

University Planning and Decision Making: The History of  
Brown  
University's Student Center

by

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Thesis

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Chapter I  
INTRODUCTION

The extension of knowledge is by  
the investigation of things.

-Confucius

The quest for knowledge starts with but a single step, an unanswered question, a confusing issue, a problem that needs solving. The key to learning is to begin with simple matters and study them. It is this understanding which will allow one to comprehend more complex ideas. By focusing on a small issue, one can really get to know all aspects of it and then use this information as a basis from which to view other broader problems and topics. One has to start with small issues in order to eventually understand the larger picture.

A case study of the history and development of a student center at Brown University provides such a perspective. The issue is just one of many issues with which Brown is concerned and in the larger scope of world problems, it is one miniscule matter. But this topic can serve as a paradigm

for a much broader range of issues. By focusing on this one situation in-depth, one can gain a greater understanding of the operations of a university and planning in general.

Planning is an activity which occurs constantly everyday: it is simply devising or carrying out a method in order to achieve a desired goal. Planning develops from the recognition of a problem or imperfect situation. The objective is to do something to alter or improve the existing state of affairs. Planning is simply problem solving, working towards a solution. The reasons for planning are to affect the progression of events, to influence or shape the future.

In analyzing the development or planning of any situation, it is virtually impossible to determine exactly why something happened when or as it did. No one factor is generally the cause of change. Rather, it is the mix of people, timing, luck, and amount of effort which lead to successful planning. One can try to gauge the role that each of these factors plays and then see how, when put together, they create a favorable or unfavorable environment for action. In order for a plan to be carried out, it must be seen as a priority by those in power, the people who are involved must have enough power and dedication to initiate the change, and generally, money must be available.

The history of Brown's student center aptly illustrates the factors involved in university planning. In 1902, Brown

committed itself to the concept of a student center when Rockefeller Hall was built. The purpose of the center was to enrich the college experience by providing a common gathering spot. This concern was not in the mainstream of the philosophies of most colleges but represented Brown's views on developing the whole character of a person, in aiding Brown students in "discharging the offices of life with usefulness and reputation."<sup>1</sup> The University took an interest in the student's non-academic lives and viewed this aspect as integral to the student's overall development and learning.

Over the years though, Brown's commitment to and physical embodiment of the concept of a student union diminished. The history of this downfall is directly tied to the overall history of the University. As the College expanded in physical size, population, and philosophy, the interest in a student center waned. The result was a dilapidated building in need of renovation. When this flaw was first stated in 1967, a comprehensive plan for action was developed. The report was simple and demonstrated the changes which were needed. However, no action ensued and for the next fifteen years much talk, but no change, took place.

This paper examines the history of Brown's student center, the numerous attempts at revitalizing Faunce House, and the change that did eventually occur. The process high-

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Stiles as quoted in "Objectives of the Office of Student Life," 1980.

lights the key aspects affecting university decision-making: people, money, and timing. Any of these factors can lead to or inhibit change. Generally though, it is the combination of these factors which determine university planning.