

# INTRODUCTION

## Overview

The quality of student life on campus has significant impact on the both the undergraduate and graduate experience at the University of Houston (UH). That quality is measured by the presence, or lack thereof, of physical spaces and outdoor places that draw the campus community together. A university center is often the hub of extracurricular activity, offering informal gathering areas, formal event spaces, performance and cultural venues, dining and retail amenities, student organization spaces, as well as some element of student services. It is an important tool in the recruitment and retention of students and when successful, is a destination which offers a dynamic mix of spaces and activities that draws the largest numbers of students. The open spaces also contribute significantly to the quality of student's social experiences. They provide for relaxation, recreational activities, and opportunities to engage with others in a pleasant outdoor environment.

The vitality of UH is predicated on developing a strong campus experience, where students of any major, whether residing on campus or off, can find community and a variety of social opportunities. Students spend most of their day attending classes, studying, and participating in organized activities. Critical to this experience are the informal gathering spaces, which provide lively settings for students to interact socially with friends and meet new people between or after other engagements. Students are quite vocal about their desires, from late-night, weekend and versatile dining options, to coffee shops, study lounges, and multipurpose event spaces. They are also forthright about their perceptions of life at the UC and UC Satellite; these are not social magnets, they lack



school spirit and offer no compelling reason to extend their time on campus. Two of the most successful "happening places" on campus are the recently renovated Library and the Recreation Center, both have in common comfortable, movable furniture.

UH is a thriving public research and teaching institution which provides high-quality education in many disciplines. Since it's founding in 1927 to today, the University has prospered and grown to include more than 550 acres and a student population of approximately 35,000. UH is today the largest and most comprehensive institution in the University of Houston system. The evolution of the campus has not paralleled an equal transformation and growth in student life facilities over time. Since opening in 1967, the University Center has benefited only from selective renovation efforts; as a result the facility shows significant signs of wear. The UC Satellite, though fully renovated in 2002, has not been able to keep up with the demands of a growing population in the academic core.





*Executive Committee Reviews Planning Options*

In 2006, the UH Board of Regents approved a "Framework Plan" that emphasized an increase in the number of students and services on campus through the development of mixed-use, perimeter precincts over a 15-year period. The plan provides guidelines for integrating the four precincts and campus core into a coherent whole and considers specific future initiatives for new construction and the network of open green spaces, courtyard and paths which weave the campus together and connect to the surrounding neighborhood.

With plans for continued enrollment growth, residential growth, and physical development, the UC and Satellite will struggle to meet future demands. Already, the programs and departments within these facilities are limited in their ability to meet the needs of today's students due to existing space constraints, outdated environments, and/or organizational inefficiencies.

The Master Plan described herein examines the student life experience, and has as its specific focus the University Center and UC Satellite. Each facility was considered in terms of its current physical condition, programs, and ability to meet future needs as defined through the master planning process.

## Process

In February 2008, the University of Houston entered into a contract with Holzman Moss Architecture in association with Brailsford & Dunlavy (B&D); Envision Strategies; Campus Bookstore Consulting (CBC); and Shah Smith & Associates, Inc. to provide Professional Design and Planning Services for a Master Plan of Renovation for the University Center Complex and the



University Center Satellite. The results of these efforts are presented in this report.

The mission of the Planning Team was to:

- Review of existing conditions, building infrastructure and systems;
- Review and assess the Bookstore and food service revenue generating operations;
- Document the space utilization of offices, meeting rooms, casual spaces, study areas, student activity areas, and general facility circulation;
- Perform a comparative analysis of competitor institutions and model programs at other universities;
- Perform a detailed financial market analysis of revenue potential and associated cost estimates of potential facility improvements;
- Develop conceptual program options;
- Determine building operating costs and unit operating costs for proposed enhancements; and
- Identify revenue potential from student fees and speculative sources.

The Master Plan report is intended to provide guidance for future development and includes:

- An assessment of existing conditions, including the physical condition of the building; the financial situation; and survey results of student, staff and faculty perceptions;
- A proposed Building Program that outlines assigned net areas for each department and organization to be housed in new or expanded facilities;
- Adjacency and stacking diagrams that illustrate how the varied spaces within new or expanded university center facilities might best relate to each other;



*Students Prioritize Key Improvements to the UC*



- Concept campus design and planning options that illustrates how the UC and Satellite: whether new, renovated and/or expanded, might best achieve the goals and vision of the University and larger framework plan;
- An implementation plan that includes phasing scenarios for all recommendations;
- A financial analysis that provides a rationale and approach to funding recommended improvements; and
- A preliminary estimate of the total project cost.

The information and findings presented in this report were gathered over the course six months as a result of six on-campus work sessions including the Executive Committee, UH staff and administrators, and the participation of representatives of current UC and Satellite user groups and students.

Through a series of focus groups and web-based surveys a diverse spectrum of the campus population provided input in the data-gathering portion of the study for the UC and Satellite specifically, along with topics relating to food service and the Bookstore. The online survey targeted faculty, staff and students, covering a range of demographics including gender, undergraduate class, graduate status, and students of each demographic both on and off campus.

Interviews were conducted with the majority of the departments located within the UC. Representatives of each department were asked questions concerning their anticipated staff growth, departmental space needs, and qualitative considerations.



To assess the current attitudes of the UH constituents regarding food service, a series of focus groups and interviews was conducted with a broad cross section of the campus population. The purpose of these focus groups was twofold; to subjectively identify customer perceptions and desires pertaining to campus dining, and to create a foundation for developing a survey instrument for quantitative research purposes.

In order to analyze the Bookstore facility/space and programming requirements, CBC conducted regular site visits, including tours of the campus, UC and Bookstore and visits to the local competitors. An analysis and benchmarking of the University's historical financial performance was based on financial data for the past five years provided by the University.



In-depth interviews were held with Bookstore staff on several occasions. Meetings with faculty, staff, and administrators were also held to gather input regarding the Bookstore services and programming requirements.

Planning workshops were held throughout the process with the participation of the Executive Committee. Tools used in these sessions included charts, diagrams, models and program data. Discussions included an understanding of specific goals and objectives, project needs, square footage requirements for all of the program spaces, architectural and system requirements, desired adjacencies, functional efficiency, and cost implications. During the workshops, options responding to these needs were collectively evaluated in terms of their ability to achieve the program, design objectives, budget and schedule.

On four occasions the Executive Committee toured comparable student centers based on recent renovation and expansion efforts of relevant scale; Holzman Moss Architecture joined on three of these tours.



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Visits were made to the Indiana University-Purdue University, Campus Center; University of California -San Diego, University Centers; San Diego State University, Aztec Center; and the Texas Tech Student Union Building. Following each tour, participants were asked to complete a site visit analysis to gauge the positive and negative features of the union.

Through the process, the University representatives were able to fully participate in the development of planning options. While not all stated ambitions can be accommodated within the final recommendations, this process allowed the group to understand the needs and approaches from a wide range of their professional colleagues.

