

# Campus Centers—Retooled for Today's Students



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Why are student centers getting so much attention these days? Partly it's the growing competition among institutions for students and faculty. But just as telling are the variety of student groups to appeal to and the different cultures of Generation X and Y students. Also daunting are the complexities of daily life for students suddenly on their own and, of course, the challenges of creating community when technology seems to underscore the private experience. In so many ways, the campus center is being called on to provide the vital support that will ease and facilitate the social, recreational and personal lives of students.

It's difficult to conceive of an institution today without a campus center, whether it's a commuter-based community college or a large university. The size and components may be different, but there are elements which remain the same. To start with, there are the symbolic statements including the value of a social community in an intellectual setting, of welcoming and vitality and the fundamental message that one's life outside the classroom is as important as the one within.

Whether an institution is building a new center, or revitalizing an obsolete one, location is primary. For both symbolic and functional reasons, campus centers should take pride of place on the campus. And more often than not, an existing campus

center is already in the right central location, acting as an orientation point for the campus. But what is the appropriate solution if its services and facilities are dated or the campus has grown so that the building is no longer near the institutional epicenter? Then too, as campuses grow, services normally associated with a campus center can

become dispersed, incorporated ad hoc into other buildings as they are added to the campus. The question becomes whether

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to renovate and expand, start over at the same location or relocate. And after understanding the costs and benefits that go with each solution—the kinds of symbolic, functional and economic returns they want to achieve—administrators have to strategize how to provide the campus center's services while it is being overhauled.

## Conveying the Brand

With a campus center, building image and internal environment are crucial. Because it's centrally located, receives more use than virtually any other building, and provides multiple services, the quality of design and function inevitably become part of the institution's brand. It is probably among the first buildings prospective students visit and the impact it makes can influence their decision to enroll.

The literal qualities of the design—the amount of light, the ability to see and be seen by other students, the quality of the gathering spaces, the clarity of the connections between functions and the ease of movement throughout the building—convey messages about the institution's values and how well it functions as a whole. Knowing who you are and appreciating the community you are a part of is important to both students and faculty members. Although this kind of understanding depends on age, experience and personal goals, a successful campus center offers support to all members of the university community.

When it comes down to the actual incre-



1. University of Cincinnati Student Center/view from Main Street



dients of a successful campus center, there's a lot to choose from—"town hall," recreation center, dining commons, shopping mall, conference center, lounge, gym, post office, movie theater, administrative building—the list goes on. What gets included is based on the size, culture and physical makeup of the institution. An urban campus with students who have jobs and commute from home will require a different mix of services from a residential campus in a college town. How they are combined to create an exciting, accommodating environment will determine its success.

Administrators and facility managers will have the most comprehensive knowledge of the condition and functioning of the current student center or any facilities located elsewhere that should be a part of it. However it is the main user group—the students—who will provide essential input in what does and doesn't work now, and what they'd like to see in the future.

#### Essential services

When it comes to determining essential center services, there are a few that seem to be indispensable. Whether or not the institution has a separate dining commons, food service of some sort is required—from an informal café to a more established eating area—and often late into the evening. If the center provides the major dining facility, the food service area will have to be designed with the flexibility to allow for a wide range of tastes, eating habits and diets.

Reflecting students' complex lives and academic schedules, combining a variety of life and student services such as banking and shopping will make sense to assure students can spend the majority of their time on campus.

Since campus centers are the institution's "living room," sometimes operating on a 24/7 basis, a variety of lounge areas is a prerequisite, with more formal study areas as well as places for just "hanging." And it almost goes without saying that they will be linked for computer technology, if they're not already in a wireless zone. Campus centers will always be meeting places, and their special mission in the era of private, computer-based research is to attract students to this community setting, through the quality of spaces and amenities. As with libraries, the ability to do private

work comfortably within a more public arena is essential. When students do come together, it should be easy to create group conference or learning situations, in either private or open and informal situations.

There are many elements which go into creating a vibrant campus center, whether a new building or a renovated one. The evaluation process for deciding its image, group

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of functions and resources is a complex but doable one, if true weight is given to all parties involved. If ever there was an opportunity for an institution to make a statement about its values and care for the student body, it is in the design of the student center. All of the implied vitality and energy of students' intellectual exploration and social growth can be made manifest in the center—as well as the process of self discovery that students, as they enter their first decade of maturity, are experiencing. It's a challenging and rewarding process to create a campus center that, when it opens, is filled with energy. And it is well worth celebrating when it's achieved.

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