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Sustainability in the Union

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There are few buildings on a college or university campus that compare to the college union. Offering the campus community a wide range of services and programs, it operates as the center of student life and has a core role to teach citizenship, social responsibility, and leadership. As such, the college union is naturally situated to model sustainability. Unions can serve as locations for education and conversations about sustainability, as well as for organizations operationally and programmatically engaged in sustainable practices. In this chapter, we examine the historical framework of college unions, how a college union functions as a building and a business, and provide some detail on how a college union—with its heart and soul—can be a leader in shaping current and future practices that support the values of sustainability and stewardship.

Sustainability is one of the buzzwords that have emerged in higher education over the past few years. Once a word breaks through the surface and becomes part of daily conversation, weekly headlines, and conference themes, its meaning becomes more and more diffuse. Taking into consideration the purpose and function of the college union, there is value to pause and reflect upon sustainability concepts and to clarify the meaning for this context.

The concept of sustainability originates with ideals of the Iroquois, which urged humans to live and work for the benefit of the seventh generation in the future. The leadership of the Six Nations, known by many as the Iroquois Confederacy (or “The League of Power and Peace”), followed a written constitution that was heavily borrowed from by the founders of the United States. The Six Nations were called the *Hau de No Sau Nee*, meaning People Building a Long House. The six tribes that formed this powerful

alliance (the Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondagas, Oneida, Seneca, and Tuscaroras) held many important and personal beliefs, one of which connects directly into how we relate to our surroundings and how we prepare for the future. The Great Law, as the document was called, asked a current generation of people to be mindful of, and work towards, the well-being of their children seven generations in the future. The translation reads something like this: “In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation . . . even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine.”

If we apply the accepted number of years that define a generation to the seven-generation concept, then we need to be thinking out 175 years as we make decisions. Another way to look at this is in college terms. If we do that then we need to think about over forty generations of students. Considering this large number of years—forty generations of college students—we might want to reconsider adopting the word, *sustainability*.

Stewardship might actually be the word that better captures the values behind sustainability. Although the distinction might seem trivial, it mirrors the difference between tolerance and acceptance when we consider many of the discussions centered on social justice. Sustainability only goes far enough to sustain the status quo, when environmentally or financially we need to own the careful and responsible management of those things entrusted to our care.

Sustainability usually infers an evolving interplay between humans, other members of the animal and plant world, and the broader physical environment. Stewardship places personal responsibility with each of us to take action within that social and environmental interplay. Whereas sustainability *can* be a call to action, stewardship requires it. To be a good steward is to take action on our obligations. The perspective of stewardship is adopted in this chapter to advance a discussion about college unions as a model for campus sustainability.

Introduction to College Union History

The early college union movement was founded in the nineteenth century, noted historically to be based on college debating societies. Although debate was an important campus activity at the time, the first union buildings were clearly intended to be social centers (Berry, 1989). Serving the campus as a gathering place for social activities continued in the college union; however, a more structured role emerged over time. Early in the twentieth century, a professional association for college unions formed, known today as the Association of College Unions International (ACUI). By the middle of the twentieth century, a role statement was developed for college unions, which has been reaffirmed and updated over the years. The statement has continued to convey the underlying principles of students developing good citizenship, social responsibility, and leadership.

These key components have been maintained throughout the history of college unions, and are consistent with the major tenet of sustainability to attain present needs without hindering future generations in meeting their needs (World Commission of the Environment and Development, 1987).

Historically referred to as “the living room of the campus,” college unions offer a welcoming and inclusive environment. They often are the center of student activity and involvement, and are positioned to be a primary location for the campus community to share ideas and encourage constructive discourse. It is not unusual for campus demonstrations to take place, or originate, at the college union, and for students to use the union as a stage for bringing contemporary issues to the forefront. As might be expected, college unions throughout the country played an important role during the activism period of the 1960s. As reflected in the ACUI presidential remarks in 1969, Edwin Siggelkow referenced the changing landscape on campuses and noted that college unions “in their idealized state represent a model for many needed reforms within their larger institutions, college or university” (Siggelkow, 1969, p. 182).

Similar to Siggelkow’s observation of the college union’s being at the center of reform, today’s unions continue to be representative of change taking place in the larger society. As in the past, college unions serve as the center of student life, the community center for the campus, and similar to the resource desired by debating societies, a conduit for contemporary trends and practices to be shared. At the same time, college unions have not operated in a stagnant manner to serve the campus, but instead have altered their delivery according to the changing needs of students. Unions originally built with swimming pools and cafeterias now have computer labs and a variety of food options. Although sock hops and telephone booth stuffing may have met the programmatic needs of students in the 1950s and 1960s, twenty-first-century students are engaged in a multitude of diverse activities such as cultural performances, poetry slams, and late-night programs. Operationally and programmatically college unions have been vigilant in their efforts to understand student needs and change with the times, even in instances when the same student needs are delivered in a new or better manner. Telephone booths, for example, once a staple in college unions, dwindled to a nonexistent status with the proliferation of cell phones. Many college unions have been able to transform their telephone booth spaces into e-mail stations; with built-in webcam capability, the stations in essence are capable of making video phone calls.

If history offers any guidance, it is that the college union can serve as an important conduit for college campuses during transformational periods. By modeling a sustainable organizational practice and providing avenues for active student engagement during such societal change processes, college unions maintain their important role for the college campus.

The Union as a Building

Although college unions may have been built with similar functional spaces, such as lounges, meeting rooms, and retail operations, the craftsmanship and building materials have varied. Some of the earliest college unions appear in fact to have withstood the test of time, being designed well and constructed with lasting building materials. Houston Hall at the University of Pennsylvania, constructed in 1896 as the first college union in the United States, was recognized for its space dedicated to out-of-class experience (Hamilton, 2009). Houston Hall today still serves the campus with meeting rooms, restaurants, and study space. Similarly, five of the seven founding institutions of the Association of College Unions International are still operating with their original college unions, all built in the early part of the twentieth century.

According to Szuberla (1986), the building design of early student unions was much more vibrant and iconic as compared to the architecture of unions built later in the twentieth century. A similar difference exists for materials used during the second half of the twentieth century. As student populations sky-rocketed with the return of veterans after World War II, campuses scrambled to quickly build facilities, paying less attention to quality construction materials. Technological advancements in building materials focused on quick and easy to construct rather than long-lasting (Academy for Educational Development, 1982).

The recent sustainability movement has created more intentional thought in college union design, using high-quality materials to last many years rather than less-expensive materials that will need more frequent replacement, and includes some of the resilient materials more commonly used in early college unions. For example, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) gold-certified Davis Center at the University of Vermont was built with a slate roof, similar to unions built in the early twentieth century. According to the lead architect, slate was used because of its texture and depth, but also because of its durability, lasting 100 years or longer (Wakefield, 2008). Building materials with long life expectancy, as well as technological advances in such areas as energy consumption and building efficiency, have enhanced college union renovations and new construction.

Sustainability is clearly a focus for recently constructed college union facilities, and it is also an apparent strong desire of students. According to the director of the LEED silver-certified Ohio Union at Ohio State University, students would only agree to build a new union if it was environmentally sound and LEED recognized (Ohio Union, 2010). Such insistence on the part of students is not surprising. The current millennial generation has grown up thinking about recycling and has become familiar with the idea of sustainability as the topic has been increasingly incorporated into the college (Hatton, Farley, Cook, and Porter, 2009).

Renovations of college unions, including older facilities, are also being thought of with a sustainable and creative mindset. A cistern, for example, installed in the University of Michigan's Union, which opened in 1919, is scheduled to be tied to the building irrigation system, creating better use of runoff rain water that would otherwise dump into a storm drain. Such efforts to conserve water are being sought by unions across the country, most prevalently recognized through the more common practice during building renovations to install waterless urinals. College union managers must actively look for opportunities to correct such building infrastructure components that can improve sustainable output. Conducting a Facilities Conditions Analysis (FCA) that includes an assessment of deficiencies related to sustainability is a good place to start. FCA recommendations such as window replacement to capture heat loss, converting to light-emitting diode (LED) lighting, or installing automated building temperature control systems are examples of enhancements that could be part of a renovation or implemented independently as funding is secured.

The focus on sustainability does not end when the newly built or renovated college union opens its doors. Managers must initiate effective regular sustainability practices in daily building operations. Sustainable cleaning practices, using eco-friendly products and equipment, are essential for college union organizations to live up to the values with which their building was designed, built, or retrofitted. Improvements in green products have made it possible to effectively clean facilities with less negative impact on the environment. Products ranging from all-purpose cleaners and disinfectants to degreasers and deodorizers allow operations staff to employ green cleaning practices in maintaining the college union facility. Energy efficient and environmentally safe equipment also make a difference in building operations, such as vacuums with HEPA filters, floor cleaners that use less water, and washable microfiber mops. Developments in the cleaning supply field have allowed for competitive pricing, making green cleaning a logical choice for operating college unions in both an environmental and cost-efficient manner.

Enhancing the college union building through sustainable infrastructure and building operations is a logical and necessary approach for today's college union. The many benefits of a sustainable building are not only good for the environment, but in the long run provide a cost savings to the union operating budget. College union managers should conduct an audit of their facilities to understand physical plant opportunities and best operating practices for their union.

The Union as a Business

Although the college union serves as an important resource for the campus, it also operates as a business. From a budget perspective, many unions are not part of the college or university general fund, meaning the funding base

does not include tuition dollars. Instead, unions frequently operate as an auxiliary operation, meaning the college union is responsible for generating its own revenue to operate. Certainly, core to a college union mission is to provide needed services to students and the larger campus community, but college unions also undertake business enterprises out of a necessity to generate revenue to pay for programs and services.

All business entities must understand their primary customer base, the needs and desires of their customers, and have processes in place to serve their customers. In addition, the values of the organization often drive the delivery of service and the nature of the business. As a business and educational organization, college unions are positioned to convey values that are consistent with those of the institution as well as the college union profession. As noted in the Association of College Unions International's watershed document, *Role of the College Union* (1956), one such value focuses on the importance of social responsibility.

Corporate social responsibility is a term generally used to describe the role of business to take responsibility for its impact on society and the environment. McElhaney (2008) indicated that effective corporate social responsibility includes "a business strategy that is integrated with core business objectives and core competencies of the firm and from the outset is designed to create business value and positive social change, and is embedded in day-to-day business culture and operations" (p. 5). In essence, companies must make business decisions and manage in a manner that positively contributes to society. College union leaders have an opportunity to not only embrace business practices that actualize corporate social responsibility, but in the process to also promote, encourage, and teach such values to students. More than major corporations who are subject to the pressures of stockholders, the learning laboratory of the college union provides an avenue for educating the campus's principal stakeholders: students.

Intentional and strategic sustainability efforts in the college union have the potential of raising the campus consciousness through products sold, business sought, and tenants to whom space is leased. Recognizing that there are many and varied business operations in college unions, it is up to leaders within those organizations to evaluate how sustainable practices can be realized. Some more common business areas to consider include food service, conferencing, retail stores, and leased operations.

Restaurants and catering services are businesses that typically operate out of the college union. Sustainable practice and looking for environmentally sound solutions are an important part of today's food industry. Waste composting, buying local products, and conserving water are examples of common practices initiated by many food operators (Leahy, 2008). Through campus partnerships, college union food operators also have access to resources to strengthen their sustainability practices, as well as a customer base, students, capable of significantly contributing to the

transformation of food sustainability efforts. For example, a closed-loop food system initiated by students on one campus uses composted table scraps from the college union restaurant to create new produce for the same restaurant.

Conferences and meetings are a common occurrence in many college unions. Staff responsible for such events can be conscious to purposefully attract socially responsible businesses and conferences, and to also provide event resources that are more sustainable in nature. Simple and inexpensive solutions might include online registration and reusable nametags. Technology can also offer broader solutions, such as directing attendees through digital display signs rather than paper, making presentation slides available on a conference Web site rather than having handouts, and offering video-conferencing for long-distance presenters or attendees to limit unnecessary travel.

Convenience stores offer many products to campus customers, and serve as a good example when considering sustainability in retail operations. While offering convenience, such stores can still proactively demonstrate good sustainable practice with efforts such as buying local, encouraging reusable carry bags for purchases, and providing customers alternative choices in purchasing patterns. For example, bottled water may always be a necessity in college union convenience stores due to the needs of campus visitors. However, for students who regularly visit the store, a water refill station might be a more sustainable option where they can reuse their own carry bottle and lessen the likelihood of more plastics entering landfills.

College unions often lease out space to business partners to provide a needed service. Lessees are usually selected through a Request for Proposal (RFP) process, which provides a fair and measured approach to selecting a vendor. To seek green tenants, college union managers should ask potential vendors to describe their sustainability practices, and in fact could tie sustainability to the selection process. Recognizing that it is not uncommon to use weighted decision-making criteria in selecting a vendor, sustainability could be considered part of the criteria. For example, product quality might be assigned 25 percent of the weighted criteria, rent revenue 35 percent, corporate support 20 percent, marketing 10 percent, and sustainability practices 10 percent.

College unions can and should operate their businesses with a sustainable mindset. When considering socially responsible and sustainable practices for their businesses, the question some college union managers might ask themselves is whether such initiatives will hinder their ability to generate needed revenue. Research suggests that socially responsible companies perform strong financially (Heal, 2008; Shaw, 2009). Public perception supports the idea of companies being socially responsible, as people purchase goods from organizations they consider to be good companies. “The idea that companies only pursue profits bumps up against the reality that the

public expects corporations to care about more than profit and it rewards those that do” (Shaw, 2009). It is reasonable to conclude that college students expect college union businesses to also embrace socially responsible and sustainable behaviors, and that they are willing to financially support such practices.

The Heart and Soul of the New Union

As we begin to move deeper into the twenty-first century and strive to infuse stewardship into all aspects of the college union, it is important to consider a number of elements that provide a strong foundation for the work. Once a solid base is established, it is possible to look more strategically at specific initiatives with an operational and programmatic framework, including values and mission, new construction or renovations, operations, programming, human resources, and change.

Values and Mission. Each college union exists on a campus with a mission statement and a set of policies that more specifically shape day-to-day decisions. There is certainly value in supporting, or even shaping, institutional direction related to sustainability and stewardship, but a college union’s activities are not usually limited to the defined parameters of the institution. The autonomy of the union permits a department to explore and define its own value and mission within the larger institutional context and local community. In either case, it is critical that the values of stewardship be clearly articulated as an active component of the union mission.

Marshall University’s Department of Housing and Residence Life (HRL) demonstrated their commitment to environmental sustainability and awareness with a strongly articulated plan (Yaun, 2010). Detailed in their sustainability plan are four clear elements: sustainable leadership, sustainable education/literacy, sustainable purchasing, and sustainable food service operations. Marshall has also developed multiple ways to measure the outcomes of their actions, from decreased energy usage to consistent use of new initiatives such as hydration stations to monitoring water usage in bathrooms.

The University of Vermont, when planning for the recently constructed LEED gold-certified Dudley H. Davis Center, articulated four specific aspects to guide not only the construction development stages of the project, but to also shape ongoing decisions throughout the entire operation. The four components of the Davis Center mission are to be student focused, to complement the academic mission, to celebrate and support social justice, and to strive for environmental stewardship.

There are a wide variety of ways to approach the development or reaffirmation of mission and values for a college union. To maintain longevity in commitment to the values of stewardship and sustainability, it is critical to create a strong written philosophical base to shape operational decisions, educational efforts, programming decisions, and staff training.

New Construction/Renovation/Ongoing Operations. If one is fortunate enough to be involved with the construction of a college union, then there are numerous opportunities to shape a new building with the values of stewardship. As mentioned earlier, Ohio State students demanded that the new union be sustainable (Ohio Union, 2010). Those demands resulted in a LEED-certified building that utilized local Habitat for Humanity volunteers in the deconstruction phase, rescued many historical elements of the former union to be included in the new construction, and all union operations that are tray-free and bag-free. New construction certainly allows for more creativity and flexibility, but clear values are important in shaping decisions.

College union renovation, the more common opportunity for many campuses, also creates an occasion for the infusion of stewardship values in decision-making. Whether it is from back-of-the-house renovations in food service or the replacement or creation of bathrooms, design decisions will directly impact long-term operations.

The most common reality for most union professionals is working in a current facility that is showing its years, appears to have little opportunity to change infrastructure, and presents daily challenges just to maintain. It is difficult at times to live within this reality and also think about creative ways to infuse better practices into daily decisions and operations.

Whether building a new facility or renovating or working with an existing facility, there are many opportunities to change practices, teach, and challenge campus denizens to become better citizens. Again, clearly articulated values better guarantee responsible and long-lasting decisions.

Operations. The University of Minnesota-Morris envisions the college union as a laboratory for citizenship (Association of College Unions International, 2011) and frames their efforts to support planet, people, and profit. Oregon State University has implemented a variety of purchasing policies, like only permitting copiers that default to two-sided copies that support responsible practices. Many professionals go to the operations arena when considering ways to become better stewards. Yet there are many opportunities to create or changes practices in this area.

How does one go about infusing stewardship and sustainability values into operations? Typical college union operations include visible and invisible opportunities for change. All aspects of college union operations can be reviewed and changed accordingly. On many campuses union staff review and modify energy consumption through heating, ventilation, and thermostat management. Food service—self-operated or contracted—can add significantly to stewardship efforts: by initiating portion control, going trayless, composting, purchasing from local farmers, and by ensuring the purchase of Fair Trade products (Sustainability, 2010). Campus bookstores can decide to go bagless. Water fountains can be retrofitted to accommodate long spouts that encourage refillable bottle use. Vending machines can be fit with “vending miser” programs that reduce energy use. Many

facilities are working to switch in (LED) lighting to reduce use and costs. Cleaning products can be “green” thereby protecting the health of staff and students, and increase the life of a facility. Waste streams can be measured and used to challenge the operations group to become more responsible. Are, in fact, hand dryers better than paper towels in bathrooms? There are a multitude of opportunities to change operational practices on any individual campus, and it takes defined values and leadership to initiate those changes.

Programming. Many educational outcomes result from planned programming efforts. If, in fact, the union is a laboratory of citizenship, and the union believes in practices that support the values of stewardship, then how does this shape programming decisions? What current program practices might not actually fulfill the emerging values of stewardship? What new programs can be created to assist in the educational goal of creating great campus stewards?

The answers to these questions are nearly limitless and are likely defined by the budget and abilities on any given campus. Yet there are many opportunities that might allow the union to become a campus leader. Some unions have become the locale for bike and car share programs, and have lobbied to become stops for local mass transit. EcoRep programs, charging undergraduate students with assisting with programming and consciousness raising, have started to become the norm (Sustainability, 2010). Reaching out to local farmers and working with campus food service staff might just begin to get students to think about the origin of their food and the value of providing direct support to local farmers and businesses. Farm to Table or Fork programs are becoming a rapid success (Sustainability, 2010). Campus farmer markets are being established in college unions. Campus kitchen projects are capturing unused food from on campus and creating nutritionally balanced meals for local communities (Combs, 2010). Campus challenges, like Bottle Free Weeks, are attempting to engage the entire campus community in responsible practices. Examining times, like campus move-in and move-out, when the campus experiences significant volumes of trash and figuring out ways to manage such times and teach new students about the values of the campus.

Human Resources. Staff can perform an invaluable role in fulfilling the mission of stewardship. It is important to include those values in the entire hiring process, from job posting to interview and selection. Believing in the values of stewardship will assist in developing a strong team spirit and create a productive flow of communication to further enhance operations and programs. It is also important to consistently recognize and reward staff efforts to fulfill the mission as well as support ongoing professional development for staff.

Change. The outcomes of operational, programmatic, and educational initiatives are to bring about responsible change. Turning consumers green, via social norms, has consistently proved successful (Simon, 2010). It has

been found that encouraging people to change their habits to save the Earth are not so consistently effective as having people change because their neighbors are doing it. Infusing social norms throughout a college union can fulfill one of the key educational goals and make change for our future.

Concluding Thoughts

The opportunities for a college union to be a campus and community leader in responsible operations and dedicated programming and education are limitless. Running parallel to the importance of clear mission and values are the staff charged with creating and implementing the values of stewardship. Union staff must become good stewards themselves.

In approaching the goal of becoming a responsible college union, it is important to consider:

- *Stewardship Partners.* Partnerships are required to bring about change within complex organizations. Be open to partners on and off campus. Look for support from students, and let students know you want to work with them to improve the operations and programming of the union. Success in inculcating all sustainability practices on a campus requires relationships from the president to student leaders to custodial staff. Together, from institutional policies to selecting toilet paper, consistent change requires partnerships.
- *Listening to Community Members for Simple, Yet Powerful, Ideas.* Casual conversations can often result in great ideas for sustainability. Listen to them. Eavesdrop on students. Listen to custodians and ask where they see waste and inefficiencies. Sometimes the best solution to a problem can come from those you least expect.
- *Education With the Values of Stewardship.* Remember that in the end our mission is education—education for all. As decisions are made to bring about change, use that change as an educational opportunity. And do not be afraid to challenge yourself, your staff, and the campus community to learn and change within a framework of stewardship. Let us strive to graduate the best stewards as possible.
- *Flexibility for a Sustainable Future.* Becoming more sustainable may demand a substantial shift in practice and philosophy. Change typically requires flexibility. The art of compromise, resulting from a dialogue, might just find the common ground needed to demonstrate new responsible practices.
- *Social Norms.* Work to establish defined norms in the union. Work actively with your community members to reinforce norms that represent the values of stewardship.

- *Assessment.* Nothing can be more powerful than visually demonstrating the outcomes of responsible practices and programming. Take the initiative to talk to the campus newspaper and to student leaders about efforts and outcomes. Good publicity about successful practices reinforces the importance of being a leader and strong role model.
- *Valuable Web Sites.* One of the most useful ways to continue to develop your college union efforts in sustainability and stewardship is to consistently review active and related Web sites such as
 - http://www.acui.org/content.aspx?menu_id=20&id=300
 - <http://www.nwf.org/Global-Warming/Campus-Solutions/Resources.aspx>
 - <http://www.nwf.org/campusecology>
 - <http://www.nwf.org/campusecology/resources/yearbook>
 - <http://www.zipcar.com>
 - <http://www.stopglobalwarming.org>
 - <http://www.uwosh.edu/sustainability/fairtrade>
 - <http://www.greenstudentu.com>
 - <https://stars.aashe.org/>

Stewardship and sustainability evokes a general concept of working for the Earth. Like the Earth, some things work better when influenced by the organic. The future depends upon the creativity, flexibility, caring, and actions on a home institution as much as it does on what might be happening on other campuses. Working together, sharing ideas, and using ideas from other campuses, we just might secure a better future for those seven generations.

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