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Editorial Staff

Contact Us

Open Rivers | Institute for Advanced Study, University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: http://openrivers.umn.edu

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Editorial Board

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GEOGRAPHIES

THE COLLEGE UNION: WHERE TRADITION MEETS DECOLONIZATION ON CAMPUS

By Simón Franco

Higher education has undergone many changes since the first colleges in the old world came to be. Institutions of higher learning respond to societal pressures and needs, which means that education is ever evolving and dependent on the social context in which institutions find themselves. However, there is no denying that the first institutions of higher learning were not welcoming places for people not of the elite classes. These institutions were, and are, places where the education of future leaders has been the premier goal (Cohen and Kisker 2010). To achieve this goal, institutions of higher learning have employed a mixture of curricular, extra-curricular, and co-curricular tools.

Providing a forum for students to apply the theoretical learning acquired in the classroom became a necessity as institutions of higher education adapted to the societal changes of the eighteenth

On November 29, 2016, fast food workers around the USA went on strike for a $15/hour wage. About 300 protesters gathered at Coffman Memorial Union and called on the Minneapolis City Council and the University of Minnesota to pass a $15/hour minimum wage for all Minneapolis workers. Image courtesy of Fibonacci Blue via Flickr. (CC BY 2.0) century. The first student society formed at Oxford in 1812. Its founder, Augustus Hare, underscored the value of debate as the only path to the truth and indeed considered debate the only value of education (Butts 1971). Of course, the truth that Hare sought was dependent on the context of his time. In America, the newly formed colleges found that their students also wanted to apply their recently acquired knowledge outside the classroom. As a result, students at these institutions "formed literary clubs, debating societies, and other groups" (Cohen and Kisker 2010, 75). Much has changed since Hare's days and the first clubs and societies of the early and mid-nineteenth century, but the spirit of these extra-curricular activities remains alive. College unions are the heirs of these traditions. The role of the college union is currently understood as "advance[ing] a sense of community, unifying the institution by embracing the diversity of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and guests… bolster[ing] the educational mission of the institution and the development of students as lifelong learners by delivering an array of cultural, educational, social, and recreational programs, services, and facilities."[1] Through a student-centered approach and encouragement of self-direction and self-realization, college unions lend themselves to fulfilling the educational imperative of creating the leaders of tomorrow.

The role of the college union, as expressed by the Association of College Unions International, signifies that the work of decolonizing the academy naturally belongs in its spaces and programs. By fostering the spirit of innovation, social justice, and belonging, the college union is the place on campus where different ideas and ways of knowing all coexist and are instilled in the leaders of tomorrow. The Mellon Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community (MESPAC) Initiative created the opportunity for institutional change at the University of Minnesota Morris. Once one has an understanding of the history of college unions and their role in student leadership, it becomes clear that any decolonizing work that happens on a college campus needs to include the union.

History of College Unions

The Oxford Union

The precursor to the Oxford Union, the Attic Society, was formed at Oxford in 1812. This society sought to provide students with a forum to freely discuss and debate ideas (Butts 1971). As expressed by Butts, the Attic Society was formed with the belief that "[t]he contest of mind against mind is the greatest benefit Universities can confer" (1). This notion was prevalent in the early and mid-nineteeenth century during which the goals of higher education were, to a large extent, focused on the socialization of the youth and were not academic—as we understand it today—in nature (Cohen and Kisker 2010).

The Oxford Union Society was officially founded in the spring of 1823. The main purpose of this union continued to be to foster an environment in which debate among students was encouraged and praised. In his seminal book *The Role of the College Union*, Porter Butts states that the Oxford Union retained a tradition of exclusiveness from the Attic Society. It remained a place for the elite at this prestigious institution to debate "the love of books. There were claims of philosophy. History might enter in….Politics allured, not theoretically, but as a likely occupation for one's whole existence" (Butts 1971, 2). Thus the privileged few who were admitted to the Oxford Union had a place to hone the skills and knowledge needed to enter the Statesman's profession. Butts points out that of the eight students who were presidents of the Oxford Union in 1823, seven were on their way to the "house of Commons or the House of Lords" (3).

The preparation of future leaders was very much ingrained in the spirit of the Oxford Union since its inception. Although not the first of its kind, the Oxford Union is celebrated as a trendsetter for leadership organizations and for being the longest continually running college union still in existence.

College Unions in America

Imitation fosters standardization. The first colleges and universities in the United States were modeled on European educational institutions. Everything regarding the collegiate experience in the early days of institutions of higher learning in America was a direct transplant from the colleges of the old world (Cohen and Kisker 2010). So, too, were the college unions, with Harvard being the first college in America to adopt the college union in 1880. Butts (1951) and others (Butts et al. 2012; Bloland 1961; Rullman and Harrington 2014) state that the college union at Harvard was started by students to fulfill the role the Oxford Union had played for the students of Oxford

Harvard Union is now known as the Barker Center. Built in 1900 and designed by McKim, Mead & White, this building is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

University. "[A] large and comprehensive club" where ideas of the time could be expressed and dissected, a "house for meeting each other, for meeting your teachers… and for meeting the older graduates" was envisioned at Harvard in 1901 with the dedication of the new student union building on that campus (Butts 1971).

The University of Pennsylvania soon followed suit; in 1896 the university dedicated Houston Hall as a center where "all students from the various departments" could have a place "where all may meet on common ground" (Butts 1971, 11). At the University of Pennsylvania, the first vestiges of student government were made evident through the combination of the student union (Houston Hall) and a student common forum where the different clubs, groups, and organizations came together to discuss the challenges of the era (Butts 1951).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, other institutions in America began to adopt the college union idea. In his inaugural address as president of the University of Wisconsin, Charles Van Hise stated that "[i]f Wisconsin is to do for the sons of the state what Oxford and Cambridge are doing for the sons of England, not only in producing scholars but in making men, it must once more have commons and union" (cited in Butts 1971, 11). Van Hise's notion underscores the progress schools were making in providing a place for the development of the whole student in and out of the classroom. At Princeton, University President Woodrow Wilson remarked in a 1909 address that

> The chief and characteristic mistake which the teachers and governors of our colleges have made in these latter days has been that they have devoted themselves and their

Shevlin Hall at the University of Minnesota. Image courtesy of Ben Franske.

> plans too exclusively to the business, the very common-place business, of instruction, and have not enough regarded the life of the mind. The mind does not live by instruction. The real intellectual life of a body of undergraduates, if there be any, manifests itself, not in the classroom, but in the way they do and talk of and set before themselves as their favorite objects between classes and lectures (cited in Butts 1971, 11).

President Wilson's address was inspirational to many other institutions of higher learning. As Rullman and Harrington (2014) point out, Wilson's ideas of the true purpose of education profoundly influenced the role that college unions would come to play in twentieth and twenty-first century America.

By the 1920s, colleges and universities in the United States had grown tremendously. This growth was primarily because more students had access to higher education, particularly women, who were entering institutions of higher learning in greater and greater numbers (Cohen and Kisker 2010). This change in demographics was apparent at the University of Minnesota, with female students organizing and claiming space for themselves in Shevlin Hall, while male students did the same in Nicholson Hall. The changing demographics of universities meant that the understanding of what community meant on college campuses was changing and the college union became a place where men and women could interact in productive co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Social activities, artistic performances, and intramural and competitive sports began to contribute to the formation of a new collegiate identity (Cohen and Kisker 2010; Butts 1971). These changes were evidenced at the University of Minnesota, which began construction of its union in 1939.

The Great Depression and the Second World War (WWII) marked the next two decades of American society. As institutions of higher education were affected by these events, so too were the college unions. From the Depression, ideas of professionalizing the administrative staff working at the unions and increasing the oversight of student activities were developed (Butts 1951). From WWII emerged the notion of providing more recreational activities when large groups of young people were gathered together away from home (Butts 1971). The college unions heeded this call, providing more spaces for recreational activities and the arts. With the Red Scare looming over post-WWII American society, debates about the governance and direction of college unions became the norm in the 1950s.

The governance structure of college unions became unclear in the mid-1950s, with students distrusting the paid personnel—the union administrators who had become the norm in the previous decades—and with the faculty and staff of colleges and universities underestimating the capabilities of the student leaders. Out of this mistrust came the governing body we see today on many campuses, a committee-like structure which is independent of the union but still is part of campus governance (Butts 1971; Butts et al. 2012; Bloland 1961). The role of the college union director was also solidified at this time. As stated by Butts (1971), the director of a college union provides continuity, sets goals and standards, provides leadership, advocates for the student union to faculty and administrators, and selects and trains the professional staff of the union.

The next decade was marked by the societal changes taking place in America. Interestingly, it was neither the Civil Rights Movement nor the Counter Culture that threatened the life of college unions. It was the word "union" and its association with the labor movement that created a tense atmosphere on college campuses (Butts et al. 2012). The word "union" came to signify labor unions, complete with bargaining units for contract negotiations. The college unions had to argue for their existence, redefining their place on campus as more than "social centers." College unions had to change this perception and stress the union's role as a place for cultural, civic, and leadership development (Butts 1971; Lane and Perozzi 2014).

The societal changes of the 1950s and 1960s continued to be felt at the college unions at the dawn of the 1970s. The college union became a place for activism. Sit-ins, overnight stays, and other demonstrations became commonplace on many campuses' unions around the country. For example, in 1970, 132 students were arrested at Michigan State University after refusing to vacate the union building (Butts et al. 2012). In 1971, 17 students were arrested for occupying administrative offices at the union of the University of Nevada at Reno. These students were requesting a space within the union building for the Black Student Union (Butts et al. 2012). The University of Minnesota system saw its own protests, including the 1969 Morris Hall occupation by University of Minnesota African American students demanding new programs and the 1970 University of Minnesota Morris student walkout to protest the war in Vietnam.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the commodification of education. With the treatment of education in the 1980s as a business, college unions were perceived as auxiliary to the institutions of which they were a part (Butts et al. 2012). An auxiliary is any self-sustaining campus service (i.e., residential life, dinning services) that does not receive funding from tuition or state allocation (D. Israel-Swenson, personal communication, 2016). This business model perception of college

A photo of the Morrill Hall takeover at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in 1969, which resulted in the creation of the Department of African American and African Studies. Photo courtesy of the University of Minnesota Archives.

unions as not directly connected to the institutional mission of colleges and universities meant that the educational mission of the union was lost. However, efforts by professionals in the field intensified and the college unions realigned their mission to enhance educational opportunities for students (Butts et al. 2012).

It was in this era that a union was founded at the University of Minnesota Morris. Although there already existed a vibrant tradition of engagement through Student Activities, a dedicated union, called the Student Center at Morris, was not built until 1992. This building was in the best tradition of college unions around the country, included meeting spaces, recreational lounges, and an incorporation of the existing Edson Auditorium as a performance venue. Decisions in the Student Center planning process reveal that there was an effort to recognize if not decolonize the University of Minnesota Morris' complex history as the site of an Indian Residential School. A dining space was named the Turtle Mountain Cafeteria in honor of the reservation from which many residential school students came, while the largest public meeting space was named Oyate, a Dakota word meaning people or nation, to acknowledge its location in traditional Dakota homelands (B. Gercken, personal communication, 2023). In other ways, however, Morris's union was in-line with nationwide movements towards the commodification of education because it had to charge students fees to fund the Student Center's construction.

The Student Center at the University of Minnesota Morris.

The turn of the twenty-first century brought with it greater emphasis on learning outcomes and student academic achievement, but also shrinking budgets (Butts et al. 2012). The increase in prominence of online education meant that student unions were collecting fewer fees from on-campus students. This drop in revenue became more pronounced during the financial collapse of 2008, when parents and students demanded a lower-cost higher education and saw services provided by college unions as superfluous and unnecessary (Butts et al. 2012). Once again, the professionals in the field found themselves justifying their existence (Crone and Tammes 2014). Social movements like the MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter found a home in the college union. With growing student social awareness, college campuses saw massive investment in program and services to help survivors of sexual violence and police brutality. The second decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by the upheaval created in higher education by the COVID-19 pandemic. College union professionals were once again at the forefront of maintaining the culture of student engagement even at a distance.

Experiences at the University of Minnesota Morris followed these national trends. Student Activities has better aligned their programs and services to student learning outcomes, helping the campus community understand how what we do matters as part of a well-rounded collegiate experience. Student Activities assessment data shows a strong correlation between student engagement and retention at Morris, as it does nationwide. This correlation was at the core of changes we made during the Covid pandemic to continue to provide student engagement and support and remind our students that they belong. We created the #MorrisMission engagement series in the spring of 2020 to help our students feel connected as they finished their school year from home. These programs, which fostered weekly opportunities for student participation, were awarded the Association of College Unions International Shirley Bird Perry Staff-Driven Program of the Year in 2021.

We now better understand the elitist beginnings of the college union and also their ability to reflect and create transformation in a campus community. Through the thoughtful deployment of programs, services, and interventions, college unions are spaces where students, faculty, and guests all come together to create community. Creating spaces in the union goes beyond the theoretical or metaphysical. Union professionals curate physical spaces where barriers are removed, different levels of ability are recognized, and where people from different cultures can all come together. Dining facilities respond to the cultural imperative from many traditions of sharing a meal together. Gathering spaces with furniture configured as a circle facilitate conversation and foster egalitarianism. Performance venues celebrate diverse cultures. Such changes are evidence at Morris of an on-going commitment to diversity, a commitment that needs to continue, but also needs to advance the efforts to decolonize the work of Student Activities and Engagement. The MESPAC grant created the opportunity for me to extend my decolonizing work beyond the union.

What I brought to the MESPAC leadership team was my student affairs professional knowledge of how physical spaces, student development, and community-building all interact and respond to societal changes. In one of our MESPAC cohort meetings, I led a conversation about how physical space impacts students' engagement and feeling of belonging. As a result of this session, our financial aid office completely revamped their physical space, including rearranging desks and seating to create a more welcoming environment, and incorporating Indigenous art as part of their décor. Many faculty reported similar changes to their office spaces and spoke of creating an environment that removes barriers and a sense of hierarchy in communication. They used the knowledge I shared to decolonize their space.

College Unions and Leadership

A core part of my work at Morris has been to move the institution's leadership development programs away from a Eurocentric approach to leadership development and to recognize other ways of knowing. I created and implement MLEAD, the Morris Leadership Education and Development Program, a co-curricular leadership certification program with the express purpose of decolonizing student leadership on our campus, moving away from Eurocentric, individualistic notions of leadership to more communal and group-focused leadership models. In a 1966 bulletin of the College Union Association, Butts asks the question "who will educate the leaders?" (Butts 1971, 127). He suggests that college unions should play a large part, citing the social and community-building aspects of college unions. He also argues that unions create "good, actively participating citizens" and "leaders of our common life together" (128). It was with these comments in mind that I shared the "Introduction to Leadership Theory" and "Multicultural Leadership" units of the MLEAD program with the Morris MESPAC cohort. The first unit engages with definitions of leadership that go beyond a leader-centric approach while the second utilizes a leadership model developed using traditions from African, African-American, Hispanic, and Indigenous traditions. By sharing these models with our cohort, I hoped to help them understand that one person in a leadership role can create significant change.

Throughout our MESPAC cohort work, I emphasized that leadership needs a special focus in any decolonizing efforts. While there has been consistent movement to more diverse and inclusive strategies in college unions and leadership programs, too often leadership is only recognized or understood if it follows Euro-American models. While we now understand that this tendency goes back to the origins of college unions, we also know that we cannot decolonize if we are still adhering to the aspirations and methods of Regency-era English aristocrats.

From its inception, the mission of the college union has always been directly related to the holistic development of students. Student Development theory provides a useful framework to contextualize the college union mission. The Campus Ecology model in particular provides greater insight into the role of college unions in student development and student leadership development. Campus ecology is defined by Evans and colleagues as "the study of the relationship between the student and the campus environment" and as "the transactional relationship between students and their environments" (2010, 168). As this definition makes clear, college unions have a profound impact on molding the lives of students and creating the leaders of tomorrow because they are important campus agents in terms of providing programs and services. College unions provide a setting in which each aspect of campus ecology comes into play. These aspects are "Behavior-setting theory, Subculture approach, Personality type, Need X Press = Culture, Social ecological approach, and Transactional approach" (168–72). What makes the college union crucial to student development and, more specifically, to student leadership development is that it provides a place to exercise student leadership through student organizations, program coordination, and employment opportunities.

It is evident at Morris that our students have an impact on the student center environment and the ecology reflects our earlier discussions of physical space and its role in student life. For example, our students have petitioned to have a mural that honors the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in the Student Center and students are also working to update a display case that chronicles our campus history from a decolonized and indigenized viewpoint. We also have a completely student-led radio station and the distribution of student activities fees is determined by a majority student-led committee. Through the work of the Morris MESPAC cohort, support staff and faculty are better prepared to assist students in this work.

As discussed earlier, college unions since their inception have changed to meet social needs. Our understanding of leadership has also changed as social needs have changed. While a century ago notions of leadership were focused on the qualities and skills of a leader, today leadership theories focus on the transactional relationship "whereby an individual influences a group…to achieve a common goal" (Northouse 2016, 6). Because college unions provide the forum where this process between leaders and followers takes place, college unions should be understood as the heart of student leadership development today. Using these definitions, it is clear that today's college union is not that far removed from the first debate societies of Oxford and Cambridge. Debate societies were a place for future leaders to exercise their leadership skills and attributes. What today's student leaders are trying to accomplish is very different from what the aristocratic students Oxford and Cambridge were trying to accomplish, but how they accomplish it has remained the same: through the forum of the college union.

Conclusion

Even though much has changed since the eighteenth century, the college union remains the center of community, society, and leadership building in our institutions of higher learning. Today, college unions remain a forum for free expression, civic engagement, student governance, and overall leadership development. While one does not need to know the lengthy history of college unions to be successful nor do they need to be aware of how well Campus Ecology development theory maps onto the mission of college unions, having this information can help practitioners better develop programs and services that acknowledge the transformational nature of the college years. Such programs will help students transition to new stages of development and create future leaders. Moreover, having this knowledge helps faculty and staff reframe how they understand the college union as a place where decolonizing is already happening and needs to continue happening. Through the MESPAC initiative, I was not only able to elevate current decolonizing efforts at the University of Minnesota Morris, but also to ensure that our college union remains the vanguard of decolonizing efforts. Although the college union has come a long way from its beginnings and has often led the way in campus efforts to diversify—including at the University of Minnesota Morris—the work of diversifying and decolonizing has not ended. We have to resist the allure of the "we've always done it this way" paradigm. And, above all, we must remember that community building also requires fun.

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Footnotes

[1] "The Role of the College Union Statement," The Role of the College Union, Advancing Campus Community, https://www.acui.org/rolestatement.

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About the Author

Simón Franco serves as Assistant Director of Student Activities, Conferences and Events at the University of Minnesota Morris. Franco's practice is founded on principles of student development theory and leadership education. Franco developed and implemented the Morris Leadership Education And Development Program (MLEAD), a leadership program geared toward undergraduate students. Franco has presented at national and international conferences on freedom of speech and its intersection with the college union. He is a member of the Association of College Union International's Active Dialogue workgroup and Education Council.