

The Faculty Club: Not Dead Yet

By NELL GLUCKMAN

Ohio State University's faculty club is housed in a 78-year-old building outfitted with chandeliers, dark carpets, and heavy drapes. It's a space that evokes tradition and exclusivity. Once upon a time, that was precisely the idea. But now, at a time when gaining new, younger members is crucial to the club's future, the old-fashioned décor strikes professors as stodgy.

So the club's executive director is trying to retool the building for the modern era. By slowly changing the interior space to create areas for small groups to work together or have a beer, he hopes to draw younger members from the faculty.

The executive director, Jeffrey White, said the reason for the renovations is simple: "We're at a crossroads."

In the last two decades, membership has dropped from more than 2,000 to 1,600, only 250 of whom are on the faculty. Those figures don't make Ohio State's club an outlier. Private dining clubs were once nexuses of faculty interaction around academe, where colleagues across departments bonded over meals, drinks, card games, or book groups. But many have shrunk or closed as they have struggled to attract new members. Some have attempted to plug the gap by inviting students' parents and alumni to join.

But Mr. White hopes that by modernizing the institution, he will be able to return



COURTESY OF THE CLUB AT OHIO STATE U.

Once-exclusive organizations like the faculty club at Ohio State U. have struggled to attract young faculty members. But now, with many professors craving more collegiality, officials at Ohio State and elsewhere see a chance for revival.

it to its traditional role as a place for academic colleagues to congregate. He says faculty members want a place to collaborate and converse in person.

His changes include one counterintuitive

tactic that already seems to be working: New members can no longer join free.

Ohio State used to offer newly hired faculty members one year of free membership to encourage them to take advantage

of the 11-room building. But Mr. White said few of those newcomers actually used the club; only about 18 percent typically paid the \$39-per-month dues to continue their memberships the following year. So he eliminated the complimentary membership for new hires and took a page from the gym-membership playbook, temporarily offering any nonmember a discounted first year at the club.

The Ohio State club gained 126 new paying members from August to February, well over twice the number of new members who joined free during that period a year earlier. Almost all of the more recent crop of new members have visited the club at least twice since joining; half have used it an average of six times a month.

Mr. White thinks that when people pay for something, they are simply more inclined to use it. But charging new members is only one of several changes the club has adopted to entice younger members.

"The club," he said, "is really trying to reintroduce itself to campus."

COLLABORATION AND COMFORT

That's where the renovations come in. Over the past 18 months, Mr. White has held focus groups of members and nonmembers to discuss how the club could be made more appealing to the younger faculty. As a result, some rooms are being outfitted with computer monitors, Wi-Fi, and comfortable

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