

## **SHEPHERD UNION OPERATIONS REVIEW**

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### **FACILITIES**

The renovation of the Shepherd Union is regarded as an overwhelming success. Campus stakeholders admire its appearance and resources. With its windows and open spaces, the facility is transparent enabling building occupants to see and feel the pulse of the building, which functions as the social and emotional hub of the campus. Because of its proximity to the admissions office in the Student Service Center, the facility is a convenient venue to showcase the university and student life.

A vibrant student union buzzes with people. Populating a student union depends on the resources and activities of the union and its location on campus. The Shepherd Union is graced with a central campus location near the university library, a large classroom facility, and the Student Service Center. To the extent the university can continue this trend of siting facilities serving and housing significant numbers of students near the campus center, the Shepherd Union and student life will thrive at Weber State.

The Shepherd Union has a number of strengths including the following:

- A central atrium which can be used for information tabling and events,
- Significant lounge space on main and upper floors,
- Significant number of meeting rooms,
- Large ballroom for the size of the campus,
- Contemporary finishes and furnishings,
- First-floor food court in a high-traffic location,
- Proximity to outdoor spaces where students congregate and outdoor events are scheduled.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Increasing and Improving Resources to Supporting Studying**

Students' social and academic lives are intertwined and while student unions have traditionally focused on serving the social needs of students, the Shepherd Union has been responsive to their academic needs as well. The renovation of the union added resources like a computer lab, lounge space and wireless networking.

In the 2010, Weber State Student Union and Programming Student Survey, "atmosphere conducive to studying" was the activity most frequently checked by the student respondents as important to them. To support students' academic needs,

the union should upgrade the wireless network in the facility to eliminate dead zones and provide seating and work surfaces in lounges suitable for laptop computer users. This includes lounge seating with tablets and tables and chairs with seating for 4 to 6 people.

Students increasingly study in groups. This is especially the case in classes where faculty emphasize collaborative learning and in academically challenging fields where students commonly study together to learn from one another. To facilitate group studying consider the creation of small group study rooms for 4 to 6 people with a table, chairs, electric outlets and a white board.

### **Improve Wayfinding Inside the Student Union**

To assist visitors with navigating the student union consider installing directory kiosks at the major entrances. The kiosks should include floor plans of the facility and highlight the locations of popular resources such as the food court and bookstore.

As a tool to assist visitors with confirming the location of meetings or events in the union, consider adding more postings in the facility of the locations of the day's meetings and events.

Occupants of the Women's Center and Nontraditional Student Center inquired about solutions to reduce the frequency of students mistaking their location as the Test Center. The location of signage near the three centers might be the culprit. Signage for the Test Center is mounted quite visibly on the soffit in the center of the hallway leading to the three centers. In contrast, the signage of the other two centers is mounted on the wall off to the side.

### **Add Exterior Signage to Increase the Visibility of Bookstore in the Student Union**

Architecturally speaking student unions tend to be more extroverted in their appearance than other campus buildings because of their role of enhancing student life and providing goods and services. For example, colorful banners are hung from the south side of the Shepherd Union. These banners signify to visitors that the building is a student union.

First-time visitors to the campus, such as prospective students and their parents and conference attendees, are often interested in purchasing university logo goods as a reminder of their visit. However, they might leave empty handed at Weber State because the bookstore is hard to find. Its exterior entrance at the northwest corner of the union lacks prominent signage. An opportunity exists to place signage on the windows next to and above the entrance. Signage conforming to campus standards could also be placed along the sidewalk.

### **Increase Student Organization Space**

Both student leaders and career staff occupy space in the Student Involvement and Leadership office suite. Students and staff expressed two concerns about the space. First, additional space is needed for student use, for example, supporting student organizations. This space could take the form of a shared workroom with resources such as computers, printers, work surfaces, and reservable storage cabinets to support student organizations. A portion of the Belltower Lounge could be used to create this workroom. Second, the space between career staff and student space could be separated more. While it is beneficial to be adjacent to one another, staff and students have different standards regarding how to use and decorate their space. Sometimes these standards can conflict.

### **Access to the Shepherd Union**

Two constituencies – Campus Events and the Nontraditional Student Center -- expressed the need for improved access to the student union.

Campus Events - The facility is an occasional site for special events attended by donors and alumni who are senior citizens and are unable to walk easily from the parking lot to the building. Campus event planners use golf carts to transport these guests to the building, however, the units are not intended for transporting VIPs in comfort. Several companies manufacture multi-passenger carts with optional enclosures for use in inclement weather that are better suited for transporting VIPs.

Nontraditional Student Center – With a daycare program in the facility, parents have the need to drop off and pick up their children but the metered lot adjacent to the student union has a ten minute limit for free parking, which sometimes creates a tight window of time for parents to drop off their children.

### **Upgrade the Audio System of the Ballroom**

Both the student union staff and frequent users of the ballroom observed that the audio system has malfunctioned and needs to be upgraded. The upgrade was viewed as an essential priority by the staff and users.

### **Address Concerns About Sound in the Union Disrupting Meetings in Conference Room 321**

This room is adjacent to the atrium, the most active space of the union, and users of the room have indicated that noise from activity in the atrium has disrupted their meetings. They suggested that before SEC schedules a meeting in the room it examine the schedule for the atrium that day to see if a potential noise conflicts exist.

### **Develop Plans for a Lactation Room**

With a large nontraditional population the need for this resource is arguably greater than other campuses. The ideal space is dedicated for this use, can be locked and has a private sitting area with bathroom facilities.

### **Reconsider the Location of the Mascot Sculpture**

Weber State has four mascot sculptures sited on its campus grounds. The Wildcat sculpture near the Shepherd was formerly sited in a planter bed and is currently located on a steep slope next to the children's playground of the Nontraditional Student Center. The presence of four mascot sculptures on the campus grounds and the new location at the Shepherd Union breaks from the recipe universities use to make their mascot sculpture a popular attraction. Universities such as Penn State University and UCLA placed a single prominent mascot sculpture in an accessible location to encourage visitors to touch them and pose next to them for photographs. At these universities, it is not unusual to see prospective students, newly enrolled students, graduating students and alumni pose next to their mascot sculpture for a photograph. Campus rituals emerge, such as touching the mascot for good luck on exams, and in special circumstances, student groups are permitted to decorate them.

### **SERVICES**

Typically, food service is the largest generator of foot traffic in a student union and a major source of revenue to support the student union operation and minimize its reliance on student fees. Consequently, it is critical have a clear sense of what particular groups of students, faculty and staff want from the union food service, be responsive to their needs, and monitor closely the quality of the food service operation.

The Shepherd Union has taken positive steps to strengthen its food services. It has a contemporary food court in a first-floor location with a number of premises for a variety of food concepts and ample seating both inside and outside. Compared to previous years, the food service provider, Sodexo, is turning a profit and the campus is receiving revenues. To its credit, Sodexo has made adjustments in response to campus input. It has added more low-priced menu items, increased the variety of offerings, and is adding a Jamba Juice.

During the site visit comments by students and staff pointed to a desire for expanded hours, more low cost food options, greater variety, and improvements in the appearance and helpfulness of front-line food service staff. The responses of the 2010 Student Union and Programming Student Survey echoed many of these concerns.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Operate a Systematic Assessment Program Related to the Student Union Food Service**

A more consistent program of assessing the usage of food service, preferences, interests and satisfaction levels of students, faculty and staff should be conducted by the student union. Construction of the assessments, collection of the data, and its analysis should be performed by student union. Assessments should be developed in partnership with Sodexo to ensure Sodexo is invested in the results and willing to respond to them.

The assessment program should include an annual survey. The survey is an opportunity to investigate interest in new food concepts and other adjustments in services. The participants should not only include students but also faculty and staff. The sample of student respondents should be large enough to not only analyze the results by student subgroups (e.g., part-time vs. full-time, age groups, residency type, employment and hours worked) but also for the union and Sodexo to be willing to commit space and funds towards an initiative based on the results. The 2010 union survey had about 300 respondents and while this number achieved a statistically high confidence level to generalize the results to the student population, it would make a union director hesitate to commit resources toward a major initiative.

In addition to annual surveys, on a more frequent basis, the student union should perform assessments of the quality of the current food service operation. These assessments could take the form of a secret shopper surveys and focus groups. They can inquire as to the speed of service, quality of the food, appearance and helpfulness of the staff, cleanliness and other dimensions of service. Focus groups can perform a similar role and also provide an opportunity to seek suggestions for adjustments in services, such as new food concepts, which can subsequently be confirmed in a survey with even more participants.

### **Food Service Hours**

Students have expressed interest in late night hours (after 7 p.m.) during the academic year. In response to this demand, Sodexo has experimented with late hours and stated the demand is insufficient to be profitable. More than one option exists to respond to this situation. One option is for the university to negotiate with Sodexo a university subsidy to support late-night operation of the convenience store or one of the restaurants with an agreement if the sales reach certain levels the subsidy reduces or stops. Another option is to look to the Game Room. Since the Game Room operates into the evening, the Game Room service counter could be remodeled to expand its food offerings.

### **Convenience Store Size**

Measured in sales and customer count, the Shepherd Union convenience store is the most popular retailer selling food and beverages in the union. Convenience stores cater to students who are in a hurry and don't have a lot of money – a perfect match to Weber State students who are thrifty and short on time. Given this alignment of needs to service, however, the footprint of the Shepherd Union convenience store is small especially compared to student unions of similar size.

Student unions with larger convenience stores are able to satisfy students' demands for variety and healthy food options. They are able to stock a broader selection of food products and beverages, such as super-premium juices, health-oriented teas, fresh produce and a variety of prepared sandwiches, including veggie sandwiches. And they are less expensive to operate than restaurants during low traffic periods such as weekends and evening. In many respects, a campus convenience store should be different from a 7-Eleven. Executed well their décor can be less institutional and more hip with chalkboard signs and a sound system playing students' favorite music.

### **Marketing Food Services**

Some participants in the review were not aware of the specials, value items and new offered in the food court and commented that more advertising could occur.

### **LEASERSHIP AND STAFFING**

The Shepherd Union is composed of staff who oversee operations and business activities and staff who program events and advise student groups. This is the optimum pairing of staff. Each complements the other to create a student-centered student union. Programming and advising staff activate the union with activities. Operations staff set up events and keep the union clean. Business affairs staff oversee retail activities and services to satisfy students' needs and sustain the union financially. At some student unions, event programming and student activity staff do not report to the union director. Under this arrangement, it is not unusual for union staff to be less centered on students and more focused on running the union as a retail and conferencing center.

In a down economy, the Shepherd union staff have been resourceful in running the student union with constrained resources. To pull this off, many staff perform multiple roles in their departments. The adoption of these roles appears to have occurred organically over time. Additional duties were assigned to staff with the interest and ability to take on new duties. Custodians clean the facility and set up event but also perform audio/visual technicians. Conferencing staff use their skills promoting conference and event services to market the student union. The

administrator in charge of business affairs oversees custodial and building operations staff. The union director oversees campus recreation.

The following set of recommendations focus on these multiple roles and reporting relationships and considerations for adding staff when resources become available.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Match Job Titles to Responsibilities**

In several cases, the job titles of the staff do not reflect their duties. This includes the union director who oversees campus recreation, the financial services associate director who oversees operations, and the scheduling, events and conferences associate director who oversees marketing. For example, the job title of the union director could be the Executive Director of Student Life Facilities or Executive Director of the Student Union and Campus Recreation. The job title of the Associate Director of SEC could be the Associate Director of SEC and Marketing. The job title of the Associate Director of Financial Services could be the Associate Director of Operations and Financial Services.

### **Identify Fill-In for Union Director**

The organizational chart and titles of the staff do not indicate who steps in for the director of the Shepherd Union when the director is away. Typically, student unions of the size of the Shepherd Union have one associate director who fills in for the director and assistant directors. The Shepherd Union has several associate directors. It could identify an executive associate director who fills in for the director.

### **Examine Staffing Dedicated to Technical Services and Marketing**

While keeping labor costs within budget, the tactic of combining roles into a position on occasion reveals shortcomings. This is particularly the case with audio/visual (technical) services. While having the best intentions to support events at a high level, the union custodial and event set up staff have limited skills and expertise in supporting ballroom events with complex sound and lighting requirements. For some events, they wisely seek the support of the technicians at the performing arts center. Minus this support, however, the staff and student building managers have run into situations when they have been unable to resolve a malfunction as quickly as a trained technician. The student union might explore the feasibility of hiring a sound and lighting technician who keeps the sound and lighting systems in good shape and hires and trains a cadre of student technicians to support events.

Marketing is an essential function given the variety of services and programs the union provides and the need to build student, staff, faculty and community awareness of these programs and services. Presently, marketing of the student union and its facilities and services is a function that occupies a portion of a staff member's responsibilities because of funding limitations. The function does not appear in the job title or organizational chart. The function is assigned to the Associate Director of SEC but each department is permitted to market its programs and services independently. For example, Student Involvement and Leadership and Union Programs promote their own events and programs.

Marketing efforts appear to be primarily advertising. They should also include market research such as routinely assessing client (e.g., student, staff, faculty, guest) satisfaction and client needs and preferences. Graphic design services delivered by student employees are accessed through the Student Involvement and Leadership Center and sometimes the campus newspaper. The advertising efforts of all the departments should be coordinated to some extent. At the very least, common graphic standards should exist to ensure a family look to marketing collateral and to make sure all advertising is at the highest level of quality. Use of social media, such as Facebook, to promote programs and services appears to be limited to Student Involvement and Leadership.

### **Consider Pros and Cons of Changes to Organizational Structure**

A common organizational structure exists in student unions. Variations exist from campus to campus. The differences typically stem from campus priorities and preferences as to whether to house certain functions in house or secure them elsewhere on campus. To achieve the highest level of coordination and communication, typically union operations cluster together the functions of scheduling, event set up, catering (if in house), technical services, custodial services, information desk, game room (sometimes part of programming and not operations), and maintenance. The Shepherd Union splits these functions between Financial Services, Scheduling Events and Conferences, and the Wildcard Information Desk. There were no significant signs that this structure hampers coordination and communication. However, the union leadership may wish to examine the pros and cons of a revised structure. One option to consider is having Scheduling, Events and Conferences oversee Custodial Services and having the union Financial Services oversee the Wildcard operation, which has a strong financial component to it.

Another area of concern regarding the organizational structure pertains to the union programming department. Two concerns exist here. First, this is a department staffed by a part-time FTE in charge of several programs, which, with the exception of the Art Gallery, do not generate foot traffic in the Shepherd Union. Typically, the role of union programming is to coordinate events and programs that occur in the student union in order to activate the union and bring students into it. The second concern is that the role of the union department resembles the role of



the Student Involvement and Leadership department, which has more staff and could conceivably perform the tasks performed by union programming.

## **FINANCIAL RESOURCES/BUDGET**

### **Recommendations**

#### **Institute a Budget Plan for Replenishing Reserves**

In light of the fact that the Shepherd Union has recently concluded a multi-year business plan, it is timely and prudent for the student union to develop a new business plan that would ensure funds are set aside annually at designated level to a reserve fund.

#### **Link Financial Incentives to Retail Activity in the Union**

It is a general rule of thumb in student unions that staff invest time and energy to improving retail activities housed in the facility when a financial incentive exists. With no financial incentive, the attention of the union staff can easily shift to other areas of the union where revenue generating potential exists. At the Shepherd Union, this rule of thumb is applicable to retail activities pertaining to the food services and ATM services. Ideally, the Shepherd Union should benefit from these services financially.

#### **Clarify Funding Received for Department Use of Meeting and Event Spaces**

Historically, the Shepherd Union has received funding from the university in exchange for department use of the meeting and event space. An amount was negotiated and settled on but in recent years the amount received from the university has been less, which suggests a change of course. This topic should be raised and clarified.

## **ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION**

The use of assessment methods generates information vital to informing organizational decision making and improving facilities, programs and services. With its access to resources such as Student Voice and entrance counting technology, the Shepherd Union has the tools to conduct a comprehensive assessment program and has begun making strides in this direction. It should aspire to reach the stage where its self-study document contains a thorough presentation of assessment results to support claims about performance and a comprehensive set of data to justify plans for new directions. This includes information about student usage of services and attendance to programs, student satisfaction, trends related to student interests, and the impact of programs on

student learning. The Shepherd Union may already be conducting these forms of assessment but did not include the results into the self-study.

## **Recommendations**

### **Set Expectations for Collecting Usage/Attendance Data for Each Department**

Identify the minimum data that should be tracked consistently concerning service utilization and program attendance. Expect departments to make annual comparisons to determine if usage and attendance has increased or declined. For example, the Information Desk should conduct periodic studies on the volume of phone calls, emails and walk-up visits it receives. This information can determine appropriate staffing levels during certain times of the year and times of the day. The Game Room could measure usage of the billiards tables by day and hour and provide comparisons from year-to-year.

Encourage occurrence tracking when departments encounter issues. For example, the Information Desk staff indicated that university switchboard operators often transfers phone calls to the Information Desk as a default when they are not sure which department can answer their question. This is a circumstance when the department can begin tracking the frequency of this occurrence.

### **Identify Opportunities to Measure Client Satisfaction**

In the student union environment, many opportunities exist to seek client input on their satisfaction with a service or program as a means for continual improvement. For example, the Scheduling, Events and Conferencing Office can devise a concise client satisfaction survey and administer it major events. The survey can include an open-ended question seeking suggestions for improvements. Short surveys can also be administered to students who participate in leadership workshop and other types of educational programs. Even walk-up service areas such as the Wildcat Card office could conduct quick point-of-contact surveys. Student Voice supports the use of point-of-contact surveys using devices such as I-Touch for departments to ask clients short surveys at the point of service.

### **Measure Learning Outcomes Where Appropriate**

The student union should continue to conduct assessments to confirm the knowledge, skills and dispositions students are learning from participation in its student employee training programs and educational programs for student leaders. To measure knowledge gains, learning outcomes assessments can be given to students at the conclusion of educational workshops and training sessions. To measure skill acquisition, rubrics can be used by training facilitators to observe and rate how well student employees perform tasks during training exercises.