THE HEART OF CAMPUS, REIMAGINED:
Student Centers as Multifunctional Ecosystems

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INTRODUCTION

Modern collegiate student centers have transformed from gathering spaces into multifunctional hubs that integrate academics, wellness, technology, and community engagement.

Fifteen years ago, student centers were primarily seen as places for dining, lounging, or recreation. A student center was often the only place to get food, pick up your mail and packages, find out about clubs and organizations, buy your books, or meet your friends for a scheduled activity. TikTok was yet to be invented, Facebook had only recently appeared as an app on iPhones, and mental wellness centers were in university health services buildings.

The millennial generation created a significant boom in college enrollment, and as a result, universities needed to stay relevant and competitive with their peers by building new campus centers, student housing, recreation centers, and other campus amenities. In addition, the early 2000s saw large capital campaigns and donor funding targeted at visible campus projects such as student centers, which are high-impact, donor-friendly projects. That, plus institutional borrowing and low borrowing costs (for part of the decade), enabled many new collegiate projects. Many of the student centers that were built during this period do not support today's updated programming and as a result are being renovated or modified to support a new vision for these student-focused facilities.

Today, economic pressures on higher education institutions have forced campus space utilization to be much more efficient and for more of what exists to be multi-functional. Isolated and dedicated spaces often sit vacant and were costly to build and maintain. As enrollments began to decrease on some campuses, so did the larger crowds of activity, which made the student center an appealing beacon of engagement and activity. Today's thriving Student Centers are those that have structural and philosophical flexibility that allows them to more easily accommodate newly adopted programs that support the institution's evolution.

Modern collegiate student centers have transformed from gathering spaces into multifunctional hubs that integrate academics, wellness, technology, and community engagement. They serve as the heartbeat of campus life, blending social, cultural, and educational support functions in ways that reflect shifting student expectations and institutional priorities.

The top ten drivers of the evolution of student centers are as follows:

01 UNIVERSITY FOCUS ON STUDENT SUCCESS



UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA KULLMAN CENTER FOR CAREER AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Institutions of higher education are competing for a smaller pool of traditional first-time freshmen, and more students are considering technical/vocational careers. As a result, colleges and universities are focusing on both student success for active enrollees and post success for students in the job market. Modern student centers are designed to support academic and personal development, not just co-curricular activity. They integrate tutoring services, career advising, and collaborative learning areas alongside social spaces. Demographic shifts are causing declining enrollments, leading to universities increasingly leveraging student centers as recruitment and retention tools, showcasing vibrant campus life that supports students' success.

Career centers are increasingly located within collegiate centers, reflecting how universities support students' post-graduation employment, engagement, and career readiness. The proximity to where students congregate helps normalize career exploration as an ongoing part of student life rather than a service used only by upperclassmen as job seekers. Higher Education institutions are also under pressure to demonstrate their ability to prepare their students for jobs that give a return on tuition investment.

02 SPACE UTILIZATION

In the face of increasing tuition and construction costs, institutions have become much more intentional about measuring space utilization in order to leverage existing space for new and expanding programs. Other than equipment-intensive spaces such as specialized science laboratories, dedicated classroom and meeting room spaces have become much less common. When universities undertake a comprehensive campus-wide utilization study they often discover that their campus space is not being utilized as efficiently as it could be which then begs the question of where opportunities exist to do so more effectively.

What were formerly dedicated student center meeting rooms and event venues are now being evaluated for use as classroom and seminar spaces during low traffic times at many institutions. The additional classroom traffic moving through the student center in the early morning past dining and coffee shops can generate additional business revenues at a time of the day when things might otherwise be quiet.



RADFORD UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR ADAPTIVE INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY ILLUSTRATES SPACE FLEXIBILITY THROUGH THE USE OF MOBILE FURNITURE

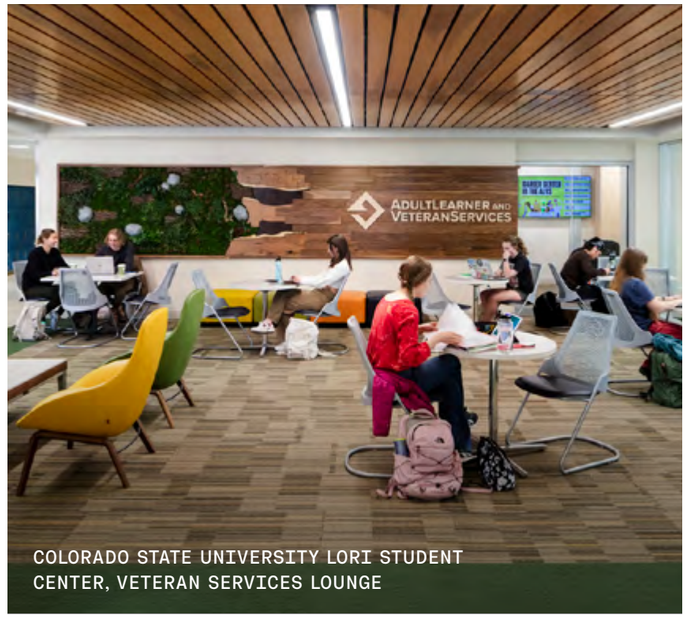
03 HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Collegiate student centers are increasingly shaped by health and wellness trends, with biophilic design and neurodiversity awareness driving more inclusive, restorative, and flexible environments. Neurodiversity recognizes that differences in brain functioning, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or sensory processing differences, are natural variations, not deficits. These approaches to design emphasize the integration of nature, sensory-sensitive spaces, and holistic wellness environments that support diverse student needs.

Biophilic Design in collegiate environments has been proven[2] to enhance student well-being, improve focus and productivity, and foster stronger communications by integrating nature into campus spaces. Students in biophilic study areas report higher productivity and a preference for those environments.

Plants in spaces with natural light have been shown to improve mood and lower cortisol levels. Access to daylight regulates circadian rhythms, improving sleep quality and energy levels. Shared green spaces, courtyards, and nature-inspired gathering spaces encourage collaboration and informal interaction, strengthening campus culture.

Current Student Centers are evolving to accommodate neurodiverse students by integrating responsive design principles that reduce sensory overload and increase choice, comfort, and belonging. Sensory-friendly environments include adjustable lighting, acoustic treatments to reduce background noise and echo, and visual simplicity to minimize overstimulation. Flexible spaces are being designed into quiet zones and “retreat rooms” for decompression, where students can control their environment by moving the furniture – on casters, of course - to align with their preferences, such as closer proximity to natural light or a quieter zone.



COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY LORI STUDENT CENTER, VETERAN SERVICES LOUNGE

In order to accommodate neurodivergent students who may have lower senses of belonging on campus, open, inclusive hubs where design fosters acceptance, social integration, and identity affirmation have become central to student center programming.

CAPTION: Colorado State University Lori Student Center, Veteran Services Lounge designed with neurodiversity sensitive design features through the use of materials and planning configuration (see image above).

04 DECLINE OF STUDENT ACTIVITY POST COVID

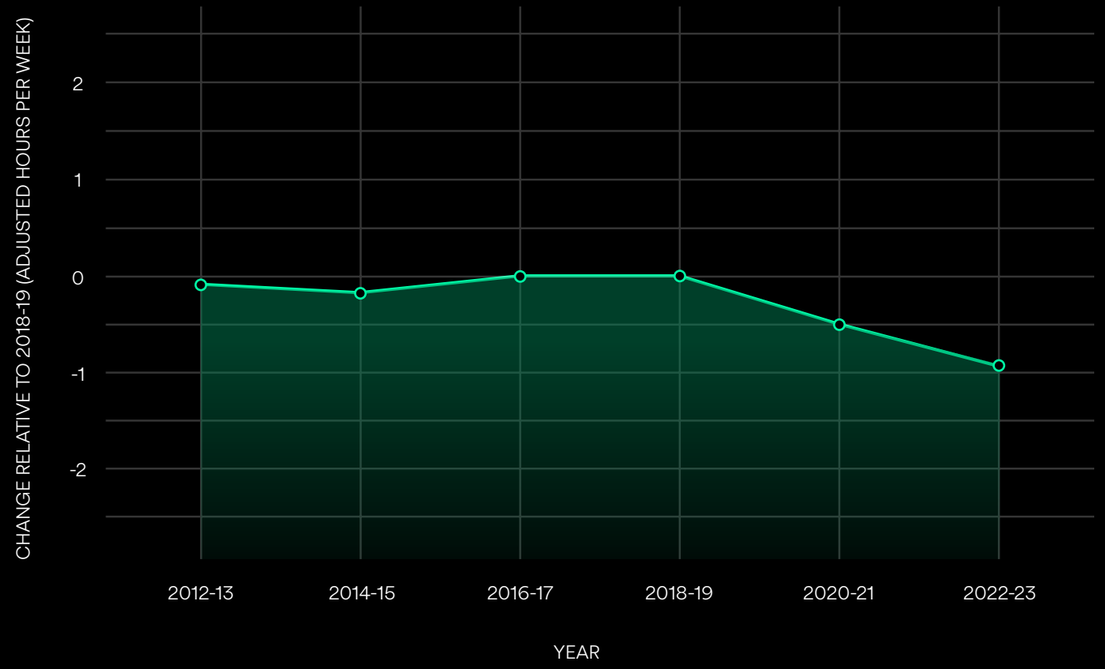
Research shows that student participation in campus activities remains lower than in 2019, with fewer students volunteering, joining clubs, or attending events[1]. This disengagement is linked to disrupted socialization during pandemic lockdowns and ongoing financial/emotional stress. The trend in the time students spend participating in student clubs or organizations was stable from 2012-13 up to 2018-19, followed by a significant decline during the pandemic. This sharp drop reflects the impact of the shutdown on extracurricular life, likely due to restrictions on in-person gatherings and the broader shift to remote learning environments. The decrease observed in 2020-21 deepened even further: In 2022-23, students spent almost one hour per week less engaged with student organizations compared to 10 years ago.

Alternative advertising of campus student activities and organizations is becoming more prevalent in the face of this decline in student engagement. While social media is still a popular outlet to advertise clubs and engagement opportunities, interactive signage can create a 24/7 buzz of excitement in key locations such as open lounges or near information desks.



AIMS COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAMPUS ACTIVITIES DISPLAY

Time Spent Participating in Student Clubs or Organizations[1]



NOTES

Estimates are from a university-backed effects regression model, adjusting for gender, race/ethnicity, social class, study level, and field of study. Robust standard errors are clusted by university. The dashed line indicates the baseline pre-pandemic period (2018-19); error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

05 COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND INCLUSION

Student centers are increasingly designed to reflect campus culture and diversity, offering spaces for cultural organizations, identity-based groups, and inclusive programming.

Distinct cultural spaces are an option in some cases. These are intended to support marginalized students, promote equity and retention, foster identity development, and enhance campus-wide inclusion. That being said, the intent is not to segregate, but rather to target support within an integrated campus ecosystem. Veteran's services are much more common now than they were 15 years ago, with many of these offices located within the Student Center in an effort to connect this community to other services and student opportunities offered there.

MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY THURGOOD MARSHALL DISPLAY



CAMPUS FOOD DELIVERY ROBOT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

06 FOOD SERVICE IS EVERYWHERE ON CAMPUS

Campus libraries, academic buildings, student centers, and rec centers are increasingly incorporating satellite food service venues into their buildings. Deans ask for venues to allow their students to remain in their academic program facility and be plugged into the culture of that organization. This often manifests as a coffeeshop or smaller grab and go venue. Food options are still located in a centralized student center, but without the identity as the only place to eat on campus.

Students take advantage of apps on their phones to order meals for pick up or delivery to them, with some institutions using robots to accomplish the door-to-door task. On some campuses, this is reducing the number of students coming together at mealtimes and instead meeting the students where they are, which may be in their residence hall room, the library, or an outdoor spot on campus.

As a result of these trends, food venues are smaller and more specialized in student centers and are no longer the exclusive place to eat on campus. Some campuses have designed venues that look like specialty urban venues to continue to attract those looking for an opportunity to meet up with others and enjoy an experience over a meal.

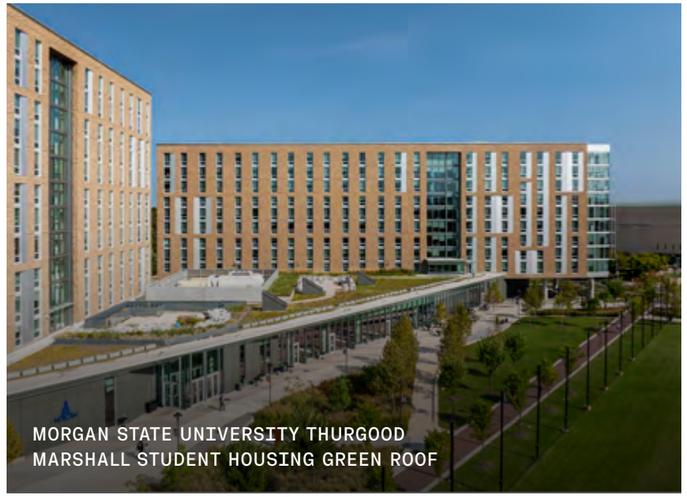
07 SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

Student Centers are becoming campus-wide sustainability models because they are typically highly visible and often centrally located.

Universities increasingly emphasize green building practices with natural light, energy efficiency, and sustainable materials to align with student values and institutional goals.

Increasingly, colleges and universities are requiring high-performance buildings and return on investment because they save money over time, support learning and research, meet sustainability goals, strengthen reputation, and fulfill their responsibility to future generations. Many colleges and universities have targeted net zero energy consumption by 2050 through initiatives such as “Race to Zero for Universities and Colleges”.

Student Centers are becoming campus-wide sustainability models because they are typically highly visible and often centrally located. As a result, they can become ideal showcases for energy efficiency, wellness, and community impact. Today’s students expect campuses to reflect environmental responsibility. Centers respond by integrating recycling, composting – where practical to do so, and by piloting campus initiatives associated with lighting and HVAC system controls that reduce energy consumption. Campus dining programs have initiated zero-waste initiatives into their delivery models by eliminating plasticware and replacing with compostable utensils. Campus commitments to sustainability are being demonstrated through green building certifications such as LEED and Green Globes, aligning with student activism and lifestyle choices.



MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY THURGOOD MARSHALL STUDENT HOUSING GREEN ROOF



NORTHWEST COLLEGE STUDENT CENTER

08 MULTI-FUNCTIONAL BUILDINGS

Colleges and Universities are responding to financial pressures by consolidating programs into multi-functional buildings, which also improve flexibility, efficiency, student experience, and long-term sustainability. Student services, career and veteran's services, and academic spaces are often incorporated into student centers, but additional programs are now increasingly becoming the norm.

Carnegie Mellon's Cohen Center houses traditional programs of student lounges, dining, retail, student organizations, and meeting spaces, but also includes student wellness and fitness, and university programs that are traditionally in other university buildings. The recently completed John Hopkins Bloomberg Center adds multi-purpose rooms for performing arts and music to its traditional student hub platform.

As student centers continue to evolve, the following challenges lie ahead:

- Cost vs. access: Building and maintaining modern, sustainable, multi-purpose centers is expensive. Cost pressures may lead to user fees (mandatory union/rec fees), which might burden some students if other sources of revenue are not pursued.
- Balancing flexibility with identity-specific needs: There may be tension between "universal" spaces vs. dedicated resource centers (cultural centers, identity-based support hubs). A one-size-fits-all center may not address all students' needs.
- Over-commercialization or over-institutionalization: As campuses push retail, dining franchises, and revenue-generating amenities, there's a risk the "student community vibe" gets replaced by a more commercial or transactional feel.
- Equity and accessibility concerns: Not all students may benefit equally, such as commuters and low-income students. Centers will need to be designed with affordability, transportation access, and inclusivity in mind.
- Sustainability trade-offs: While green design is trending, big centers with high energy & maintenance demands (large volume spaces such as ballrooms and assembly rooms) still have environmental costs to manage if not done carefully.

09 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence has become interwoven into nearly every dimension of higher education as core infrastructure reshapes how students learn, how campuses operate, and how institutions make decisions. Student Centers are already the crossroads of academic support, wellness, involvement, dining, and community life, which is a catalyst for AI to become the connective layer that makes these environments smarter, more responsive, and more personalized.

Schools including The University of Tennessee and Manhattan Community College have deployed kiosk solutions for student information and self-service tasks, such as registration help and wayfinding. Concierge Kiosks can greet students, answer questions, and book spaces instantly, reducing full-time staffing requirements. Some kiosks generate tailored information such as recommending events relevant to a student's interests or answering common questions conversationally, representing a shift from static signage to context-aware digital helpers.

10 ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

Student Centers are entering an era when relying solely on student activity fees won't keep pace with scale, complexity, and expectations of modern facilities nor will an ever-increasing fee be an acceptable approach in a more cost-conscious environment. The financial model that worked in 2010 won't support today's programmatic requirements and rising construction and institutional costs. While dependence on student fees allowed student centers to draw some lines as to what types of activities are welcomed into the facility – for example, for some, the center is intended to be a respite from the coursework - there are trends and practical realities that call this exclusivity into question.

If the institution is challenged to provide sufficient classroom space and the Student Center has space that sits idle during class hours in particular, opening the door to hosting classes within defined parameters (only these spaces, between 8a-2p) types of agreements can allow institutional dollars intended to support classroom space to make their way to the student center for equipment replacement and basic R&R activity. The presence of state-funded student services like One-Stop shops, Career Services, and Academic Support opens the door for those spaces to be leased or subsidized in a way that supports their upkeep and maintenance.

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David is a principal in the Higher Education studio with particular expertise in the planning, programming and design of campus master plans, student centers, dining and residence halls. He has designed more than 60 student life facilities on campuses across the country. He is a recognized expert and frequent speaker for The Association of College Unions International and The National Association of College Auxiliary Services on topics regarding the design and programming of colleges and universities.



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Carolyn is a skilled planner with extensive experience in student life/services, administrative and academic facilities development, and management, including the planning and construction of student unions/centers on three different campuses. In her 25-plus years on campuses, she has played a significant role in identifying and coordinating the facilities, programs, and human resources needed to support the institution's mission, values, and initiatives through environmental, organizational, and operational improvements. Her experience working with a breadth of institutional types and stages of development brings a valuable perspective to her work with campuses.

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