

### Skidmore College

### STUDENT USE OF CASE CENTER



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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This paper presents an overview of one student's investigation into student use of Case Center, performed as part of the sociology class Studying Student Worlds with Dr. Susan Walzer. The findings should be regarded as preliminary and anecdotal, as the research was neither comprehensive enough nor broad enough to offer an accurate overview of how students use Case Center. The results are unique and non-reproducible, as the research method employed was qualitative data analysis; I observed and noted behavior when present in Case Center during the first three weeks of October 2007, and interviewed four Skidmore students about their thoughts, experiences, and opinions of Case Center.

I found that Case Center's location, conveniently close to many other important buildings on campus, plays a significant role in ensuring that students use Case Center. The location is significant because students do not perceive Case Center as offering any essential services – something that provides sufficient justification to go to Case Center. Instead, students use Case Center to kill time when they have a gap in their schedule that was too small to justify going to another, more compelling location.

Supporting the conception that students use Case Center to pass the time when they have a small gap in their schedule during the day is the volume of traffic Case Center experiences over time. During weekdays, when classes occur, Case Center experiences a substantial amount of traffic from both students and staff. However, in the evenings and on weekends, Case Center is almost empty. One interviewee noted that she will "go through on the weekends, and it's completely empty. Completely." When classes are on, students – particularly those living farther away from the academic buildings, such as upperclassmen living in Scribner Village or Northwoods, or off-campus – find it more convenient to spend thirty minutes in Case Center than to travel all the way back to their dorms. College staff also use Case Center, especially the Spa, because they find it more convenient to eat at Case than to travel off-campus for lunch.

I noticed that during the evenings and on weekends, mainly freshmen and sophomores use Case Center. The Late Night events on the weekend that I attended attracted a predominately younger audience, and I recognized more freshmen and sophomores using the computer lounge in the evenings. The obvious explanation to this is that Case Center is more convenient because it is closer; fewer juniors and seniors live in the dorms, which makes Case Center less attractive as a common area. Furthermore, upperclassmen are likely to have well-established social networks, more resources, and more living space which makes venturing to a college-wide communal area a less compelling alternative to spending time with friends or in their living areas. Freshmen, in particular, are more likely to be interested in exploring aspects of the college and finding things to do, which makes Case Center more attractive as a location to meet other people and find something to do.

Case Center's most valuable attribute is its location; the services and facilities available to students at Case would ideally try to leverage the baseline traffic Case Center attracts and make Case a more attractive location to "kill time" between classes.

# OVERVIEW OF CASE CENTER

Skidmore College describes the evolution of Case Center as:

Envisioned as a "campus center" to "link the Academic and residential" areas of the campus, "a place where everyone crosses paths: students, faculty, staff, special program participants, prospective students, alumni, campus visitors." When Case Center opened in 1974, it included space for an information center, student government offices, space for student clubs, organizations, and publications, a snack bar and pub, the bookstore, the chaplain's office, and a center director's office.

Over the next twenty-five years, the size of the student body increased significantly, the campus saw nearly continuous construction, and offices and programs were moved as the College adapted to its changing reality. Toward the end of the 1990s, both Case Center and Ladd Hall were in need of renovation. Many of the functions and programs originally located in Case Center had been dispersed across the campus, the food service facilities in the Spa were outdated, the academic programs in Ladd Hall needed improved classrooms as well as additional offices, and Starbuck Center – originally created as student social space – was being converted to professional offices.

These various developments, and the new presence of the Tang Museum on the southern approach to the building, occasioned a major renovation of both Case Center and Ladd Hall in 1999. This construction did not alter the missions of Case Center and Ladd Hall. However, the project did add Porter Plaza, a Faculty Staff Club, and a small television room (the'01 Lounge). It also relocated the multicultural lounge (renamed the Intercultural Center), staff offices, student activities offices, SGA, and Skidmore News back to Case Center from Starbuck Center. Finally, it improved spaces for the bookstore, post office, office services, and food services. (Case Ladd Charge.doc; from Case Center-Ladd Hall Task Force email)

Case is a three story building in the center of the Skidmore College campus, built into the side of a small hill. The location places it south of the academic buildings, north of the athletic buildings, and directly between the library and the dining hall. The location is interesting, because while it is close to every significant building on campus, it is not conveniently between them; unless one travels to and from the Gym, the Field House, or the fields often, Case is not on the way. The most noticeable separation is between the academic buildings and Case Center. Students who live north of Case namely, those in Jonsson Tower, Howe-Rounds, Wait Hall, Scribner Village, and Northwoods - can have a full academic day at Skidmore without coming near Case Center.



While Case Center has three stories, the third floor contains offices for various Skidmore College staff. The first and second floors attract the most traffic. The first floor opens to the Case Center Parking Lot in the South; there is one main door near a stairway, though it is possible to leave through doors in the Spa Eatery. The Case Center Parking Lot is one of the busiest lots on campus, and has perhaps the highest turnover. Visitors are advised to park in the lot by Case Center; taxis frequently pick up and drop people off there, and the CDTA regional bus stops there as well.

The main entrance into Case Center from the parking lot is on the west of Case, next to Ladd Hall. The stairs to the second floor are immediately in front as you enter, as is a corridor that stretches horizontally across Case. Four of the largest service-based facilities in Case Center are along that corridor. The Campus Shop, the Spa Eatery, the Post Office, and Office Services are all service facilities because they (1) provide a service to students, and (2) require staff to run them (consequently, they have limited hours). The first floor also has both the Student Entertainment Lounge and the Saratoga Room (a renamed section of the Spa Eatery seating area which has couches, slightly separated from the table area). A second set of stairs stands at the end of the same corridor that all the service facilities branch off of. Posters are everywhere in Case Center; they adorn the walls, frequently advertising events that occurred weeks ago. The most popular area to hang posters is by the stairs. They are taped to the wall, the banister, and sometimes to the floor.

The second floor of Case is smaller than the first, because a sizable section of the floor does not exist. You can observe the Spa from the second floor by peering over a banister from the Computer Lounge. However, the second floor manages to seem fairly open, perhaps because while the north end of the first floor is backed into earth, the main entrances into Case from the second floor come from the hill. The Computer Lounge hosts the Burgess Café in the corner, and is the room with the most traffic (due in no small part to Burgess Café). The second floor hosts a small number of offices: the Student Government Association, Skidmore Credit Union, the Chaplain, Skidmore News, and so on. The second floor of Case also holds the only ATM machine on campus. The two service facilities are the Burgess Café and the Faculty Staff Lounge. The only closed room open to the public in Case is the Inter-Cultural Center, which allows groups of students to meet in relative privacy.

Case Center hosts a variety of services that do not relate particularly well to one another. The building serves food, sells common items useful to students as well as textbooks and Skidmore-branded memorabilia, hosts the post office, and a variety of offices that provide student services. While all services provide some functions to students, a majority of the floor space in Case Center is useful to only a small percentage of the student body a small percentage of the time. Few students have reason to meet with SGA, the Chaplain, Skidmore News, the student credit union, or go to the bookstore or even the Spa.

## DATA COLLECTION

The purpose of my study was to determine how Skidmore students use Case Center, and what characteristics of Case Center influence student use. I engaged in two distinct stages of research: a participant observation stage, followed by an interviewing stage.

### **OBSERVATION STAGE**

I engaged in both passive and participant observation. Case is a public location, and as Esterberg points out "... you may be able to observe without asking formal permission. Access in these cases is easy: you simply enter like any other member of the public" (Esterberg, 65). I was able to observe student behavior simply by entering the building. Of course, as a Skidmore student myself, I found myself talking with friends and acquaintances who would pass through Case Center. At various times, I also interacted with Skidmore staff in the service-based locations.

I observed Case Center from two key locations, one in the Computer Lounge on the second floor that allowed me to watch students in the lounge and Burgess Café, and one in the Spa below that enabled me to see into the Post Office as well as the Spa Eatery and seating area. I spent a majority of time sitting at either location, with an emphasis on spending time in the computer lounge on the second floor, which – barring lunchtime – generally receives more traffic than the Spa. I also spent a small amount of time intermittently walking around all three floors of Case Center with a clipboard and digital recorder.

My primary note-taking tools consisted of a pen and a clipboard. I jotted down key words and phrases, which I later typed up and entered into QSR NVivo 7. At times, I also employed a digital audio recorder and a camera to capture moments I later transferred onto the computer. I used QSR NVivo 7 to organize and analyze my observations.

My observations were vulnerable to selection bias. Due to my schedule, I did not have as much time during weekday mornings and afternoons as I would have liked. My observations were skewed towards the evenings and the weekends, with brief observations (e.g. under 30 minutes) during the daytime on the weekdays. Furthermore, I had a pre-disposed bias against both the Burgess Café and the Spa Eatery, both of which I consider to offer sub-par products at premium prices. I also overused my stereotype of students and professors, and assumed that any "Green Mountain" paper cup I saw had coffee in it; this was wrong on one occasion when I managed to check, but I was unable to verify most of those occurrences. I tended to assume that if an individual was using a computer, it was for both Facebook and email; I could usually verify this through observation. I noted exceptions my bias, but when I was unable to verify the website, I fell back on my assumption. I also did not pay much attention to the clothing people wore, as I am not predisposed to notice clothing, which made it harder to identify groups of people by shared clothing style.

My study took place during the three week period from September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007 to October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007. I differentiated between long observations, lasting at least one hour, short observations usually lasting 20 minutes, and ducking in to note the number of people and take a picture at various times of day.

### INTERVIEW STAGE

I interviewed four Skidmore students over the course of two weeks. I selected students whom I knew personally, and whom I hoped were sufficiently different to give a variety of opinions on Case Center. I chose the interviewees along very few criteria: the only significant ones were class year and location. While the interviews were not random – all participants knew me in one form or another – I attempted to choose people who were not too close to me, and who did not know one another.

Identifier:	М	А	D	R
Sex:	Female	Female	Male	Female
Class Year:	2008	2009	2010	2011
Residence:	Northwoods	Wait Hall	Wait Hall	Penfield
Home:	New York State	Oklahoma	New York City	Thailand

#### INTERVIEWEE SELECTION

**Interviewee M:** I chose to interview M primarily because she is a senior living in Northwoods. As a senior, she has seen Case Center change from year to year – particularly with respect to the discontinuation of the Meal Exchange program – and can recall how her use of Case Center has changed from year to year. As a student living in Northwoods, she is physically removed from Case Center. I sought to address the question of whether or not the facilities available at Case Center are substantial enough to merit traffic when the location is not a factor.

**Interviewee A**: Similar to M, A can look back on her use of Case Center over the years. However, because A lives in Wait Hall Case Center is a more convenient location to visit. I attempted to flesh out my understanding of how class year affected use of Case Center independent of location on campus. Furthermore, I knew that A worked in Dining Services, and in the Spa as a student supervisor. I wanted to see how her employment at the Spa for a number of years influenced her opinion of the Spa.

**Interviewee D** : I chose to interview D for two reasons: first, he is a student worker in the Burgess Café, and second he is a sophomore. His status as a student worker should give him a different understanding of Case Center than non-workers. He was also likely to live in the dorms, and have a reasonably well fleshed-out social network.

**Interviewee R**: There were two interesting things about R which led me to interview her: first of all, as an international student, she may have had a different perspective about public space. Second, as a freshmen, she would be living in at least a double, and probably a triple (later confirmed as a triple). Thus, as she has no private space for work, I thought her use of Case Center may be affected. Also a freshman, she would not have an established network of close friends for activities and may be attracted to Case Center during the weekends for things to do. The interview took place roughly halfway through her first semester, which gave her enough time to become familiar with the surroundings, and thus discriminate between locations based on her own experience instead of hearsay. This allowed me to be more confident that when R expressed an preference for something (e.g. the Spa over the library for work) she could compare based on actual experience and the limitations of each location and not be unduly influenced by softer factors – such as the name 'library' being more appropriate for a location dedicated to homework than 'the Spa.'

#### INTERVIEW RESULTS

The interview process was useful, and I was able to disprove several hypotheses I had generated during the observation phase. However, I had difficulty extracting as much information as I wanted to. I believe that some of the interviews were unsatisfying, both because I failed to explain the nature of the interview, and because my interview subjects had difficulty collating their opinions of Case Center; as a topic they lacked general interest contemplating, or a history of studying, students found it difficult to articulate anything more than a general impression of Case Center. I attempted to have two students walk me through an experience at Case Center, with limited success. Consequently, my interviews tended to focus on current and historical usage of Case Center.

# **Research Themes**

During my research, I identified four main themes that describe how students use Case Center. These themes were a direct result of interviewing students, and helped to explain student behavior that I had observed in Case Center. I excluded themes that were not supported by both stages of the research process.

#### Location and Convenience are important

There is a great deal of student traffic through Case Center. Even on the weekends when Case Center is almost empty, students will constantly travel through Case Center on their way to somewhere else. Its location relative to other buildings on campus makes it an attractive place for students to 'kill time.' M spends a lot of time at Case Center on some days when "[she has] a really easy day and [has] a lot of time to kill [...] it's a lot easier than walking all the way back home [to Northwoods]." The computer lounge at Case Center makes it an easy and convenient location to pass the time, as it allows people to check their email or strike up a conversation with someone they see irregularly. Its proximity to Ladd also makes it a convenient location for students who spend time in Ladd; A, when she has classes in Ladd "[is] there like 24/7... [she] feels like [she] lives there." A will spend time in the computer lounge between classes, or try and do work in the Spa. Of course, the tendency of students to use Case Center to kill time relies on students having time to kill. This implies that students would use Case Center more during the weekdays when they have classes, and thus time between classes. Upperclassmen who live in Northwoods, and presumably Scribner Village as well - and certainly those living off-campus will use Case Center to kill time during the day between classes. This is borne out through observation: more students use Case Center during the weekdays when there are classes. On the weekends, without classes, M notes that, "[she'll] go through on the weekends, and it's completely empty. Completely."

Student organizations try to take advantage of the high amount of transient traffic in Case Center. People will set up tables at Case Center to raise awareness for certain things. This means that studentrs have yet another reason for a quick walk through Case; M will "just walk through quickly, on [her] way to the library or some other place, to see if there's anyone tabling... y'know just to know what's going on on campus. If there's anything [she] wants to sign up for or not."

Case Center would not have the traffic it does without its location; this implies that another building in the same location would derive similar benefits. I doubt that people would stop using the Case Center patio if Case transformed overnight into a music building; the location is the key factor, and the open space and seating simply makes it more convenient to use. The location allows Case Center to operate as a campus hub.

#### Availability is important

Case Center's hours are important from both a services perspective, and simply as a space. Case Center is one of the few temperature-controlled buildings on Campus open 24-hours a day. Particularly on cold days, Case Center is attractive because students can trust that most of it will always be open.

R, the freshman, comes to Case Center "when the library closes… [she] comes over the Case. 'cause [she] can't work in [her] room, y'know [...] too noisy, too distracting." As R lives in a triple, it is understandable why Case Center is preferable to her room in Penfield; there are less distractions. However, R still prefers the library to Case Center, presumably because it is less distracting still. Case

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Center is primarily attractive as an alternative to her room, since the library hours are limited and evidently R is a busy freshman, working past 1:00 AM at night on weeknights. R indicated that "[she doesn't] do it often... that often. A couple times a week, maybe." The open space in Case Center is a facility that is not present in many other locations – the library closes fairly early (1:00 AM) and earlier on Fridays and Saturdays (10:00 PM), and the dining hall closes even earlier. For freshmen and sophomore students who prefer to go to bed during the early hours of the morning, Case Center provides a good location for work and group meetings.

#### Facilities are relatively unimportant

None of the students I interviewed cited the facilities available at Case Center as a primary draw. The students that I interviewed will use the facilities when they are at Case Center, but they will not travel to Case Center just to use the services.

Everyone checks their mail consistently; R and A said they do so daily, while M said she does every couple of days. However, post office boxes are open 24/7 even if packages can only be picked up when the Post Office is open – and for which students receive an email notification. R said "[she] goes to the Spa for [her] Milanos [... but] no, [she] doesn't buy anything else there." R also "uses Burgess a lot... [she] needs her coffee, so [she's] always there." A will go to Case Center when facilities are open, but less to use them; because she works there, she'll "go to Case Center for work, obviously" and sometimes she'll "drop by the Spa or Burgess... to see someone, people I know who are working there, just to say hi..." This echoes what D said in the earlier interview; he will drop by Burgess Café to talk to people he knows are working there. Both R and A state they go to the Campus Shop to purchase stationary, though rarely anything more – neither appreciated the clothing available – though M, who has a car, "[would] prefer to go to Target or something, where I know I can get... something bigger for the same price, or something."

Facilities seem to be appreciated, but do not seem to impact the decision of whether or not to go to Case in the first place; that is a matter of convenience and location.

#### Use changes by class year

A student's use of Case Center decreases as they spend more time at Skidmore. The upperclassmen I interviewed reported using Case Center less; their primary use was to kill time between classes. M reported that "[she] used to more in the past... 'cause of where I lived on campus [Wieking] I would always go through Case [...] to get to classes and things." However, because of living in Northwoods, she doesn't "feel the urge to get out and put [herself] in a public space as often because [she's] not cramped in her room." M used to, as a freshman and sophomore, "on the weekend, [...] just wander over the Case with a friend to see if anything's going on... 'cause usually there was some sort of Late Night activity going on or something." A, as a junior, also reported using Case Center less outside of class time because "[she] has friends in Northwoods... [she's] more likely to go over and hang out there than [she is] to check out Case."

However, R reported coming to Case Center in the evenings for Late Night as well as meeting friends there on the weekends. As Skidmore students age, the resources available to them increase. They develop networks of friends who can provide resources to them indirectly, and they have access to better locations. Sophomores and up generally do not live in a double or a triple, and often have substantially more space than is available to freshmen. As students move into more spacious living quarters, they generally also move farther away from Case Center, making it less convenient as a location to hang out or meet. If students default to Case Center when they have nothing else to do, then their use would predictably decline as they advance through Skidmore. Upperclassman housing (Scribner, Northwoods, off-campus) is situated farther away from Case Center, making it less convenient, while increasing the availability of alternative facilities – e.g. space to watch a movie with friends. Furthermore, student social networks would solidify as students aged, giving a base of potential activities that probably do not include Case Center. The exception would be students intimately involved in SGA, which constitute a minority of the campus.

# CONCLUSIONS

Case Center operates as the location of last resort on Campus. Students will go to Case Center when they do not have anything else to do in the amount of time they have available. Case is popular when students are between classes or commitments, and in the evenings on weekends with lowerclassmen. Student use of Case seems to be a function of proximity and time to kill.

Skidmore students use Case Center less year over year because their opportunities for how to spend time increase, perhaps influenced both by expanded social networks offering more ways to spend time, and by habitual ways to spend time. Lowerclassmen may be more interested in exploring activities available at Skidmore, which would involve spending time in Case Center.

Case Center will always have a certain baseline level of traffic, because it offers services to students. A large source of traffic is the services it offers to student organizations; not only does Case have to host the full-time staff that supports student activities, but also SGA and club meetings. However, this traffic will largely be relegated to weekdays during the day, when most club-centered services are open, and some traffic on weekdays during the evenings for club meetings.

The service-based facilities at Case Center are a traffic draw, but location remains the primary attraction. Students will purchase food at the Spa or Burgess when working in the library instead of going to the Dining Hall because "that's too far!" Students know that there is always something to do at Case Center, which makes it a convenient location with which to kill time – e.g. checking email on the computers, checking mail at the post office, and so on.

The traffic that Case Center attracts can be divided into purpose-driven and location-dependent. A number of students who go to Case Center because of the services there, such as SGA offices, have a specific purpose in Case Center. If the service was in a different building, purpose-driven students would make the extra effort to travel there. Location-dependent traffic is less compelling, and would not follow Case Center if the building magically moved into the Sports Center. However, both types of traffic occur largely during the day on weekdays: Case Center is substantially less compelling in the evenings and on weekends, as the services are closed and students are not nearby. Case Center is effectively underutilized during those times.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

While recommendations are beyond the scope of this paper, I advise examination of these alternatives:

- Expansion of the Inter-Cultural Center (ICC), both in hours and floor space. The ICC is useful because it provides a closed room for student meetings. However, clubs often attract a larger audience than the ICC can support. A more central ICC may also drive traffic outside of regular hours.
- Partial elimination of staff offices. Students seeking college staff will travel to a different building, while the space could make Case more compelling as a place to spend time.
- Focus on group activities for freshmen and sophomores. Case Center is not a credible location to find something to do, and it could very effectively operate to build social networks for incoming students.

# REFLECTIONS

The material covered in Studying Student Worlds allowed me to examine college life at Skidmore in relation to college life across the United States. The most valuable takeaway from the material is that college life is approximately the same; many of the most glaring problems at Skidmore College are not unique to Skidmore. My research did not delve into cross-college problems, such as class participations and social life. However, my research on Case Center encompassed some aspects of general student attitude and life; particularly in seeking explanations to how student attitudes and behavior could explain use patterns at Case Center.

The largest change in my belief system has been the change in how I perceive student "apathy" to events on campus and the world; with more examination, it becomes difficult to label lack of student participation in certain activities with such a general term as "apathy." The opportunities students have to spend time have expanded, which has led to less time devoted to an increasing number of pursuits. Interest fragmentation amongst the student body occurs in all colleges, of whatever size, and should not be seen as a problem in and of itself.

I have also been forced to change my opinion of Case Center. I began my research without a background of spending time in Case Center; the most I'd done in Case prior to this was buy textbooks from the Campus Store. My experience researching the paper has led me to conclude that Case Center serves a valuable purpose, and is a good place to operate as the "gateway" to the campus for visitors. Of course, Case Center has problems – it is too geared towards satisfying needs during the daytime – and the space could potentially be used in a more compelling way, but it functions.

I took the Studying Student Worlds class to learn how to perform qualitative data research and analysis (QDA). I had been exposed to QDA from a business perspective before coming to Skidmore, but wanted to learn more about the process. I found the class to be a good opportunity to experience participant observation, and textual analysis. The class was divided into three research teams, each focusing on a different section of student life. Unfortunately, because my research team had a mix of topics that did not overlap in any way, I did not collaborate with my team and thus derived no significant value from them.

# APPENDIX

### TABLE 1: FACILITIES AVAILABLE IN CASE BY TYPE

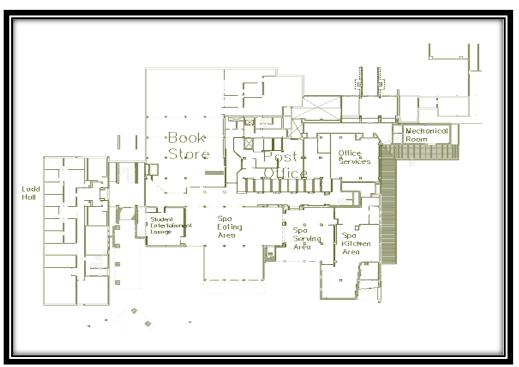
#### **Universal Features:**

- Temperature-controlled environment.
- Wireless internet access.

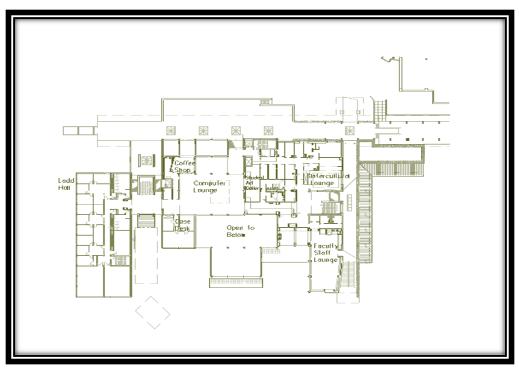
Facility Type	Facility	Function & Use
Service-based	Burgess Café	Serves beverages and snacks.
	Campus Shop	<ul> <li>Sells commonly-needed items:         <ul> <li>Textbooks/books.</li> <li>Clothing.</li> <li>Art supplies.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	Faculty Staff Lounge	Serves lunch; hosts scheduled events.
	Office Services	• Provides professional printing services.
	Offices (SGA, Chaplain, etc)	Student-centric office locations:
	Post Office	• Sends and holds mail for pickup.
	Spa Eatery	Serves meals and snacks.
Available space	Computer Lounge	<ul><li>Computer terminals for use.</li><li>Comfortable seating, tables.</li></ul>
	Intercultural Center (ICC)	<ul> <li>Isolated room for meetings.; locked at 9:00 PM</li> <li>Capacity of 40 people (practical maximum).</li> </ul>
	Student Entertainment Lounge	<ul><li>Computer terminals.</li><li>Comfortable seating.</li></ul>
	Spa Seating Area & Stage	<ul> <li>Stage, with multimedia.</li> <li>Public television.</li> <li>Comfortable seating.</li> <li>Numerous chairs &amp; tables.</li> <li>Late Night events</li> </ul>

### CASE CENTER FLOOR PLANS

#### **First Floor**



### **Second Floor**



### **Third Floor**

