



FACILITIES AND MAINTENANCE

by Jeff Vredevoogd

Living, Learning, Socializing: Six Guiding Principles for Furnishing Residential Spaces

Change is constant at today's colleges and universities.

It's occurring in classrooms, libraries, and labs, and especially residence halls—almost everywhere on campus.

Community Impact on College Experience

What is becoming increasingly clear is the impact of community on the college experience. Just ask a campus leader (or student for that matter), and you'll hear stories and statistics about friendships formed and support networks strengthened. You may also hear about the challenges and rewards of creating a home away from home for students.

The Social Fabric of Daily Life

While the primary purpose of higher education is academic, the vibrant social fabric of daily life on campus is stitched together in its residence halls. No longer just a place to sleep and eat, today's residence halls provide spaces to live and learn, and foster a crucial sense of community. In a change that mirrors the paradigm shift in teaching and learning styles, residence halls are becoming a mix of living, learning and socializing.

Shaping the Residential Experience

This change certainly involves architecture and amenities, but it also requires shaping the residential experience to meet the needs and expectations of a new generation of increasingly mobile students.

To provide the best opportunities for students and the broader community, colleges and universities must design every aspect of the campus experience to promote and enhance learning. Hopefully, we can agree that any space on campus can be a learning space—and residence halls are no exception.

By applying the same thoughtful planning to residence halls that administrators put toward formal learning spaces, the large-scale, multi-floor, barracks-style dormitories of the past can become the thriving living and learning spaces today's students are asking for and tomorrow's students will expect.

Keeping Pace With Changing Landscapes

One of the most effective ways to create inspiring environments is through residence hall design and furnishings. Together, design elements and physical furnishings can contribute to a sense of community that increases students' energy and enriches their living and learning experiences, while keeping pace with the quickly changing campus landscape.

By focusing on six important attributes, decision makers can make the right selections that will create spaces designed for forward-thinking living and learning.

Transforming Environments with Adaptable Furnishings

There was a time when dorms and residence halls were for sleeping (and eating—if you were lucky enough to have a dining hall in your building.) More often, students had to leave the dorm and go somewhere else to eat, study, learn, share, or collaborate on group projects.

Today's residence hall supports all of those activities and often more. As a result, space must keep pace with the multitasking nature and habits of students, staff and faculty.

Within a residence hall, it's common for a mixture of relaxed discussion and study areas, spaces that expand or contract depending on need, and private or group spaces that coexist in the same physical place.

The design needs to support a level of flexibility that traditionally hasn't been seen in dorms. Spaces should be able to flex in an effort to support the task at hand, and students need to be empowered to redesign their community spaces depending on their needs.

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Doing Double Duty with Social Spaces

People—and certainly students—are social creatures, and learning is a social activity that happens in many places beyond the four walls of a traditional classroom. Community areas mingled among classrooms, small cafes, and lounges in residence halls, libraries, and throughout campus support the social nature of learning.

Within the residential setting, think about furnishings that promote collaboration and teamwork. Will residents be able to work together and get creative while designing a float for the homecoming parade in the dorm lounge?

Does the environment you are furnishing support interaction and group discussion as a study group gathers to debate a reading assignment? Is there adequate work space for groups looking to spread out and work together on complicated problems?

Well-designed lounge spaces provide this needed environment for gathering and studying, as well as a common area to relax and socialize.

Today's lounge space does double duty, serving as a preferred place to study and read, or conversely as a community space to watch television shows or sports games as a group. Design lounge spaces that are inviting and comfortable, and students will gravitate towards this open and welcoming environment.

One of the goals of space design is to drive engagement and bring people together. Creating spaces that allow for this collaboration—without getting in the way—represents the best possible solutions.

Creating Stimulating Hubzones

An important role of the residence hall is to create community for new and existing students. In addition to bringing people together, they often become a buzzing hive of ideas.

They can be loud or quiet, but are effective as long as they stimulate, motivate and keep

people thinking. The very arrangement of your residential hall spaces sets expectations about the kinds of activity that will occur there. Stimulating environments draw students in and are the campus hot spots where people want to be.

Learning can occur anytime and anywhere, driving the emergence of a type of campus space called "hub zones" that offer students a place to meet, gather, and work together.

On average, up to 30 percent of space in student buildings, residence halls and libraries is allocated for hub zone use. Increasingly, residence halls are incorporating these types of spaces into their design, allowing students to engage with peers and faculty in a less formal setting.

I remember when the only place for late night study was in the library—if it was open. Residence halls today provide a variety of solutions that support this type of activity, while getting the residents out of their rooms.

In the end, everyone wins. Students are using the spaces designed for them. And, at the same time, they are engaging with others, resulting in both deeper levels of learning and a broader sense of community.

Incorporating Healthful Design

A physical setting can have a pronounced effect on a student's psychological and physiological well-being. Natural light and access to windows help increase attention span and decrease eyestrain, color can affect behavior, and indoor air quality can affect health.

To best create a healthful residence hall environment, it is essential to understand and promote the long-term benefits of ergonomically designed work and study areas.

Much of students' time is spent reading and writing, and in front of computers. Provide abundant task lighting and seating that decreases eye strain and promotes good computing posture in each and every room in the residence hall and on campus.

Select ergonomic furnishings for computer lounges, media centers, and student workspaces that won't leave students with unnecessary cramps or physical aches following a late night spent working on a term paper.

Plan the color choices and artistic elements thoughtfully for interior spaces. Limited access to natural light? Consider murals that depict outdoor scenes.

Planning Resourcefully

Earlier, I mentioned the constant change felt on today's campus. As all higher education leaders can attest, this requires a constant need to balance fiscal, functional, and educational needs. That's why it's essential to plan and allocate resources wisely and with an eye to the future in residence hall updates.

Flexibility in spaces and furnishings adds long-term value, as environments can be adapted without changing the architecture. Purposeful design allows for future changes in infrastructure and technology without requiring significant renovation.

Today, there are many options for leadership to consider, including some with rather high price tags. Add in the investment of ever-changing technology, and today's decisions can have a very lasting and expensive impact on the future.

I recommend that leaders test new concepts before implementing them on a larger scale. It's better to "play in your sandbox before you build your castle."

To that end, consider trying a residence hall pilot program. In one building on campus, take design risks, and then test out which furnishings make the most impact, are preferred by students, and enhance your space most effectively.

Similarly, think critically about pieces that did not work as well as hoped. Collect feedback from the students and faculty in the residence hall, and use this data to inform campus-wide purchasing decisions.

Promoting Sustainable Practices

The Princeton Review's 2019 Hopes and Worries Survey of 9,282 college-bound high school students revealed that 66 percent consider a school's commitment to the environment in their college choice.

Collegians around the country reinforced this interest by participating in a recent nationwide video contest about campus sustainability, showcasing everything from blender bikes to green teams to solar panels installed on university buildings.

Likewise, creating environmentally sustainable facilities is chief among current design criteria for administrators at learning institutions.

Furthermore, sustainable construction and design offers fiscal advantages. Slightly higher initial costs are quickly recouped through energy savings, which become increasingly important as the cost of college housing rises.

According to the U.S. Green Building Council, sustainable technology can save a university "20 to 50 percent off their energy bill after heating, cooling, and lighting thousands of dorm rooms."

Following green building principles provides ways to make a difference to the environment, and how products are designed and manufactured also makes an impact.

Cradle-to-cradle principles ensure that the environmental impact of a piece is considered at every step, from production to eventual recyclability. Consider elements such as the piece's materials, durability, and disassembly when selecting new furnishings.

And for those schools with a big appetite for sustainability, pursue an entire green-themed residence hall where like-minded students live together and share an environmentally-friendly focus.

Living, Learning, and Socializing Spaces

Aging facilities, competition for students, and swelling enrollments are three factors prompting many colleges and universities to renovate or build new residence halls. As planners continue to look to the future, imagine the possibilities, the partnerships, and the dreams that take root in campus residence halls year after year. Higher education brings possibilities to life, pointing the way to a better world.

The environments that support higher education and its mission make a difference to students, teachers, leaders, alumni and the community.

Drawing on the six key space attributes—adaptable, social, stimulating, healthful, resourceful and sustainable—tomorrow's campus residences are sure to meld living and learning in a way that will play an important role in creating community on campus.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jeff Vredevoogd is director of the Education team at Herman

Miller. He works to expand the understanding of evolving learning trends in higher education environments. Herman Miller is committed to improving education by creating innovative learning spaces.

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