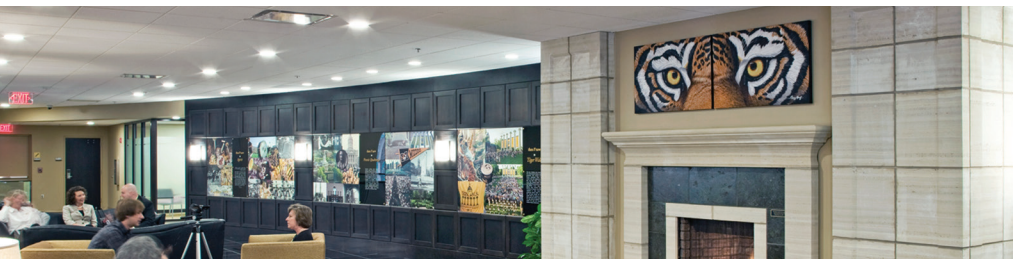




COLLEGE UNIONS AND RETENTION:

PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGIES
FOR IMPROVED EFFICACY



BY SCOTT TIERNO

Since the 1990s, there has been a surge in spending on college and university campuses evidenced in many new and renovated facilities, *College Planning & Management* has reported. Some hope the increased spending on physical spaces will result in progress toward institutions' recruitment and retention goals.

Indeed, researchers have noted that improved facilities have a direct correlation to improved recruitment and retention of students (e.g., George Kuh's work on the National Survey of Student Engagement and an article by Holley Belch, Melinda Gebel, and Gerals Maas in a 2001 *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*).

Recently, a doctoral study sought to determine whether the professional staff who work in college unions, and the students who participate in the building as student leaders, believe this particular facility affects student retention. From the study's findings and related literature, six principles for college union efficacy are proposed.



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CORE COMPETENCIES

FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

- Building Design and Construction

LEADERSHIP

- Goal Setting

Retention

According to ACT, the average retention rate of students who complete a degree within five years has not changed more than three percentage points in decades. The rate has remained steady among public and private four-year schools since 1993.

In his 2005 book *College Student Retention*, Alan Seidman wrote: “Research on student retention is voluminous. It is easily one of the most widely studied topics in higher education over the past 30 years. Over that time, considerable attention has been paid to developing and testing theories of student retention that seek to explain why some students leave and others persist. Although there is still some disagreement over the details of differing theories, the broad dimensions of a theory of student retention are starting to emerge. Among other things, we can say with a good deal of confidence that academic preparation, commitments, and involvement matter.”

A number of research projects also address the importance of the campus environment and students’ decision to attend an institution and persist. Two studies speak to the idea that campus facilities and environment influence college choice. The first study, conducted by the Carnegie Foundation, occurred between 1984 and 1985. In 1986, Ernest Boyer published findings from the Survey of the Transition from High School to College, which surveyed 1,000 high school seniors. The results indicated that a majority of the students valued the campus visit, specifically mentioning the athletic complex and student union, and used this knowledge in making their final decision on where to go to college. In 2006, APPA: Leadership in Educational Facilities conducted a follow-up study to focus on all campus facilities and their impact on recruitment

and retention efforts. The study revealed a significant correlation between the campus environment and successfully recruiting and retaining students on campuses. In this study, the college union was ranked ninth in importance in affecting a student’s decision to attend an institution.

Nonacademic spaces such as the union and library also have been proven to affect the retention of non-white students, especially black students, according to the 1997 study Student Retention and the Use of Campus Facilities by Race, conducted by Brent Mallinckrodt and William Sedlacek. As non-white populations grow, it is important for institutions to better understand what retains students of all races.

Studies that support retention can be placed into two categories: the environmental factors and student social and psychological experiences. In the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice*, Haiyan Bai and Wei Pan explained: “At the environmental level, studies ... suggest that organizational behaviors, including expenditures for instruction, academic support, student services, facilities, institutional support, and institutional grants (i.e., student financial aid), significantly contributed to student retention rates. Not only is it important that the current climate at the institution contributes to the decision to build a facility, but it is just as important to recognize the alumni of the institution in having an impact on the retention of students. ... In addition to the influence of the current organizational environment, the support from members of past student communities, rejection of norms of past communities, and values from previous peers were also found to significantly impact student retention.”

Despite the environmental and developmental experiences inherent in college unions, the

literature does not specifically outline whether renovating or constructing a union on a college campus is guaranteed to aid recruitment and retention efforts. Also, it is not clear whether professional staff or students perceive the college union to provide such a benefit. To address such questions, this doctoral study examined both student and professional staff perceptions of the influence of college union facilities on retention.

About the Study

In 2013, 562 professional staff members and 1,971 students enrolled in ACUI member schools were invited to complete a survey modelled after an instrument used in a similar study on recreation centers. Respondents answered questions about the college union on their campus, past renovation/construction projects, and satisfaction with the union as well as its programs and services. A total of 113 professional staff and 50 students completed the survey. During the analysis process, the study was then limited to four-year public and four-year not-for-profit institutions of higher education in the United States. Follow-up phone interviews were then conducted with two of three randomly selected professional respondents at institutions that completed a renovation or construction project in the past five years.

Through this study, both professional staff and students said they did not believe that the college union was the top facility on campus that contributes to retention, but they did think that it is a place that affects student satisfaction. Specifically, results showed that both professional staff and students consider the college union to be the fourth most important facility on campus in supporting retention, behind performing arts spaces, academic buildings, and residence halls. This perception is similar to the outcome of the aforementioned APPA study. It also

coincides with *College Planning & Management's* longitudinal study in which the union has consistently ranked among the top five facilities constructed/renovated on college campuses between 1997 and 2011. In those 16 years, 402 new unions were built on campuses, compared to 1,331 academic buildings, 994 science buildings, and 734 residence halls.

Although the study revealed the college union was integral in enhancing the campus environment and providing services and spaces that support student engagement, other spaces were perceived to more greatly influence a student's decision to stay at the institution. Both students and professional staff ranked the performing arts facility as most contributing to an institution's retention goals. Perhaps this is because the majority of respondents were from public institutions with student populations over 5,000. Larger public institutions tend to have more specialized facilities, such as performing arts buildings, which contribute strongly to the campus ecology and could influence perceptions.

In the interviews, individuals said the union facilities and programs they manage are not given the recognition they deserve. When asked whether the college union is part of the retention effort on campus, the first person stated: "No, I think we serve a bigger role than we are given credit. As an example, the campus has a plan. ... In those plans there is a lot of discussion about retention. Not only is the college union not mentioned in there, really the division of student affairs isn't even mentioned in there." Relatedly, the second interviewee stated that the institution promotes that "academics are our priority for the foundation piece within our retention program. ... [However,] some of our students actually will more identify with some of our cocurricular and extra-curricular activities than with their

academics, which makes me happy, but I'm sure other people [say], 'Well, if they're identifying with an athletic team, how do they identify with the institution?' or 'If they identify as a student leader on campus, why are they not identifying within their academic pursuits?'"

Finally, the study found that even when individuals are asked to reflect on recently renovated or constructed facilities, the college union is expressed as more than a building; it is part of the campus ecology. It contributes to the living and learning experiences on a college campus and provides a place where all can feel a sense of inclusion, safety, involvement, and community. The facility's impact is in its contents, in its programs and services.

6 Principles

Along with common themes from the study findings, a synergy is evident between the literature on retention, principles identified as connected to community building, and the ACUI core competencies.

In 1990, Ernest Boyer's publication *Campus Life: In Search of Community* identified six principles of community, which help to outline how the union supports community. According to Boyer, to build community, an environment must be:

- **Educationally purposeful** – A place where faculty and students share academic goals and strengthen teaching and learning on campus.
- **Open** – A place where free speech is protected and civility powerfully affirmed.
- **Just** – A place where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued.
- **Disciplined** – A place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined

governance procedures guide behavior for the common good.

- **Caring** – A place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.
- **Celebrative** – A place where the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming tradition and change are shared.

In 2005, ACUI introduced 11 core competencies for college union and student activities professionals, self-professed "community builders":

- Communication
- Facilities Management
- Fiscal Management
- Human Resource Development
- Intercultural Proficiency
- Leadership
- Management
- Marketing
- Planning
- Student Learning
- Technology

Weaving together the literature and responses from the surveys and interviews, the following six principles suggest what exists in the union that supports retention on college campuses.

The college union:

1. Supports the Academic Mission of the Institution
2. Enhances Communication of Community Values
3. Is a Diverse Space on Campus
4. Is a Community Center
5. Is a Welcoming Place
6. Celebrates Traditions

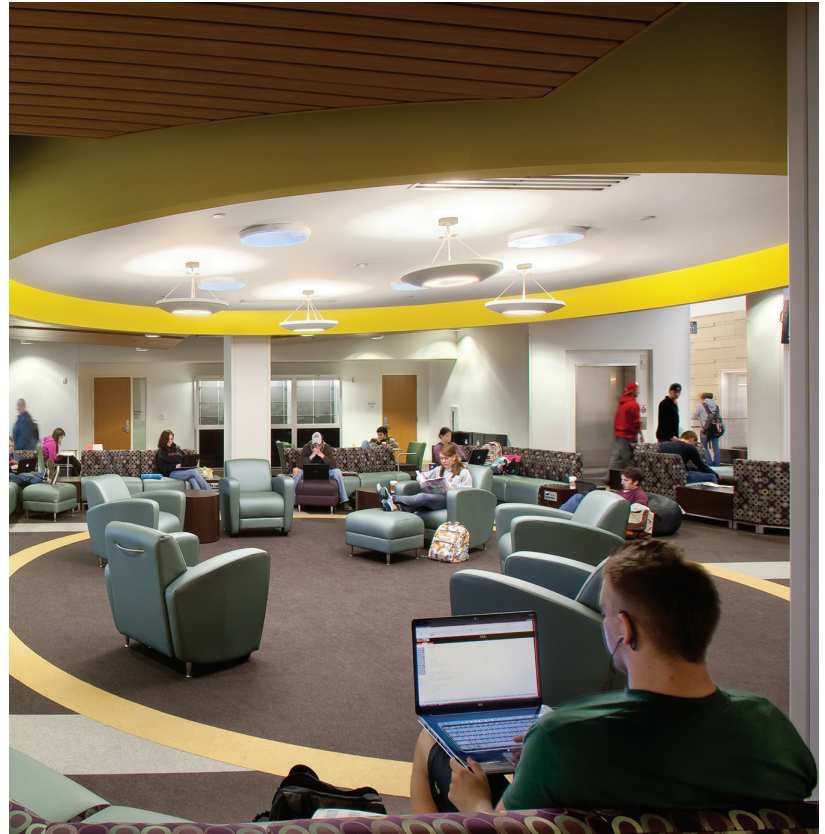
Each principle evokes concepts and ideas that can help foster a positive campus environment, which in turn can influence retention on campus.

1

SUPPORTS THE ACADEMIC MISSION OF THE INSTITUTION

The college union is an educationally purposeful place where faculty and students share academic goals and strengthen teaching and learning on campus. The facility is a place that promotes intellectual and interpersonal skills, beyond the traditional classroom setting. According to *The Role of the College Union* statement, “The union is an integral part of the educational mission of the college.” Porter Butts wrote in *The College Union Idea* that “the union plays a considerable role as one of the teaching and laboratory resources of the university.”

It is important to note that these facilities support activities and programs found to influence academic success. Opportunities for students to work in the college union provide the type of laboratory setting Butts described. These opportunities are invaluable to students as they develop management, leadership, and interpersonal skills that will allow them to succeed beyond college.



Photos courtesy of Scott Tierno



ENHANCES COMMUNICATION OF COMMUNITY VALUES

2

The college union is a space that promotes inclusiveness and requires its leaders to have the “ability to successfully exchange information through verbal and nonverbal symbols and behaviors,” according to the ACUI core competencies. Reflecting on campus ecology theory, the college union and other facilities on campus promote designed educational environments that are inclusive. In *Architectural Science Review*, Åshild Lappégard Hauge explained how space can promote identity development. In discussing this admirable concept, he wrote: “A transactional view of the relationship between an individual and the environment can be seen as unique because it focuses on the interface between people and environments.” This is

an essential aspect of the college union as a community-building space supporting retention.

Throughout the building, offices, departments, and organizations promote community values by utilizing marketing and advertising techniques, promoting programs and awareness campaigns, and hosting events in its spaces. When an orientation program sponsors a “meet and greet” with new students, the facility is supporting an activity that promotes the college experience. Highlighting an alumni reunion in the building gives current students the message that the institution values its graduates. All of these activities are integral to communicating community values and are magnified by having a presence in the college union.



3

IT IS A DIVERSE SPACE ON CAMPUS

The college union provides a safe haven for all. As stated by one study participant, “We allow a lot of activity here that maybe isn’t allowed in other places on campus. So, they [students] feel comfortable coming here; they feel comfortable being themselves here.”

College unions have a responsibility to support diversity and house many different services and offices on campus. Areas such as multicultural centers, offices that support military veterans, interfaith prayer space, community service departments, and student organizations should all be represented in this important facility.



4

IS A COMMUNITY CENTER

In his 2006 *Facilities Manager* article about college unions, architect Kyle Taft wrote: “The strong position of a student center in its campus gives visitors and students alike a vital heart to their living, learning, and socializing pursuits. A fully connected student union with its visual connections, physical relationships, and symbolic representations, can positively contribute over the years by giving a stable, yet flexible base of services for a growing, changing campus as it responds to the challenges of the future.”

By design, the college union is a unifying space on campus. It promotes connectedness, which occurs over food, through student employment, in clubs and organizations, and among people who walk through and relax in the building. Professional staff, student workers, and other community leaders manage the facility through formal and informal associations.

College unions house many types of unifying spaces, such as fitness centers, dining areas, lounge spaces, and meeting rooms. The unique nature of the college union is that it can be many things to many people.



5

A WELCOMING PLACE

An article in *The Presidency* about the 2006 APPA study stressed that “campus aesthetics and quality of facilities are important to students, and when certain facilities are unavailable, insufficient, or neglected, these deficiencies negatively influence the college decisions of students. Therefore, it is essential that college and university leaders include facilities management in their campus planning.”

Architect Paul Adamson emphasized the importance of welcoming facilities on campus by stating that spaces are recruitment and retention tools, commenting in a 2010 *College Planning & Management* article: “If people have a place to go that feels good, they’ll come and they’ll stay.”

This facility, no matter how large or small, supports a core set of services and activities that create a positive experience for campus constituents. The college union is a well-considered plan, providing many services, spaces to connect, and programs that offer opportunities for all people who visit the facility.



Photos courtesy of Scott Tierno



CELEBRATES TRADITION

6

The union is the place on campus that instills strong memories for alumni and other community members, which results in an affinity to the campus and results in both friend-raising and fundraising success. As Boyer explained, spaces on campus, including the college union, are places where the heritage of the school is reflected upon and tradition and change are celebrated.

The union’s mission and goals must be closely tied to the strategic mission of the institution while maintaining a connection to the history of the school. This can include housing welcome centers, celebrating campus traditions, and honoring students as they transition both in and out of the institution. Many professional participants in the doctoral study reported that when their union was renovated/constructed, students seemed more connected and there was an increased use of space and services in the facility.

Next Steps

Seidman wrote: “Despite all the research that has been conducted to date, little work has been devoted to the development of a model of student persistence that would provide guidelines to institutions for creating policies, practices, and programs to enhance student success.” While there is much more to learn about student retention and the college union’s influence, this facility certainly has a place in the conversation. When investigating the factors that contribute to students’ persistence at an institution and determining which capital projects to fund, administrators can use the six principles outlined here to guide their decision making in regard to college union renovation and construction. **IB**