

A Place to Call Their Own

BY ROBERT FERRIER

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



As diverse student organizations move into the new **Leadership Center**, they are finding that proximity fosters understanding and a common purpose.



For years University of Oklahoma students dreamed of housing their leadership offices under one roof. In September 2000, those dreams turned to reality as 59 student organizations began moving into the three-story, \$5.5 million Archie W. Dunham Conoco Student Leadership Center, a west-side addition to the Oklahoma Memorial Union.

Launched by a \$1 million gift from Conoco Inc. and named for the OU graduate who is its chairman, president and CEO, the facility provides offices, cubicles, equipment, conference rooms and lounges enabling student organizations to work in close proximity. Previously the groups had been housed in Ellison Hall, Henderson-Tolson Center, the Union and other campus buildings. The arrangement lacked efficiency and inhibited any sense of community.

In 1997 student leaders Amy Cobb, president of the University of Oklahoma Student Association, UOSA vice president Jabar Shumate and Kenneth Corn, now District 3 Oklahoma State Representative, met with President David Boren. Their goal: approval of a single facility to bring together as many student offices as possible. Boren agreed and sought major input from students on the facility's design. *continued*



The new 10,000-square-foot courtyard, enclosed on three sides by the Union and the Leadership Center, features limestone pavers, inscribed with the names of OU alumni and friends; umbrella tables and chairs; and a fountain, given by the Class of 2001.

The Archie W. Dunham Conoco Leadership Center is a 17,000-square-foot, three-story wing on the southwest corner of Oklahoma Memorial Union; the connecting courtyard offers access to the center, the Union's ground-floor lobby and the recently added Clarke-Anderson Room.

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Campus leadership groups have offices on the second and third floors of the Conoco Center with common areas, complete with telephone lines, data ports and storage, available to all groups. Groups requiring space on a regular basis occupy cubicles, such as this single unit assigned to the National Society of Black Engineers, whose president is Houston, Texas, senior Marvin Montgomery.



The fair assignment of space was a major concern for the center's planners. Groups like the Campus Activity Council, with more widespread responsibilities, require larger quarters and may be assigned double cubicles. CAC secretary Josh Hammers, a Poteau junior, frequently stops by to update the activity schedule.

In 1999, another leadership group visited the student center at Texas A&M University to study furniture design and space planning. Making the trip were Rakesh Patel, then president of UOSA, which represents all Norman campus students; UOSA immediate past president Chris Kannady; Panhellenic Association president Katie Middleton; National Panhellenic vice president DeShaun Casey; and Black Student Association president Kurtis Massey. Traveling with the group were Clarke Stroud, then administrator of the Union and now vice president for Student Affairs, and architect Mike Tower, from OU's Architectural and Engineering Services.

At Texas A&M, Kannady and others noticed that “organizations interacted side-by-side, improving cooperation and communication.” The group returned to OU and began planning how best to promote student interaction at the 17,000-square-foot, three-story building between the Oklahoma Memorial Union and the Carnegie Building and Monnet Hall.

“The OU administration gave us lati-

tude in working with the architects to design a facility that meets our needs,” Kannady says. “Unlike at Texas A&M and other student centers, there are no faculty or staff offices.”

Campus government offices—UOSA, Undergraduate Student Congress, Graduate Student Senate and the General Counsel—occupy the first floor, which includes a conference room and a workroom with a copier, a networked computer printer and fax machine. The second and third floors house leadership groups, with offices, cubicles and lounges. The Conoco Center will equip common areas with telephone lines and data ports, which will allow smaller organizations to use the building.

Small groups needing space on a more regular basis were assigned cubicles. Storage space is available to all organizations. The facility contains Ethernet connections and a wireless network to the main campus computer and is accessible 24 hours a day through card entry.

Kannady, 2001 letters graduate from Savanna, Oklahoma, recalls a concern when the students first heard about the

facility: the fair assignment of space.

“A student evaluation committee rated applications, which discussed their membership, goals, activities and impact on campus,” Kannady explains. “The committee assigned points 1-10 for each category and totaled the scores. They used fairness and common sense to settle disagreements. The highest ranked groups received offices and others received cubicles. We received few complaints.”

Brandon Brooks, Houston senior in public administration, serves as current UOSA president. However, when plans for the facility were announced, he watched from outside the planning process.

“At the time I served as vice president of the Black Student Association,” Brooks recalls. “I remember hearing comments like, ‘I hope we get the space we deserve.’ ‘I hope they don’t short-change anyone.’ We needn’t have worried. Not only did applicants have to prove their needs with ranked criteria and an essay, each group must justify their space following each academic year. Groups have enjoyed the interaction. For example, the Black Student Association moved into third floor

faculty or staff offices.”



Student is the operative word in the new leadership center, which contains no faculty or staff offices. The facility's top office is occupied by student government's top officer, UOSA president Brandon Brooks, Houston, left, with Tara Palmer, former chair of Student Congress and now a clerk in the UOSA office.



Construction of the new courtyard connecting the Union and the Leadership Center required relocation of the Class of 1935 Fountain to a place between the Union and Monnet Hall. Although the area contains more comfortable bench seating, students such as Loren Gmachl, St. Louis, and Angela Beauchamp, Denver, still like to perch on the fountain wall.

offices adjacent to Campus Crusade for Christ and Sooner H.E.A.T., a health-related group.”

Brooks says UOSA has benefited from fewer distractions since the move. “Previously, UOSA shared Ellison Hall with two restaurants. Now, when I walk out of my office, I’m surrounded by students. Communication, logistics and efficiency have improved. This project has been a pleasure to work with, and I’m eager to make it even better next year.”

Ethnic and international groups now work more effectively, he says. In addition to the BSA, the facility houses the Asian American Student Association, the Hispanic American, Pan American and Guatemalan Student Associations; American Indian Student Association; International Advisory Committee; Society of Chinese Students and Schools; Hong Kong Student Association; Vietnamese Student Association; Baha’i Club; African Student Association; National Society for Black Engineers; and Oklahoma Undergraduate India Society.

Madeih Parizi, Tehran, Iran, graduate student in microbiology, served as the

outgoing president of the International Advisory Committee, which represents 23 cultural associations on campus responding to the needs of 1,600 international students. “For the first time, all international students will have access to one location with everything we need,” Parizi says. “We’ll take advantage of this opportunity.”

Mandy Johnson, 2001 political science graduate from Shawnee, served as immediate past chair of the Campus Activities Council, which organizes annual events including Homecoming, the Big Red Rally, Mom’s Day, Dad’s Day and University Sing. Johnson believes that moving CAC into the Conoco Leadership Center has helped dispel a misconception on campus.

“Some students have felt that CAC hasn’t been representative and open to all student groups,” she explains. “We heard comments like, ‘That’s just a Greek event.’ Or, ‘That’s just an African-American event.’ Moving into Conoco helped CAC interact with other groups. They’ve attended CAC events, and CAC has supported their events.”

Johnson acknowledges that housing 59 of the more than 200 campus organizations together does not offer a “one-fix-all” solution. How did CAC bring groups located outside Conoco into the fold?

“I didn’t wait for organizations to come to us,” Johnson says. “I visited them and explained how they can get involved, the role their organization can play and how CAC can help them. For example, we debuted UOSA-CAC Publicity Week, providing tables and chairs on the South Oval and personally inviting every student organization to publicize their activities. Also, we hosted a Student Leader Social, where leaders from all organizations could get to know each other.

“CAC belongs to the campus by an act of Student Congress. Between 500 and 600 students work with the organization at any one time, so CAC can find a role for anyone. We’ve built the foundation. Now it’s up to the students to get involved.”

Clarke Stroud recalls how students influenced the Conoco Center’s design. “Lee Fithian, an architect with OU’s Ar-



TOP: Campus government offices share the center's first floor. UOSA general counsel Sarah Jordan, left, Loveland, Colorado; staff assistant Jenny Gifford, Norman; and UOSA chief of staff John Munroe, Houston, enjoy early-afternoon down time at the reception desk.



LEFT: Jeremy Black, Oklahoma City senior, left, drops by the small office occupied by the co-ed service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, where sophomores Chevone McKinney, Oklahoma City, and Sherwin Tibayan, Norman, are at work.

chitectural and Engineering Services at that time, wanted to create a grand entrance at the center's north side," Stroud says. "She designed a high-ceiling, three-story atrium. From there visitors would descend stairs into the first floor. While students admired the design's beauty, they rejected the plan because there was no place to 'hang out.' Lee considered their request, eliminated the atrium and redesigned a third floor extending all the way to the north wall, creating two conversation nooks with a lounge. The administration respected the students' 'ownership' of the facility, and the design reflects that vision."

Construction brought unexpected challenges, Stroud admits. The 1999 tornado in south Oklahoma City created labor and materials shortages. When materials were available, limestone pavers were installed in the 10,000-square-foot courtyard enclosed by the three walls of the center. [Alumni and friends may purchase a paver inscribed with their name and year of graduation by calling the University of Oklahoma Association (405) 325-1710. Cost is \$150 per paver.]

The Crossroads Restaurant, completed in August, opens onto the courtyard, which includes umbrella-covered teak tables and chairs. A bust of David Ross

Boyd, designed by OU artist-in-residence Paul R. Moore, has been relocated from the Union's fourth floor to the courtyard. The Class of 2001 also donated a fountain in the courtyard. A fountain donated by the Class of 1935, removed from the west entrance of the Union during construction of the Conoco Center, has been refurbished and relocated in a garden plaza west of the center. Lighting and landscaping further enhance the area.

"Taken as a whole—with the previous addition of the Clarke-Anderson Room, the Crossroads area providing a 24-hour restaurant with satellite television and the new garden plaza—we've created a beautiful area from Carnegie and Monnet all the way south to Buchanan Hall," Stroud says.

Locating the Conoco Center between the Union and Monnet Hall presented architectural and construction challenges, says Mike Moorman, director of OU's Architectural and Engineering Services. "That area presents a small footprint," he explains. "The Benham Group and our project manager, Mike Tower, did a fine job of not only providing the needed square footage, but also of fitting the building to the Union and surrounding environment."

During construction, Tower sent weekly bulletins to offices in Monnet Hall, the Carnegie Building, Evans Hall and the Union advising them of arrival and movement of machinery through the North Oval. "We tried to avoid disrupting activities," he explains. "For example, University College conducts summer tours. Trucks could have made the tours difficult."

President Boren is excited about the completion of the Conoco Leadership Center. "Our nation desperately needs leaders who can help pull us together to solve problems," he says. "The University of Oklahoma provides student opportunities and programs to develop leaders capable of building community and working together. Conoco's generous and exceptional gift will greatly enhance these programs and enable us to add to our student union a wonderful new center that will unite our student organizations."