Winners Circle - Building Community through Physical Space: A Visual Ethnography of College Union Utilization by Community College Transfer Students

Zane S. Reif, Ph.D.
Texas Tech University

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When discussing a successful student transition from a community college environment to a four-year institution, the campus environment can be addressed in three main settings: peer interaction, classroom environment, and the physical environment. In particular, the physical environment is an important factor because it is the first thing students are exposed to upon arrival to a college campus, whether it is part of a tour or orientation session (Strange & Banning, 2001). Students notice the beauty, cleanliness, and friendliness of the green spaces, buildings, and people that make of the campus community (Stewart, 2012; Strange & Banning, 2001). They are drawn to spaces that enable them to witness and participate in social interactions or involvement opportunities that will ultimately be an indication of whether or not they feel comfortable enough to join or commit to that particular community (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Griffith, 1994; and Strange & Banning, 2001). Boyer (1990) studied campus life and drew conclusions that the appearance of the campus was one of the biggest factors in a student’s decision to enroll. If the physical environment is critical to a student’s first impression of campus, college administrators need to understand the individual characteristics that encompass these various surroundings and how they can be created or transformed (Stewart, 2012).

The Association of College Unions International ([ACUI], 2009) attests that a college union can serve as a beacon for this community engagement; therefore, the college union may be a valuable tool in helping students feel a deeper connection to their transfer institution, especially those individuals transferring from a community college environment. If a sense of community can be created within or around specific facilities, like a college union, there is a possibility that it might have positive effects on the ability of this transfer population to interact with fellow students and engage in activities or programs (Strange & Banning, 2001). Since Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) indicate that large populations of community college students are seeking to transfer to four-year institutions, it is important that these students feel like they matter once they arrive at an institution, and

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that they have adequate and appropriate space to interact with other students on campus (Schlossberg, 1989).

In the spring of 2013, a doctoral study was developed to gain an understanding of how and if college unions can create community for transfer students from a community college during their initial exposure and enrollment at a four-year institution. The research examined specific observations and reflections of recent transfer students in order to understand their experiences with community, especially since these students sought a connection or sense of belonging with their new institution. In addition, the study analyzed the physical layouts and aesthetics of the college union to see if there were common attributes that are similar for community building. The qualitative research study used semi-structured interviews and a visual ethnography technique from 11 different students to examine pictures and reflections on current physical space within the college union. More specifically, the study was a participatory action research (PAR) project or “self-reflective inquiry undertaken by these participants in a social relationship with one another in order to improve some condition or situation with which they are involved” (Berg, 2007, p. 223). In this instance, the action component was the discussion of a new facility and how changes could be made to reflect better or more ideal physical space for these social interactions and involvement opportunities. The interviews were coded to find common themes and the data was used to determine how the college union designed and arranged for physical space to create community. Additionally, the photographs provide a visual representation and catalyst for directed discussion and reflection on these distinct spaces.

The analysis of the pictures and interviews were presented in two distinct parts: 1) the photographs, and subsequent comments on those pictures, from the student perspective of community within the college union, and 2) relevant reflection and discussion about concepts related to the physical environment and human interaction within those spaces. Each section utilized visual ethnography, data interpretation, and dialogue from individual participants to present the findings of the study (Berg, 2007). The 11 participants discussed several factors that were ideal in the development of physical space to make it ideal for community building. The factors mentioned included characteristics of home and work; the physical layout of the space related to architecture and aesthetics; the activities and events taking place within those areas; the ability to observe those activities, without actual participation; the convenience or access of resources and support functions; the overall campus climate, dictated by years of cultural formation; and the significance of history and representation of that history throughout the facility. All 11 participants confirmed that physical spaces, especially within the college union, were instrumental in the formation of community on a college or university campus. Additionally, all students indicated that while conditions were not ideal for community within the current facility, they were able to transform these areas to make them useful for social interaction and other shared experiences. The manipulation or alteration of space became a key component for these transfer students when ideal conditions related to aesthetics and architecture were not ideal or missing completely.

Strange and Banning (2001) posited that a sense of comfort and belonging comes from the statement made by surroundings and visual representations of the constructed

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climate within institutional facilities. In other words, the values of the campus community can be seen in the placement of particular services, departments, and programs. It can be seen in advertisements, dining options, and the placement of student gathering areas. The programs and resources within a college union have the ability to not only educate students, but make them feel like they are part of a larger community, thus giving students a sense of worth and empowering them to become even more connected or take ownership of their collegiate experience and surroundings (ACUI, 2009).

Images are powerful. The visual nature of the study was important because without pictures of spaces, descriptions and data of the physical environment is hard to distinguish or vocalize. Students were asked to identify community through imagery because it connected them to the study and provided genuine responses about the college union. They did not have to concentrate on where community was taking place because they were able to focus on why and how community was prevalent within these spaces. The study of community and the physical environment are much easier when the spaces are real. While the imagery from the spaces were special, students indicated that the people in the photographs were just as important because community cannot happen without a group of people coming together to share an experience. While students indicated that people choose to engage in community in a variety of ways, the college union was a unique space that allowed them to experience that social interaction in a number of different ways: retail components, student affairs offices, events and programs, and lounge spaces. This study not only showed that the college union does have a profound impact at an institution of higher education, it can be even more powerful as a beacon for community when it is thoughtfully designed and effectively managed to change with the campus culture.

References


