



The Ohio Union Feasibility Study

An Overview

A vibrant student union contributes significantly to the life of a university. The first student union at a public university was built at Ohio State in 1909 (Enarson Hall); the current Ohio Union was built in 1950 with a student fee. What is the future for the Ohio Union?

The Feasibility Study for the Ohio Union outlines three possible courses of action: (A) new construction of a facility to accommodate the maximum desired program (pie-in-the-sky), (B) a more middle-ground approach of new construction to support prioritized program and service elements, and (C) extensive renovation of the existing building to support the existing program.

While Option A and B are strategically sound, Option B is the only one that is fiscally prudent. Option B meets the goals of the academic plan and our institutional agenda while being financially responsible. And, verbal and written feedback tells us it is the only option enthusiastically supported by students.

The core elements of The Ohio State University Academic Plan are advanced with a new student union (Option B).

Enhance and better serve the student body

The Ohio Union is on the front line of student recruitment. Last year, it hosted 11 days of Admissions Programs, 13 days of Honors and Scholars Programs, 31 days of programs focused largely on high school students, and 23 days of Orientation Programs. In addition to such formal programs, research reports that three campus buildings are at the top of the list for prospective students on campus visits: the library, the recreation center, and the student union.

The current Ohio Union is, however, not at all competitive with the Student Unions of Ohio institutions and peer universities. The national average student union space per student is 10 square feet. The average in the Big Ten is 9, among our benchmark institutions 6. The Ohio Union provides 4.6 square feet per student. It is the second smallest union in the Big Ten. Of our 11 benchmark institutions, 8 are planning, building, or have opened a new union. Four Ohio institutions are building or have recently built a student union, all funded by student fees. We are at a competitive disadvantage with an out-dated union building. This is important in recruitment and retention.

While other new construction around the campus is providing spaces for some students and faculty to interact within their academic programs, there is a need for a facility that brings the campus together. We need a place of nearly unique inclusiveness on the campus. The new Union building reflects the multi-disciplinary richness of Ohio State by providing programs and places that connect students, staff, faculty, alumni, and the community.

Spaces on the campus that are iconic to students include Ohio Stadium, the Oval, the Thompson Library, and Mirror Lake. A new Union could be such a place: A place where students exchange ideas and opinions with people different from themselves, a place of new experiences and leadership development, and a place for late-night programming and community service opportunities. Like the Union, the new recreation facilities contribute to student wellness and social interaction, but do not duplicate the kinds of activities offered. Rather, they are both part of the broad institutional commitment to improving student life.

Currently, meeting rooms are over-booked and lounges are often given over to meetings, robbing students of leisure places. The recent success of graduate and professional student nights, lectures, late-night study breaks, and culturally-based activities only hint at the possibilities with improved programming spaces. A vibrant student union contributes to the quality of life for students and enhances the student experience.

Create a diverse university community

A proposed multi-level Multicultural Center incorporated into the building's design would be a bricks-and-mortar symbol of the value placed on diversity by the institution. It would provide adequate facilities for the variety of activities and services provided by the Multicultural Center in support of our Diversity Plan. The Union is an

especially important place for social interaction and community building. The location of the Multicultural Center in the Union allows access and utilization of the Center and its programs by all members of the University.

Enhance the quality of the teaching and learning environment

Much learning takes place outside the classroom. From the informal spaces where students and faculty interact and study groups meet to the leadership and service learning opportunities provided by union-based programs and student organizations, the proposed Union facilities provide support for learning and student development.

A new student union would provide enhanced opportunities for academic conferences and meetings, adding to Ohio State's stature as a center for international academic excellence. Complimenting The Blackwell and other facilities on campus, the new Union would provide flexible meeting, ballrooms, and pre-function spaces. These activities bring alumni, visiting academics, and the community into the building, connecting them to the university.

Periodic upgrades over 52 years – often uncoordinated and under-funded – have made the current Ohio Union awkward to navigate, inhospitable to the physically challenged, difficult to secure, and aesthetically unappealing. The new building will provide flexible, beautiful spaces to meet today's and tomorrow's needs. The new Union's proposed commercial offerings and satellite service areas are a great convenience. Recommended program elements compliment the offerings of the Gateway Project. Orienting the building along High Street integrates it with and adds to the success of the Gateway initiative.

Develop academic programs that define Ohio State as the Nation's leading public Land Grant University

If Ohio State is to become the leading public Land Grant university, we must have facilities that match our aspirations. The new Union supports the Academic Plan and the Master Plan. The current facility is holding us back, and deferred maintenance requires substantial expenditures. The process leading to the recommendation for a new Union has been professional, thorough, and responsible.

The reason to build a new Union is simply this: It is in the best interests of our students and the institution. Students need and want it. Surveys and focus groups indicate broad support for a new Union building with programs and amenities aimed at student needs. While the construction of a new building (as was the case 52-years ago) would be fee based, the Union is operationally self-sustaining. It is financially and commercially viable after construction.

Architect Curtis Moody reminds us in the Feasibility Report that "Time and change will surely show how firm thy friendship." But, he adds, "time and change have brought competitive forces that put [Ohio State] further behind...any of our country's quality learning environments." It is time to build a Student Union for America's leading public Land Grant university.