driving force behind OSU's renovations, said Tracy Stuck, the union's director.

"When we looked around the Big Ten and other universities that we compete with, and when you consider that three out of every five days there's an orientation or admissions event (in the union), we just weren't putting our best foot forward," she said.

Norris, however, is not essential to NU's recruitment, Thomas said.

"The truth is, we don't have trouble recruiting students," he said. "There may be a point at which students decide based on NU's amenities. But at this point, I can't honestly say that's the case."

Norris is still competitive with other Big Ten student unions, Thomas said.

He cited its proximity to Lake Michigan as both an advantage and a disadvantage: Although Norris looks out on the Lakefill, universities building new unions tend to place them at a central point on campus. Norris - far from most students' dorms - is in an "awkward situation," Schumacher said.

And although Schumacher said he is thrilled with Starbucks' effect on Norris' first floor, he added that he hopes the changes won't stop there.

"My biggest fear is that (the administration) will look at Starbucks and say, 'They have their Starbucks, they have their café, we don't need to do anything more with Norris,' " he said. "Norris is a great example of how the administration listens to us. But it's just a small piece of the puzzle."

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Media Credit: Joanna Allerhand/The Daily Northwestern

The University of Minnesota and NU are among several Big Ten schools that recently renovated their student unions, while Ohio State University plans to completely rebuild its facility this year. Students warmly greeted the recent

revamping of Norris University Center's first floor, but officials say bigger changes aren't likely.



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