

How students create their community

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Campus News

As today's students know, the campus experience extends far beyond classrooms and lecture halls. It is in the communal spaces—libraries, lounges, dining halls, and even outdoor areas—where the most profound learning often occurs. These environments not only support academic pursuits but also foster social skills and community building, essential for preparing young adults for the complexities of the modern world.

By listening closely to students through a process called co-creation, we've learned a great deal about how students live, study, and create community. In the context of university design, the ultimate client is the student. Their feedback informs the design process, ensuring that every corner of the campus can spark curiosity, foster connections, and support diverse learning activities.

Study Everywhere

One of the most striking insights is the importance students place on having choices in where and how they study. It turns out that the modern student studies everywhere — in libraries, cafes, lounges, and even outdoor spaces. This need for versatility demands that educational environments be designed with flexibility in mind, offering a range of options that cater to different study styles and preferences.

In the wake of the pandemic, many students express a strong desire for community, balanced with the need for spaces that allow focused, individual work. This dual need has given rise to the “alone together” mindset, where students prefer to study alongside their peers, even if they are not directly interacting or working on the same course material.

For example, students often use small study rooms not to work on group projects but to study independently in a quiet environment with friends. This preference for being near others while working alone underscores the value of designing spaces that offer both social and solitary study options.

Similarly, the variety in seating caters to different study preferences and enhances student comfort and productivity. Direct engagement with students has revealed that they are partial to square and rectangular tables over round ones for practical reasons, such as like placing laptops and coffee.

Inclusive, Flexible Environments

Students also crave a sense of belonging and inclusivity that comes from communal pursuits not necessarily related to their academic pursuits. Notably, we discovered that many students have a passion for music, leading us to include soundproof music rooms and a wellness space designed for jam sessions and performances. These spaces cater to students' creative interests and serve as gathering points for shared experiences, reinforcing the communal fabric of the campus.

Inclusivity is a cornerstone of thoughtful campus design. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work when it comes to creating environments that cater to the diverse needs of a student body. We must design spaces that are adaptable and inclusive, accommodating various study habits, social preferences, and even different ways of thinking and learning. For example, approximately 15-20% of the world's population is neurodivergent, and this percentage is thought to be even higher in STEM fields, where many neurodivergent individuals excel.

Understanding that each student has unique needs, we can anticipate a range of study spaces that provide choices in seating, lighting, and acoustics. This inclusivity extends beyond physical accessibility to consider neurodiversity and other cognitive differences, ensuring that every student feels welcome and supported. It's essential for tapping into the full potential of the student body.

Interestingly, students also show a surprising level of awareness regarding issues such as chemical exposures and environmental sustainability in their surroundings. This attention to the quality of materials and the overall health of their environment underscores a growing trend among students who are

increasingly conscious of their cognitive well-being, but of their physical well-being as well.

Preparing for the Future

It's important to recognize that physical space is not just a backdrop for learning and social interaction—it's a powerful tool that can be leveraged to get the most out of people. Thoughtfully designed environments can enhance cognitive function, boost creativity, and facilitate collaboration.

By treating physical space as an active participant in the learning process, we can create environments that not only accommodate student needs but also actively contribute to their growth and development.

The design of educational environments is not just about meeting the needs of students today; it's also about preparing them for their future professional lives.

University campuses are microcosms of the real world. They provide a structured yet flexible environment where students can develop independence, learn to manage personal and social responsibilities, and engage in meaningful community building.

By integrating student feedback into the design process, we can create educational environments that not only support academic success but also promote the holistic development necessary for navigating an increasingly complex world. Listening to students and understanding their needs is key to fostering learning, social skills, and community building on campus. As we continue to learn from each project, we remain committed to creating spaces that truly resonate with the people who use them every day.

This commitment to thoughtful, student-centered design ensures that the campus experience is one that prepares young adults not just for their careers, but for life.

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