

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

The Planning Team held a series of focus groups and intercept interviews to gain an understanding of the current perceptions of students and staff in regards to the University Center and UC Satellite, as well as attitudes about the quality of student life on campus in general. Participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences with these buildings, both their likes and dislikes, as well as their experiences with other student life facilities on other college and university campuses.

The process is designed to yield qualitative data, reveal hidden sensitivities, and raise issues previously not considered by the researchers. Although efforts were made to interview representative populations, this analysis is not meant to provide rigid, statistically reliable responses from a demographically representative sample of the population. The focus group is designed to obtain feedback from a range of stakeholders and prospective facility users.

Focus groups were assembled to represent a broad spectrum of the campus community, including students actively involved in a variety of organizations and employees of the UC, as well as others. The discussions were guided by the moderators; however, open-ended questions encouraged participants to contribute freely. These discussions involved more than 130 participants allowed the team to develop a better understanding of campus opinions about the University Center's facilities and services. In addition, supplemental intercept interviews were conducted. The intercept interviews allowed us also to get a random cross-section of the campus population by stopping students, staff and faculty between classes for a few minutes of informal conversation regarding campus life.



Open Forum with Project Stakeholders

Department interviews were also conducted with administrators and staff to understand their experiences and expectations regarding the needs and future direction of University Center and UC Satellite.

Quality of Student Life

Many students chose to attend UH because it was close to home for some, while others chose the UH because of its affordability and value. Some international students chose the institution because of the reputation for its mechanical, law, and engineering classes related to the oil industry. A few faculty / staff members noted that they attended the institution during undergrad or grad and wanted to give back to the institution that had given them so much.

Comments regarding the University Center Complex were mostly consistent among the focus groups and tended to reflect poorly on the building, mostly due to



Student Focus Group

the manner in which the programmatic spaces are organized. However, there were also some positive features recognized by varied constituencies.

The project stakeholders agreed the best part of the UC is its student organizations and programming. They also liked its central location, close to the Library and Campus Recreation and Wellness Center, the convenience to retail, the mature landscape, and the visual affirmation of diversity in World Affairs lounge. The group values the outside environment and would like to see a better transition between interior and exterior spaces. Many comments were representative of those heard from student and staff populations, such as that people only visit the UC to get food, and they are tired of the food options. The building lacks school spirit and is not inviting. From the outside, it is impossible to know what is in the building, and when inside, nothing catches the eye; it is hard to locate the games area, the lounges, and in particular programs in the Underground. In general, there is the perception that there is not enough advertising or marketing of UC programs and events, though this is not specific to the facility. Some say it is because they can't directly see what is going on when they walk through the building.

Some comments dealt with visibility and accessibility to the UC, that it "lacks curb appeal," signage is deficient both inside and out, convenient parking is an issue and therefore discourages coming to the UC just for leisure purposes, and lighting in the adjacent parking lot shuts off at night and visitors feel unsafe in the darkness around the UC. People want to come to UC and have access to programs; now it "feels like walking into a Staples."

Students seconded the notion that spaces are not attractive, inviting, or student friendly. Specifically, the lighting is too dim with too little natural light, especially in the Underground, and no opportunities to see into and out of building. The UC appears dated, and its rooms and furnishings are not configured for good study or social space. One student commented that you do not get a sense of the UC when walk in because it is "spread out all over the place," another described it as "old and sober," a place you don't imagine having fun activity. Most consider the building "too old," "institutional," and "unwelcoming;" it is a place intended for quick visits where you "come to do business," not a place for lounging and lingering. "The UC looks so old, I swear Hakeem Olajuwon still hangs out and takes classes here," one student exclaimed. Some additional areas of improvements include difficulties related to ingress and egress, air quality and over all HVAC control, pigeons flying inside the atrium unchecked, and lack of seating. On the pos-



Limited views make seeing activity within the UC difficult



Food choices at the UC are limited and lines often back up



Lounge areas are not considered comfortable and welcoming

itive side, there is general agreement at the UC is in a good, central location and both the UC and Satellite have good presence on campus, when you mention either people know where it is located.

Many students say they only visit the UC to buy books or eat; there is no other draw and nothing for them to do. Some do regularly use the game room, and those involved in student organizations are there round the clock, but not to engage with others in a social setting. They don't see activity when they enter the building, the first thing they see is the stairs, which they say sends an unwelcoming message. There is no interior "hearth." It is not a place where students go to be with other students; it is a "come and go" place. People come for lunch, not to hang out. They want a building with an inviting atmosphere, open space, natural light, and the ability to see what is going on from both inside and outside. It should be aesthetically pleasing and "happening." One faculty member exclaimed, "Since there is food here, the UC has become a kind of hangout spot by default, not preference, because its not a comfortable to place relax."

Not surprisingly, food is the top complaint across the board. The quality and variety of food at the Satellite is considered better hands down; the decision to eat at the UC or Satellite is for some based on the food options and for others the convenience. A large part of the problem with dining services seems to be the hours of operation. Only Wendy's and Chili's Too offer weekend service; Wendy's is open part of Saturday and Sunday, while Chili's Too is open both days through dinner. The Satellite in addition is closes at 6:00 pm all summer and has fewer options available. Students who stay on campus have only one option, if any at all, the cafeteria at the residence halls. Since many students commute and attend evening classes, their only



Complaints about cleanliness and service influence the choice to dine at Chili's Too



Weather conditions have substantial impact on the day-to-day utilization of the Arbor

dining option is Wendy's as the remaining food venues close at 5:00 pm. There is a desire for more diversification in hours, especially during finals week.

Almost universally users think the food options are too limited and are looking for greater variety, ethnically diverse menus, and healthier options in retail and in catering. There is also widespread discontent with the Aramark customer service and cleanliness. And while students complain of crowding, they do like that it is easy to get in and out of the food court areas. They want more menu choices, expanded and late night hours, a higher standard of professional service, and better price /value relationships.

In regards to the meeting rooms, there is a general feeling that they are easy for students to reserve and access, though there is a need for more variety and a desire to have built-in technology and in some instances raked seating. While the Cougar Den was described as a "useless, wasted space," most consider the Houston Room a memorable, popular space. There is a desire for a second room like the Houston which could hold 400 to 600 people, or maybe an auditorium. Students who are involved in organizations did cite the inconvenience of having to ascend three flights of stairs to make a reservation.

The quality and provision of dedicated lounge and study areas are of particular concern to the students in both the UC and UC Satellite. Primarily, they feel that there are no comfortable places to just sit down and have a conversation. One student responded, "There is no comfortable study area that's enclosed. I do not like having to move the couches around on the top floor of the UC."

The Arbor becomes very humid and muggy at times, and the noise disrupts adjacent offices. Students want places where they have the freedom to bring food and be noisy, unlike the library, which is now serving as the hang-out area for many students. They also want a place to study where they can also eat and "see and been seen." Commuters want a place that affords some privacy with moveable furniture. Others want a TV lounge and place to play Guitar Hero in a convenient and contemporary setting at the UC. Overall they really want different types of lounge spaces where they can just hang out.

Other comments deal with the how the building's physical organization impedes visual access to its activities and retail establishments, how the décor does not capture the University's history or spirit, how accessibility throughout the building is a challenge for those with disabilities. One student added, "as a disabled student, I do not like the fact that I have to use a separate entrance into the UC. I feel that all students should be able to use the same entrance, and not be relegated to use a side entrance."

There is the notion that you have to be part of the UC culture to know what is going on, and this dissatisfaction is magnified by having the student organizations located in the Underground where "they have their own thing going on down there." Students strongly advocated for re-locating the student organization offices from the UC Underground to increase visibility and involvement, noting that student activities should be "brought to light." Students also complain that they don't go to the Underground because there is no cell phone coverage.

Overall there was a desire to improve the outdoor space. The courtyard of the Satellite seems to be very popular and works well for impromptu performances and rallies. By comparison, no one responded that they sit outside the UC in what one student termed a "random patch of cement;" it is not enticing compared to other options on campus.



Student organization space in the Underground has no visibility from the other areas of the UC