

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN STUDENT UNIONS

by

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## **Abstract**

For just over 100 years, student unions have served college campuses across the United States. These buildings have changed and progressed over time to offer services to fit the needs of students. Recently, the concept of community building has become increasingly more important to higher educational institutions. Student unions are at the very center of community building on college campuses. This report looks at one model of community building and offers design elements union administrators need to be aware of when designing student union spaces.

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## **Dedication**

There are several people to whom I would like to dedicate this report. My family members have offered continued support throughout my entire life. Without them I would not be the person I am today. I would also like to dedicate this report to the professionals who have guided me throughout my time as a student. Their hard work and tireless effort to build community for students is truly inspiring.

## **Building Community in Student Unions**

In the earliest years of higher education, learning was thought to only happen in the classroom. The curriculum taught by instructors was seen as the only way students actually gained knowledge in the college setting (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). It was not until the late 1800s that the focus of higher education began to include the activities outside the lecture hall. Institutions have since considered learning to happen everywhere on campus including within student organizations, social interactions and even volunteering (Astin, 1999; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These experiences can have a significant impact on student engagement, retention, and academic success.

An area of student affairs particularly concerned with the learning that takes place outside of the classroom is the college union. The union offers many opportunities for involvement. Through these experiences, among other factors, student unions can become major places of community building on campus. In 1956, the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), the leading professional organization for those involved in the unions and student centers, released a statement entitled the *Role of the College Union*. In 1996, this statement was affirmed as the framework for practitioners and administrators in working with students within student unions. Woven throughout it is the idea of the union being a catalyst for building community on college campuses:

Traditionally considered the “hearthstone” or “living room” of the campus, today’s union is the gathering place of the college. The union provides services and conveniences that members of the college community need in their daily lives and creates an environment for getting to know and understand others through

formal and informal associations. The union serves as a unifying force that honors each individual and values diversity. The union fosters a sense of community that cultivates enduring loyalty to the college (1996).

This task of developing a sense of community for the entire campus is not one to take lightly. All of the services a union offers, when taken together, help to create laboratories for learning on campus. The events, activities, food services, and opportunities to interact with others from diverse backgrounds help to cultivate strong citizens and future leaders (Herman-Betzen & Henthorne, 2003). With this foundational statement and other theoretical frameworks, student affairs practitioners can begin to really examine what community building can look like within a student union.

Student unions have not always been a physical spot on a college map. The earliest unions stemmed from small student organizations that had no formal space to meet. As these groups grew, physical structures were built to accommodate their needs. Over the years, unions have continued to offer a wider variety of services to students. This tradition of changing with the student population to accommodate their needs has continued throughout the past century. Even today, unions are constantly changing and upgrading their services to meet students' needs.

Today, more students have access to higher education and are attending college. With a diverse group of students coming to campus, the student union administrators must work hard to maintain relevant services. The millennial generation will continue to shape and to challenge administrators working in college unions. Their unique characteristics and needs will continue to affect the services, activities, and general structure of higher education. With all of these elements taken together—the history of the union, theoretical framework, common characteristics and design elements of communities, and the ever-changing student population—

student affairs practitioners can work to create a sense of community within their campus' student union.

## **History of the Student Union**

While the history of higher education in the United States can be traced back over four hundred years, student unions have been on campuses just over a century (Thelin, 2004). At the turn of the twentieth century, learning was seen as only taking place in the classroom. Because of this view, there was not an urgent need for space for students to interact with each other outside of the lecture halls (Cohen & Kisker, 1998). This lack of a centralized meeting location led to students finding other, more creative ways to meet their social needs including recreation, sports, sharing in meals, and discussing current issues (Butts, 1971). As student organizations and groups began to form, the need for a communal space on campus began to emerge.

This need for a place of community on campus began to grow, and construction of buildings dedicated to student spaces began around the country. Over the years, student affairs administrators have worked hard to meet the needs of their students. These ever changing needs caused the services of the student union to change as well. Today, we see student unions as places of great social interactions as well as places of entertainment, politics and mourning. From starting out as a simple student organizations to evolving into large, multi-million dollar building projects, the college union has a unique history.

The tradition of a student union on a college campus stems from Oxford and Cambridge in the form of debate societies made of students. These small groups met regularly to discuss and to debate politics. Eventually, the idea of student-run organizations made its way to the United States. These societies offered an open forum for students to voice their opinions and concerns about political issues, their institutions, and other current events. They also used these

opportunities to develop activities centered on socializing and recreation (Butts, Beltramini, Bourassa, Meyer, Mitchell, Smith, & Willis, 2012). One of the first student unions began at the University of Wisconsin. Shortly after this organization began, other institutions began to establish their own student groups. Within a few years time, these small groups began to grow in popularity and numbers.

The need for spaces outside of the classroom began to emerge. Students, as well as administrators, began to see the importance of offering students a place to gather and socialize. One of the first physical spaces for early student unions was Houston Hall at the University of Pennsylvania (University of Pennsylvania, n.d.) Students designed this building for the specific purpose of student activities. When it was finished, the building was home to a swimming pool, recreational center, eating areas, and meeting rooms (Butts, et. al. 2012). After Houston Hall, colleges and universities began erecting buildings of their own that captured the essence of the campus.

### **New Buildings and Student Populations**

The 1920s and 1930s brought about a building boom of student union buildings across the United States. Schools in Texas, Kansas, New York, Ohio, Montana and across the country were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to create a building dedicated to students and their many activities on their campuses (McMillan & Davis, 1989). At this time, other areas of student life, like residence halls and libraries, could not wholly provide all of the services students needed. Residence halls were generally seen as places to eat and sleep while libraries were used as study space. There was not a place that combined these roles until the establishment of the union. Student unions were seen as a “catch all” of student services. The buildings could offer a variety of amenities including “club facilities, restaurants, hotel, theater, art galleries, post

office, hobby shops, radio studios, stores, and a battery of offices all under one roof” (Butts, et. al, 2012, p. 80).

In the early decades of the 1900s, higher education saw a surge in enrollment. Part of this was due to two reasons: the GI Bill of 1944 and the participation of women and minority groups in extracurricular activities. Through the GI Bill, military service members and veterans were able to gain funding to attend colleges and universities. In the ten years following the passing of the GI Bill, over two million veterans and service members attended college and dominated the student demographics of higher education (Olson, 1973). These men brought unique needs and characteristics with them, and higher education responded by offering family housing for married veterans and services to help them adjust after serving in the war (Olson, 1973).

Originally excluded from higher education, women and minority groups slowly entered into institutions and the activities offered by the universities. Women had been attending college since 1848 but were not allowed to participate in the extracurricular opportunities the male students were given. In the 1920s, women began creating their own student organizations (Butts, et. al, 2012). Despite not being allowed into the union buildings, women’s organizations worked with the men’s groups to develop events and activities. It was not until the 1950s that women were fully allowed to participate within the union and all of its events.

By the 1960s and 1970s, more minority populations began to enroll at colleges and universities. As this student population grew, groups specifically dedicated to these students began to organize around the country. These organizations offered much more than just an opportunity to socialize. These groups became, and remain, powerful forces for minority students’ voices to be heard (Museus, 2008). With these new student populations, unions began to take on new roles and offer new services and programs.

## **Ever-Changing Needs of Students**

As the numbers of students attending college increased so did the need for more programming. In a student union, this was achieved through a programming board or council. These institution-sanctioned organizations were made up of student volunteers. Over time, these organizations have become a staple in the college union life. Many of the original workshops and seminars these boards offered covered topics that students indicated were not covered in the classroom including marriage, families, and sexual education (ACUI, 1938). By the 1970s, the board began to plan and promote events that served more of an entertainment purpose. These large-scale events began to include movies, concerts, and other similar leisure activities (Butts, et. al., 2012). These events required spaces big enough to accommodate large crowds of people as well as varying types of events.

Recreational centers also became a pivotal part of student unions. Many building renovations at this time began to include areas of recreation such as a larger bowling alley, a pool hall, an arcade or a combination of all three. The goal was to allow students to have a place to also develop while enjoying the competition of game and sport. “Some contribute to physical coordination, others to mental alertness. All contribute to the development of values and habits valuable to constructive use of leisure time” (Tempte & Smith Feltner, 1974, p. 1).

Political activism also began to play a large role in the lives of students. The student union became a catalyst for political protests and actions. Following the tradition of the earliest unions, students used the spaces to protest and debate the politics going on at the time. In the Vietnam War era, the student union became a hot spot for activism and protest. Often the purpose of these protests was to catch the eye of the government or the institution itself.

Campuses across the United States have held protests that have caught national attention (Butts, et. al, 2012).

Today's student union experience is a culmination of its rich history with a new role emerging over the past few decades—that of mourning and support. As violence on college campuses and in the world has increased, the union has become a place for memorial and to serve as a vigil for fallen students (Baker & Boland, 2011). September 11, 2001 brought about a new way of looking at the world. The union became the place where students not only gathered to receive the latest news, but it was a place where students were able to lean on each other for support and to share their stories (Butts, et. al, 2012). Student unions become the center of information gathering both for national and local crises (Hatton, et al. 2013). Even in tragedy, the union remains a strong place for community. While the history of student unions aids understanding the process of community building, theoretical models must also be looked at. Because each campus is different, administrators can follow the general model of community building and form it to fit their own campuses' needs.

## **Creating a Community**

One of the most popular human development models is that of Maslow's theory of human motivation (1943). This theory sets the basic humans needs in a hierarchy with the most important needs, those physical and safety concerns, at the bottom and progressing toward self-actualization needs at the top of the pyramid. The needs lowest in the hierarchy must be met before other needs closer to the top can be met (Maslow, 1943; Strange, 2000). The first level of needs is biological and includes breathing, food, sleep, and shelter. To achieve the second level, people seek out opportunities for security and protection. The third level includes building relationships with other people as well as seeking affirmation from others. The fourth level is

fulfilling a sense of esteem through achievement and respect from others. The final and top of the hierarchy is self-actualization. It is in this level people are able to exercise creative freedoms.

Strange and Banning (2001) suggested a parallel model, see Figure 1, to Maslow's hierarchy when describing community building. Like Maslow's theory that works from the bottom up, their model takes a bottom to top approach when discussing the hierarchical needs an environment must meet. In order to create a community of invested members, the students safety and inclusion needs must be met first. There must also be ways in which they can get involved and participate within the community. "The safety and inclusion of participants must be attended to first, followed by structures that promote involvement, and then conditions that offer full membership in a community of learning" (Strange, 2000, p. 23). This theory suggests a



**Figure 1: Strange and Banning (2001) Model**

campus must first meet the safety and inclusion needs of students before addressing issues of engagement. When those initial needs of inclusion and safety are met, students can then become involved with the campus and fully immersed as a member of that community. Being able to find a community can help students achieve their goals in their education (Harris, 2006). Before the elements of this hierarchy can be explored, the effects of physical space on human behavior and attitudes must first be discussed.

### **Effects of Physical Space on People**

Understanding the impact of the physical environment on behavior is extremely important to understanding the role the environment plays in community building. People can develop strong emotional relationships with places. In turn, these places can have significant impact on human behavior (Strange & Banning, 2001).

#### ***Emotional Connections to Physical Space***

People can develop strong connections to physical places. Place attachment and place identity can have profound effects on people. Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) defined place attachment as “a positive affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such place” (p. 274). Many colleges and universities have traditions that are deeply rooted in history and can help to further the connection with the campus. Place attachment differs from person to person based on his or her experiences with the place in question (Prochansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Sarbin, 1983). Relationships with spaces are constantly changing based on the experiences with the spaces as well (Manzo, 2003). There are three positions regarding the way a space can

affect a person's behavior: architectural determinism, architectural possibilism, and architectural probabilism.

Manning and Kuh (2005) suggested a number of different things institutions can do to further an emotional connection to the campus spaces. While these are meant to be general guidelines for campuses, these ideas can also be applied to the student union. First, they recommended taking advantage of the setting of the college campus. This means accentuating the beauty of the environment in which the campus is set. The use of natural beauty, both inside and outside, can further people's connection place (Cairns, 2003). Student unions can utilize this concept by including plants or other greenery in the design of the building. The plants can bring about a sense of life and warmth to a space.

Another suggestion for making place matter more to students is to offer human scale learning environments (Manning & Kuh, 2005). Human scale in this instance refers to the physical qualities of a space that promote characteristics within people. These environments offer students a place to pause and reflect. This sense of reflection not only allows students the opportunity to become more self aware, but also can encourage involvement. This is another important feature unions should attempt to cultivate for their students. While programming and meeting space are seen as very important features, smaller and more personal spaces should also be included in the design. These could be various sized meeting rooms, informal spaces to stop briefly to chat, private seating benches next to windows or an area under a set of stairs with a bunch of large throw pillows. An environment can use a number of different elements to foster emotional connections, but it can also affect the behavior of its users.

## *Physical Space and Behavior*

There are three positions that exist to explain the relationship between physical space and the behavior and actions of a person. *Architectural determinism* (Ellen, 1982) is the idea that people's behavior is directly determined by their physical environment. Their behavior is caused by their surroundings. This position suggests that behavior can be predicted because the physical space offers few options for correct behavior (Rullman, Van den Kieboom & Van Jura, 2012; Strange & Banning, 2001). For example, a bowling alley and pool tables located in the basement of a union help to define the purpose of that particular space and how it is utilized. Most of the people that could be found in the recreation center are typically there for social interaction.

The second position, *architectural possibilism* (Ellen, 1982), was created in response to the deficiencies of architectural determinism. With possibilism, the physical environment is seen as a "source of opportunities that may set limits on, but not restrict, behavior" (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 13). It assumes that behavior cannot necessarily be predicted, but the environment can offer a number of possibilities of use (Rullman & Van den Kieboom, 2012). In this case, a certain room could be used for a lecture and a meeting, but may not be a good venue for a concert because the technology and audio/video equipment are not suitable for such event.

*Architectural probabilism* (Ellen, 1982) was developed to define the probabilistic relationship the physical environment may have on behavior. This position has been widely accepted by higher education administrators in many areas of student affairs (Rullman, et. al., 2012; Rullman & Van den Kieboom, 2012). This position offers the idea that certain behaviors have a probability of happening if spaces are intentionally and thoughtfully designed (Rullman & Van den Kieboom, 2012; Strange & Banning, 2001). The physical environment can have a

strong effect on students. The next section offers a theoretical model for creating environments into places of community.

## **Theoretical Model**

### ***Safety and Inclusion***

As with Maslow's theory, safety and inclusion make up the lower, most important, part of the hierarchy that physical spaces must work to fulfill. This first level of safety ties together both physical and psychological aspects of environment (Strange, 2000; Strange & Banning, 2001). Both of these concepts are often intricately tied together. Strange and Banning illustrated this issue: "For example, insufficient outdoor lighting on campus (a safety issue) may make it less attractive to some students (an inclusion issue), and failure to successfully attract and retain sufficient enrollment of some students (for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students), an inclusion issue, may make it psychologically unsafe for those few who do matriculate" (2001, p. 113). An essential and important component of this level is the fact that students must not only be physically free from harm and threat, but they should also feel psychologically safe as well. When exploring these needs, there are physical as well as psychological elements that must be considered.

Union administrators that are successful in building community align their physical spaces with institutional values (Manning & Kuh, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Rullman & Van den Kieboom, 2012; Strange, 2000). When people are trying to make meaning of an environment and the intended and verbal communication of a space contradicts the unintended and nonverbal communication of that same space, they will tend to believe the latter (Manning & Kuh, 2005; Rullman & Van den Kieboom, 2012; Strange, 2000; Strange & Banning, 2001). For

example, if a union has welcome signs posted outside of their building, but the entrance to the building is difficult to locate and leads to a narrow hallway, visitors may not feel the warm welcoming feeling the union is attempting to promote. If the nonverbal cues and an environment's intended communication do not align, people may not feel as though they belong in the union.

A feeling of belonging can have significant effects on students. Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, and Early defined belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (1996, p. 173). As students attempt to adjust in college, they may experience feelings of marginalization (Schlossberg, 1989). To combat those negative feelings, students need to find a feeling of mattering to the campus in some way. Those students that have that feeling of mattering and belonging on campus tend to persist both socially and academically (Ma, 2003; Schlossberg, 1989;).

Many elements contribute to a student's sense of belonging. Research has shown that self-esteem can have a significant impact on the social and academic lives of students. Students with a low sense of mattering tend to have lower self-esteem and are at a greater risk of having depression (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, 2008; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Those students who have low self-esteem, and a low feeling of worthiness, and may have difficulty connecting with the physical environment of the institution because those feelings can cultivate a deeper connection to the school and community (Ma, 2003). It is also important to give consideration to the human aggregate characteristics of an environment as well. Individuals with strong similar characteristics tend to come together. Eventually the environment absorbs those characteristics creating the idea that a

person's "experience is therefore a function of his or her congruence, or degree of fit, with the dominant group" (Strange, 2000, p. 21). If a person feels as though he or she does not align with the values or behavior within the environment, that person has a better chance of leaving that said place (Hagerty, et. al. 1996; Strange, 2000).

There are many factors to consider in creating safe and inclusive environments. Students should ultimately feel free from physical harm when in the union environment. A lot of time and energy can be spent on feelings of being excluded or marginalized. If these feeling can be resolved, students may then be able to seek out opportunities to grow and develop. This will eventually lead to a higher level of engagement within the community (Strange, 2000; Strange & Banning 2001).

### ***Involvement***

Providing a safe and inclusive environment is not an end. Institutions must also offer meaningful opportunities for involvement. As people feel more secure in their environment, they seek out more ways to be engaged with their surroundings. Involvement is more than being physically present. It also includes the physical and psychological time invested in that environment or activity (Astin, 1984). There are a number of factors that can assist in creating an encouraging place (Strange & Banning, 2001).

As mentioned previously, human scale learning environments can create stronger connections to the community. These smaller-scale environments offer a place where more intimate connections can be made among people (Manning & Kuh, 2005; Strange & Banning, 2001). Forethought should be given to spaces when buildings are being designed. Intentionally including small nooks and booths can offer smaller scale learning environments. Think of a large lecture hall. It is difficult for 300 students to all learn the same subject at the same level in an

hour's time. But much more can be learned in a group of three students because stronger connections can be made among themselves and with the material (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Another important aspect of environments that encourage involvement is flexible spaces that can be changed to suit the needs of the students using the space. By having moveable and flexible spaces, furniture, and walls, students can begin to take ownership of the space. This can lead to feeling a greater connection to the space because it can give people a feeling of having a deeper role in the design of the space (Strange, 2000). This flexibility can also encourage a more open flow of traffic throughout the environment and can maximize the use of the space (Hatton, et. al., 2013; Strange & Banning, 2001). This idea of ever-changing space can keep activities dynamic and interesting. It can often break up the monotony of the rest of the world (Oldenburg, 1999). With this idea of flexibility, a space that is used as an eating area during the day and as a concert venue at night, not only allows for more people to utilize the space which can lead to more connections to the community, but also creates more opportunities for use.

Finally, involving communities have a plethora of leadership opportunities and organizations for students to join (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). A good community values the differences of its parts. Having a wide array of activities that can support the differences in students, unions can be well on their way to creating a solid sense of community in the students. By having a number of ways for students to get involved, whether it is mentoring, employment or other leadership roles, union administrators can show the value they place on individual differences while also connecting students to campus (Roland, 2008; Shields, 2004; Strange, 2000).

### ***Full Membership into Community***

These levels of safety, inclusion and engagement ultimately culminate into a meaningful and deep membership into the community. As students have experiences rich in growth and development, they can start to give meaning to the world that is greater and bigger than themselves (Strange & Banning, 2001). The commonly shared interests offer a way for students to have a sense of belonging. These shared interests can help to strengthen the characteristics of the environment basically leading to more creative, deep, and challenging interactions. As environments allow students to take on a more important and decision-making role, they are able to contribute to the culture and direction of the space. They are able to take up a feeling of ownership with the space. When students are fully immersed in their community and memorable and meaningful experiences take place, the bond formed between individuals can be powerful. As time goes on and these memories become a part of history, traditions begin to build (Strange & Banning, 2001). The rich traditions and culture of an environment can help students give greater meaning to the world past their own needs. By giving students the opportunity to be a part of the history and decision making process, they begin to establish more confidence in their own abilities and develop into stronger human beings.

### **Community in a Student Union**

The idea of community and belonging are not tangible, but there are characteristics that can be used to describe elements that make up a good student union. A *third space* (Oldenburg, 1999) is a theoretical concept that describes where people spend their time when they are not at home or work. Third spaces facilitate informal social interactions by incorporating several important characteristics.

## Third Space

Places can play a large role in the lives of people. Sociologist Oldenburg introduced the idea of society being broken up into the first place or the home, second place or where one works, and the third place or an informal community space. Third space refers to a “variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16). The third space serves as the community center for people. It is a place that allows for people to release the stress from the day and find others with common interests. It can also be a place for people to find emotional support and companionship after the loss of a significant other (Rosenbaum, et. al, 2007).

The first place is seen as the most important place for a person. It is the location of the greatest growth and development as a child. It is the place that children find themselves long before the working world is of interest, and older adults find themselves here long after retirement (Oldenburg, 1997). The second place is that of work. It functions as a place that often fosters competition among peers and often provides a way to better the quality of life (Oldenburg, 1997).

Third places are often what the student union strives to be on campus. The *Role of the College Union* describes the union as the “hearthstone” or “living room” (ACUI, 1996). It is a place that fulfills the social, intellectual, and recreational goals of the student population as well as those of the faculty, staff, alumni, and other community members. With these goals in mind, there are a number of important characteristics and good design elements of a student union. These characteristics not only intertwine the concepts of a third place, but also those elements of a union that can be seen as timeless.

## Characteristics and Design Elements

### *Driven by Conversation*

One of the first and most important characteristics of a third place is one that is a neutral ground and in which the activities are driven by conversation. Places of community are those that people can freely move in and out of at will. It allows for a person to meet others and not have the obligation of staying there or playing host to others. By having a neutral place for people to meet, the door for conversation is opened. Conversation is the sustaining activity of any good place of community. It is often lively and exciting (Oldenburg, 1989). It is interesting that these are two defining characteristics of community have been embodied by the student union even before they were places. The debate societies that were the basis for the student union we know today were driven by conversation. The long tradition of student unions stems from the very notion of debate as a communal activity.

Today, there are many opportunities for students to exercise this characteristic of community within a student union. From lectures and speakers to protests and political activism, there are events that constantly encourage an open dialogue. One shining example is that of student government. Student unions often house the student government organization. This group run by students is often seen as the representative body of all students enrolled at the university. The structure of such organizations is often modeled after the federal and state governments by including an executive, legislative, and judicial branch. It is within the legislative meetings that students' needs are advocated and debated and diverse voices are heard (May, 2010). Student governments are often an integral part of many student unions as their missions of being advocates for students coincide.

### *The Hearthstone and Warmth*

Another important characteristic of the third space is that it is warm and inviting. Just as a fireplace of a home has a hearth or hearthstone, so does a student union. The hearthstone serves the student union as both a tangible and theoretical center of warmth and community. A hearthstone is often the centerpiece of a welcoming environment. Warm places tend to be environments that are used by people often. They are places of high traffic and are used quite often by those patrons (Oldenburg 1999). Spaces that remain unused or do not have a lot of people coming through tend to have an unwelcoming and cold feeling. That is not the feeling a student union should evoke in its patrons. In creating an atmosphere of warmth, there should also be a sense of ownership among the patrons (Oldenburg, 1999). People can contribute many things to a place, and those people should be aware of that. This sense of ownership can often assist in building the community.

*The Role of the College Union* (ACUI, 1996) claims the student union as the hearthstone of campus meaning it should be a warm and inviting space. Because of this, many unions have a physical fireplace located centrally in the building. It is around this space that one could typically find students socializing and studying. In 2013, the University of Minnesota Duluth Kirby Student Center underwent a small first floor renovation project. Through this construction, two fireplaces and a television lounge were added (University of Minnesota Duluth, n.d.). After the grand opening of the space, usage of the student lounge increased drastically. When a fireplace is not feasible, Hatton, et. al (2013) suggested that there are other design components of student unions that can serve in that role. Water features, artwork and even foliage can serve as a substitute for a fireplace. There is one clear focal point in the building that creates a sense of

comfort to the patrons that use the space. While this centerpiece is important, it must also be noted that the spaces must be accessible and transparent, or easily seen, to the users of the space.

### *Accessibility and Transparency*

Accessibility and transparency are a few other elements considered to be timeless to student unions and third places. In 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law. The ADA prohibits discrimination in a wide array of activities, including employment and public services (ADA, 1990). This federal act has a significant impact on institutions of higher education. There are certain reasonable accommodations a college or university must make to allow equal access to resources to all students. This idea stems back to Schlossberg's concept of mattering and marginality. By creating an environment that is open to all students and shows they belong at the university, students will be more engaged and willing to learn (Schlossberg, 1989). When designing a new student union or planning for renovation projects, administrators must keep in mind the ADA and its terms. This could be as simple as putting in ramps to the buildings' entrances and well intentional and thoughtful placement of elevators. If colleges and universities do not meet some of the minimum requirements, students may take them to court. In cases involving physical structures, some students have been successful in presenting and winning their complaints (McMenamin & Zirkel, 2003).

While being accessible to all students, it is also important that the building remain transparent and open. Hatton, et. al. (2013) describes a union with exterior transparency as a "billboard of student activities" (n.p.). Students on the outside of the building are able to see the activities happening inside the building. By being visible to the rest of campus, the events essentially advertise themselves while they are happening. This can ultimately lead to more

students participating in more activities on campus because it is visible and not hidden from view. It is also important to note the importance of large open spaces. Unions built in the 1960s and 1970s tend to be compartmentalized and dark (Hatton, et. al, 2013). When unions are able to have large open spaces, there is an opportunity for better light, more activities and more informal interactions among students. It is also important to note that spaces students are encouraged to use on a regular basis, i.e. the food court, diversity center, activities office, or lounge space, should be easily seen and visible to the public. Being able to see the activities of a space may spark curiosity in the students.

### ***Dining and Food Service***

Another important aspect of a strong community is that of dining and food service. This is an area of student unions that has significantly changed over the years. In the past, meals offered by unions tended to embody a cafeteria like atmosphere (Butts, et. al., 2012). Whatever was on the menu was often the only food to which students had access. Today, it has become more of a common practice to have a diverse range of food for students. In this “marketplace” concept, kitchens are brought out of the back to allow students to engage in the process of ordering and creating their food. This dining experience offers a wide variety of food to students and community members. The options offered can be very extensive and come from all over the world.

Food and dining can also foster discussion. Eating with other people has become more common and is the ultimate social interaction (Oldenburg, 1999). It is over meals that families and friends engage with each other. Sharing in meals cultivates conversations, which is one of the other sustaining activities of a good third space.

## *Information Gathering*

A student union should serve as an information-gathering place for students and other members of the campus community (Hatton, et. al., 2013). Members of the campus community will always be seeking information in regards to classes, the location of other buildings on campus, and even the weather. The union is a gathering place for many students and is often where students, faculty and staff learn about events and other happenings on campus. It offers a great way for students to connect to the campus and each other. Events and activities happening in the union can help bring together those students with similar interests. Students today, discussed below, are busy and high achieving. They are often on the go and looking for one central place to stop and to get all the information they need.

As social media and other technology advance, it will be important for unions to stay up on the new trends. Bulletin boards with posters may, eventually, become passé. Unions have started to include large television screens with announcements and events flashing across the screen. Students are able to get the information quickly and efficiently. Today, they have access to the Internet at all times. Smartphones allow for questions to be answered as quick as they were thought of. Students do not expect to wait for answers (Ricketts, 2010).

A feature that embodies the idea of information gathering is a welcome center or desk. By having a central location where students, staff, faculty, alumni and visitors can go to ask questions, they might feel less confusion. This is often one of the first features with which a prospective student comes in contact. Having a staff of knowledgeable student employees may help this student feel more a part of the community because of the shared characteristics. These welcome centers offer a way for students and visitors to immediately feel connected to campus.

This concept of a welcome center also relates to creating a warm atmosphere within the student union.

## **The Millennial Student Population**

The previous sections have noted the effects higher education can have on the individual students, but little has been discussed about the impact the current generation has on higher education and the student union. The needs of students and the developmental models used to understand these students have constantly changed and evolved over time (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Strange, 2004). Originally, these models began by testing theories on the white privileged men attending college, but as the student population grew, the models became more inclusive and sensitive to the differences in minority groups and women. These changes have forced higher education and student affairs professionals to change their services and methods of meeting those needs of students over time. The same holds true in the realm of student unions. As student unions grow and evolve to meet the needs of students, it is important to understand the characteristics and unique needs of the current millennial generation and how those needs with dictate the way a union is able to serve its community (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).

### **Characteristics**

Students in the millennial generation were born in the early 1980s and have been enrolled in higher education since 2000. Students of this generation will continue to be on campuses for the next ten years and beyond (Rickes, 2009). These students tend to rely on their parents' and family members' input when it comes to making big life decisions, including going to college. This reliance has made students much more sheltered in their day-to-day lives (Pizzolato &

Hicklen, 2011; Rickes, 2009). The team-oriented mindset, an interest in co-curricular activities, a need for instant gratification, and a feeling of being special are defining characteristics of the upcoming generation.

### ***Team-Oriented***

Millennials tend to accomplish tasks in a group setting (Dugan, 2013; Rickes, 2009). Studying, working, eating and other activities are done with other people. More learning can take place within a group because there is a range of diverse opinions and experiences they can share. These smaller groups not only promote learning, but also help students feel more connected to campus and others. The flexibility and variety of spaces of a student union are excellent ways to engage students within the environment. “The key, therefore, is to provide a physical space that supports multidisciplinary, team taught, highly interactive learning unbound by traditional time constraints within a social setting that engages students and faculty and enables rich learning experiences” (Dittoe, 2006, p. 3.9). These spaces can ultimately create excellent learning environments for millennial students. Along with this team-oriented way of learning is a second, closely related characteristic of achieving and participating in activities.

### ***Highly Involved and Achieving***

Students coming to college are entering with a wide array of activities from high school. They are used to multitasking and juggling many activities (Rickes, 2009). As students enter into the college life and campus culture, they will join more organizations and take on more leadership positions on campus. Participation in groups and activities can offer a sense of accomplishment and achievement that millennial students are seeking. Whether it was a large campus wide event, or increasing the number of members of the organization, students are given

something tangible that can serve as a badge of success. As students come to college looking for opportunities to make connections, unions will need to ensure there are enough roles for students to step into. This can be through leadership opportunities, student organizations, and job openings.

### ***Instant Gratification and Being Special***

A characteristic that is often associated with the millennial generation is a need for instant gratification and feeling special (Ricketts, 2009). As mentioned before, when students want information, they want it immediately and do not want to wait for it. Having the entire Internet in their pocket allows for questions that can be answered in a matter of seconds. Technology, text messaging, and social media have perpetuated this characteristic of millennial students. They are able to get instant feedback from peers and others through statuses and tweets they post to social media. When others “like” or “re-tweet” a post, Millennials may feel a greater sense of pride or importance. Students also feel as though they are special and have an attitude of entitlement. Even as children, this generation has been told they are important. These students have grown up getting awards and trophies, sometimes just for being present at an event and not actually winning or coming in first place.

### **Impact on Campus Environment**

The current millennial generation has had a profound effect on the planning and construction of new facilities on campus. The characteristics of millennials have shaped how colleges and universities design buildings and implement services. Administrators have taken notice of the generational changes and have been working toward creating a dynamic campus environment for students. New ways and ideas of designing space and conducting business to

better services to students are beginning to take shape. This shift into thoughtful design increases the feeling of community that union administrators are seeking to create.

One of the most important design features is the existence of flexible, multipurpose spaces that include comfortable furniture and ways of interacting with others. As mentioned previously, millennial students are increasingly more team oriented when it comes to accomplishing a task. Flexible, multipurpose spaces encourage interaction among students and help in creating a team-oriented atmosphere. These spaces are becoming more and more prevalent on college campuses. Unions are especially taking this into consideration during renovation and construction projects. By offering seating that can encourage students to enter into dialogue with others around them, unions can assist in meeting this need of the millennial generation. Many colleges and universities now have made-to-order food to satisfy the need for students to feel specialized. Students are able to customize their meals to include their own preferences. They are able to customize their burgers, pizzas, salads, and side dishes. Two students may order from the same menu but end up with entirely different meals. The millennial generation of students will continue to shape the direction of building projects.

## **Issues Facing Student Unions**

A number of obstacles can prevent practitioners from building an ideal community on campus. These barriers are may not easily be fixed, but practitioners should be aware of them as they work to create a strong sense of community on campus. A number of different types of barriers exist. The first problem lies in the infrastructure and shell of the building. Many unions are seeing the need to renovate or completely reimagine their space. This leads to a second problem in funding. With scarce financial resources, there may be difficulty in obtaining the necessary funds to support the construction and renovation projects. Unions are also competing

with other institutions for students' time and business. Because unions are no longer the only place of community, they face a struggle in attracting students. A final, and possibly the most important problem in community building may be the administrators themselves. The silo effect isolates many departments across campus. Administrators need to be strong campus leaders and be open to new and creative ways of building community.

### **Infrastructure Problems**

Student unions face many issues with the need for space and outdated infrastructure. Many unions were built during the building boom of the early-mid twentieth century when campus enrollments were much lower. Over time, many have had smaller renovations and construction projects. Now, some campus populations have grown exponentially in size and the unions are struggling to keep up. For example, when the Kansas State Student Union opened in 1956, the population of the campus was 6,526 students (Kansas State Student Union, n.d.). Today, the KSSU serves a student body of almost 24,000 students with very few renovations and additions to the physical structure of the building. Unions are also facing issues with infrastructure including HVAC systems, lighting, and wires. These changes are often very expensive (Revisiting Construction, 2012). Because the patrons of unions do not easily see these problems, it can often be difficult securing funding for these types of needs.

### **Funding**

Higher education in general has faced many issues in funding, and student unions are no different. Many unions are student fee-funded, meaning the students pay a set amount of money at the beginning of each semester to support the services offered by the university. Unions often get a portion of this fee to help them with operational costs and capital funds. Unions are not the

only campus entities that receive the fees. Other areas such as campus auxiliaries, student groups, and health services also receive these funds. As the cost of tuition has gone up, students have become increasingly unhappy with the rise of fees as well. It is important for unions to become more creative in the way they generate funds outside of student fees. Summer camps, weddings, conferences and other large events need to be recruited especially during the summer months. During the school year, most of the events that take place should be student events that benefit the campus.

### **Competition with other Departments**

As time has progressed, there has been an increasing competition among departments for students' time and financial resources of campus. In the early years, student unions used to offer exclusive services to students. They used to provide the majority of food and leisure activities for students. Now, those services can be found almost anywhere. Many necessities that unions offer students can now be found on other parts of campus or in businesses that are in close proximity to the college or university (Luse, 2009). Libraries now have lounges, and dining centers can be found in residence halls. This competition for resources may bring about a shift in the directions the services of unions take. Unions need to take a deeper look at their role on campus and reinvent themselves. They will need to differentiate themselves from other entities by offering expanded amenities and programs. Through assessments and student feedback, unions can constantly reevaluate their services to the campus population. Student unions need to take a hard look at their students and other members of campus to figure out how people interact with the building, services, and programming. When that is figured out, unions can capitalize on it to create a building and environment that students *want* to be a part of. Successful incorporation of

food, casual space, meeting space, and event space will create the kinds of environments that students and faculty/staff alike will likely seek out.

The organizational structure of a university can often hinder the ability of a campus to effectively build community (Strange & Banning, 2001). An interesting, and often detrimental, concept is that of the silo effect. In these situations, there is little communication between administrators of different departments. Instead of working across departments, leaders stay within their own disciplines and departments. Collaboration among departments needs to be encouraged and barriers taken down. Knowing the happenings of other areas of campus can only strengthen the student services a campus.

### **Administrators**

The final and most important barrier to building community on campus may be administrators themselves. Creativity and openness to new ideas are extremely important to the leadership roles of higher education professionals. By having strong leaders with knowledge of community building and facilities planning, campuses can begin to plan for strong community for their students, faculty, and staff (Rullman, et.al., 2012). These campus leaders must also stand their ground in what they feel is best for the students and campus. They must be willing to take risks and be creative in the way they implement new services to students. All too often, opportunities are missed because risks could not be taken. Strong leaders are needed in dictating what the ideal place of community looks like for that campus.

### **Analysis of Research**

This report researches just one lens of community building in unions. This is a fairly new area of research and little to no research actually exists about this topic. Practitioners in unions

need to be conscious of this fact. It will be up to those that work within unions to determine how community building can happen on their campus. Because this area of research is so small, there are several gaps that need to be filled. More attention needs to be paid to students who may not fit into the majority characteristics of the institution. A lot of the literature offers a blanket idea of community on campus, but is this what community looks like for minority students? How does the idea of community affect international students? Or first-generation students? Do students and allies in the LGBT group feel a sense of connection to the campus? These are questions that are not yet answered by current research.

It is also important to note that this may not be the only way of look at community building in unions. There may be several other elements that can aid in advancing a student's connection to the place. Strange and Banning (2001) discussed the importance of feeling a connection to the history of the school. Could the idea of incorporating the history of the union and campus in the design also be an important element of community? Using photographs and memorabilia may be a way of building the connection between current and past generations of students. This area of research has so much potential to grow and to contribute to the mission and goals of higher education institutions.

## **A Personal Narrative of Finding Community**

As discussed previously, community can play a huge role in the lives of students. Feeling as though they belong to a place can not only set up the stage for them to get further involved with the community, but can ultimately help them achieve academically and socially. As all of these elements of design and community come together, it is important to note the impact the sense of belonging can have on students. The following is a personal narrative to help solidify the powerful impact community can have on a student's life.

## **Personal Narrative**

I could probably be considered the quintessential member of the Millennial generation. Throughout my whole life, I have always been highly involved in events and activities going on around me. I was in lots of clubs and activities in high school. My parents had high expectations for achievement and often led me to live a relatively sheltered life. Living in rural Minnesota, not a lot of diversity was present. While the decision to go to college was easy, actually leaving my hometown and family was extremely difficult. Being three hours away was going to be hard.

In the first week of school I attended a large event with all of the student organizations and activities present. Through this, I found a volunteer organization to join. I almost immediately felt a connection with the other members. Instantly I had found others that shared my same passion for community engagement. I could volunteer at events in the community and make friends at the same time. As time progressed, I took on a few leadership roles in the organization. These experiences set me up for working in the student union as an event planner.

At the end of my first year, I accepted a job as an event manager in the student union. I was in charge of large events the union sponsored. From homecoming to banquets, I was getting to make all of the major decisions for all of these events. The level of responsibility and trust I was given made me feel great. The full-time staff members of the union allowed me to take ownership of the events I was planning. Within a few weeks of starting my new job, I knew that I found my community and connection to campus.

The staff and administration took notice of me and the other student leaders. They began to ask a number of us to serve on committees for different student life departments. I really began to feel like my opinion was valued and needed on campus. Often in these meetings, I would be one of a handful of students. The other faculty and staff members sitting on the

committees would turn to me and the other students and ask our opinions on the topic at hand. Most of the time, it seemed the people I was working with on these committees really understood what it was like to be a student, but other times it felt like they were on a totally different planet. When my fellow students or I said something disagreeing with administrators, I held my breath, fearful there could be consequences. By disagreeing with what they were saying would I get kicked out of the meeting? Absolutely not. They valued my input and took what I said to heart. They created a safe space for us to engage in difficult conversations about the lives of students.

At the end of my second year of school and first year working in the union, I was asked to participate in a committee that would ultimately change my life. The director of the union and other staff members saw the opportunity for the student union to grow. It had been nearly a decade since the last smaller renovation and over thirty years since the last significant project. The director, two other staff members, myself and two other students would make up this committee. We began to meet with architects and learn about the power of places and spaces especially in higher education.

The meetings with the architects taught me so many things. First, I was learning about the importance of community to the student union. I realized the experiences I was having and the people I met over the past few years were shaping my sense of belonging to the institution and union. They also gave me the foundational knowledge and language to describe the experiences I had in other buildings outside of the union. I began to realize how important involvement and engagement with other students were to my experiences.

The union we wanted to renovate was struggling with building the ideal community for which we were looking. It was extremely compartmentalized around the building. Offices and student organization space was spread throughout the building. Small rooms for meetings were

located on the top floor and were not easy to find. The lounge space was quiet and typically used for sleeping. The view into the lounge was blocked by a welcome center that was hard to find until it was ten feet away. Very little action went on in the lounge during the day. The furniture was outdated and not very comfortable. The building was typically used as a hallway to get from one side of campus to the other. There was no space that really caught anyone's attention and made them *want* to use that space.

Through my time there, we were able to come up with a number of needs and ideas for the future. It was clear the union needed to grow. The lounge and first floor area offered so much potential. We brainstormed different ideas, took trips to visit other college unions and third spaces, and held forums for other students to give their opinions and to voice their concerns. Eventually we had a plan to present to the administration. Slowly we began to work our way through the process and got the approval needed, both at the institutional and state level, to proceed with the project. As of October 2013, the first phase of the renovation was completed.

The renovation completely transformed the first floor of the union. The information desk was moved to a more visible location, and its walls were knocked down. The lounge space was expanded and a fireplace was also put in. A number of offices bordering the lounge were opened up to create even more space for students to meet. New and different furniture was purchased. The chairs, benches and tables at varying heights filled the lounge. While I graduated before I could see the finished product as a student, I have still been able to make it back there a few times to see the changes first hand.

The change in the atmosphere of the building was a complete turn around from where the union had previously been. The open spaces, fireplace and furniture created a more open and inclusive environment that created a more intimate feeling with the space. In talking with a

number of students and staff, it is apparent this renovation has changed the space for the better. The space is being used in better ways. There is not a feeling of needing to be quiet. There are lively conversations and events that take place there on a daily basis. Students seem to be more engaged with one another and with the student union in general.

This example of building community has been powerful, shaped the way I look at the world, and has made me realize the importance of space. I graduated from college and really felt like I had been able to leave a legacy. I played a small part in the history of my institution and the union. I was able to take ownership of the union and feel like it was a part of me. I reached the top of the hierarchy of Strange and Banning's model (2001). Even when I go back to the college, I still have this feeling of belonging and ownership. My experiences with design and space have allowed me to be more conscious of my surroundings and not only make connections with those around me, but to connect with the physical space itself.

## **Conclusion**

### **Implications**

After reviewing the model for creating community on campus, it is apparent the union is at the heart of the campus community. These buildings truly are laboratories of social interactions. The many features of unions help to contribute to the feeling of community a union strives to build. When taken together, all of these elements—conversation, warmth, accessibility, transparency, food, etc.—can offer a model for union administrators to follow. Several suggestions have been made throughout this review.

Administrators must be intentional and thoughtful when it comes to designing spaces to build community. Because space can have such a significant impact on human behavior and emotions, the design and layout must be given consideration. By adapting and aligning the

physical environment with the institutional values, a union can fulfill the first levels of security and belonging to the union and campus environment. Students will begin to feel more welcome and invited into the space if the spaces offered are ones that are warm and promote conversation and dialogue as a main activity. Particular attention should be paid to the human elements of spaces. Person-to-person engagement has become more prevalent in design elements and is being paid close attention to by designers and campus planners.

Across the country, the trend of building community is catching on. The range of these construction projects is enormous. With costs of projects ranging from \$3 million to \$100 million, it is obvious unions are at a turning point in creating community on campus. Each of these projects has created a sense of place for the students that attend. It is important to note that the concept of community is different for each union and campus. The needs and services required by students is not always the same in every part of the country. It will be important for planners and administrators to take into account the unique characteristics of the setting their union is in.

With millions of dollars being spent on renovation and construction projects for unions across the country, one would assume higher education administrators would be particularly concerned with building community on campus. Student input into these projects is vital. It will not only allow them leadership and involvement opportunities, but it will also allow practitioners to hear the needs and desires of the students directly from the students. These leadership roles can have a significant impact on their feeling of belonging.

## **Future Research**

In researching community building, it is evident a lot of new research is being conducted. This is not a new subject of research, but it has been gaining attention in higher education over

the past decade. In 2012, a summit of higher education officials, architects and campus planners met to discuss the principles of community and how they affect the life of students and other members of campus (Rullman, et. al., 2012). However, little to no research has been specifically dedicated to the physical structures of student unions.

Studies and research often include the student union, but not as an individual entity on campus. Often, unions are grouped together in studies with libraries, residence halls or other campus buildings (Rullman, et. al., 2012). More research must be conducted on the specific ways a student union contributes to the community of campus. While entities that are often housed within student unions, i.e. student involvement in activities, there is still a gap in research. The physical space offered to student organizations by unions has not really been looked at.

As the competition for campus resources and students' time increases, it will be important for unions to justify their contribution to the campus community. Assessment is vital to the student affairs profession. NASPA and ACPA consider assessment and research to be important skill sets for professionals (2010). By conducting research exclusive to the union, professionals will have the opportunity to create a strong case for obtaining more resources, both physical and monetary, from the campus.

### **Final Thoughts**

Creating community in student unions is an exciting process that deserves much thought and attention. The time for looking into renovation and construction is now. So many universities are already taking advantage of this new way of thinking about community. These spaces have such an impact on students. It is the administrators that need to be aware of the changing needs of the students and attempt to build a bridge between the students and the university. The union is a great place to start.

By using Strange and Banning's model (2001) for building community, union administrators can begin to create a better experience for their students. The students will always be changing, but the design elements discussed earlier are timeless elements that can adjust as the times change. Shaping the experiences of students is an exciting opportunity for administrators.

As with any project in higher education, there are obstacles to face. These should be taken head on by leaders willing to take the challenge. It takes time and intentional planning to create a truly great third place. Administrators must be willing to take risks and be creative in designing these spaces. The creation of these places and environments cannot be done over night, and it will take time, patience and understanding on the administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni and community members. When a student union can create the ultimate experience of community for a student and other members of campus, it has truly achieved its end goal.

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