

## Student Housing Design in the Digital Age

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The explosion of information technology resources over the past two decades has significantly impacted the role and scope of student housing on the nation's campuses. Transformational shifts in teaching and learning are creating new opportunities and challenges for residential staff, programs and facilities. Technological advances are presenting alternative – and sometimes more preferred – means for students to fulfill their educational and social goals.

Although difficult to predict, the future use of technology will inevitably bring both great opportunities and significant challenges to higher education. Some futurists such as Peter Drucker (Lenzer & Johnson, 1997) forecast that large universities will not exist in the future, but most agree that the survival of our campuses will rely on ensuring that human face-to-face interaction will remain the foundation of the on-campus teaching and learning environment. If so, the future role for student housing programs, services and facilities will become even more important.

Already, students increasingly use technology for academic, social and entertainment purposes; the exponential growth in students' appetite for bandwidth has required schools to adopt technological systems that allow seamless access anywhere on campus. The proliferation of electronically delivered music and video has resulted in a generation that views convenient technology access for entertainment purposes as normative. Students connect with each other and with family continuously through text messaging, cell phones and sites such as Facebook and Twitter. They socialize and recreate through sophisticated game and entertainment websites. An important yet different means of interaction with others is quickly being defined by the convergence of phone, radio, television and movies into one central source – the computer.

To accommodate these trends, campuses are creating both wired and wireless environments with high-bandwidth capabilities in order to provide seamless connectivity for campus constituents. As the wireless campus becomes the standard electronic environment of the future, teaching and learning will occur in every part of the physical campus environment. Terry O'Banion (1997) describes the "learning revolution" in higher education as a campus that places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners any way, any place and any time.

Students are thus increasingly dependent on technology for academic purposes, including obtaining

course materials and faculty lectures from the Internet. They retrieve resource materials from electronic library resources; their in-depth discussions on any subject occur with peers around the world on multiple blogging sites. By 2006-07, over one million K-12 students were taking online courses (Mehta, 2007) and this trend has continued to grow. As these students arrive on college campuses, their behaviors and expectations will shape the on-campus college experience of the future. The assimilation of technology into all facets of student life will continue the transformation of higher education and create new challenges for maintaining the integrity of the teaching and learning environment.

### Upcoming Trends

Online course and degree offerings in higher education will undoubtedly continue to increase. Even on traditional residential campuses, students will access lectures and other course materials online, ultimately reducing the amount of time they needed in the classroom.

Hybrid course models offering online lectures with less frequent classroom attendance are becoming more popular as well. Without the traditional lecture, time in the classroom will be more active and experiential, with a focus on collaboration and project work. Over time, hybrid course offerings could reduce the number of classrooms and instructors on campus while still providing a quality residential education to students.

Campus spaces outside of the classrooms, particularly in the residential setting, will become even more important learning environments. Students will collaborate and study in these settings more frequently; these spaces will become a more formal component of the campus learning environment. Campus student housing design will evolve from providing separated facilities for academic, social and student life requirements to blended common areas that promote the synergistic whole of student activities. That evolution will ultimately enhance learning and development of interpersonal skills as student housing facilities become powerful learning environments not available elsewhere on campus.

Although these technology-driven trends provide significant opportunities to improve the future quality of the campus educational environment, many educators are concerned about the associated decrease in personal contact. As a result, they have broadened their attention not only to include convenient technological access, but also to enhance the experience of interpersonal face-to-

face interactions between students as well as between students and faculty. It is the combination of these two environmental enhancements that will continue to make the collegiate experience distinctive. Indeed, without an educational priority for campus technology that preserves in-person human interactions, the viability of the traditional residential campus experience would be in question.

Functioning and design of campus residence halls will be part of the solution. It is erroneous to assume that the student trend to learn, communicate and socialize with the use of technological aids reflects a reduced interest in personal interactions. Students continue to seek opportunities for personal interaction and assistance from their teachers and peers. While technology can create additional hurdles, an environment that facilitates quality personal interaction can more than compensate and will, in fact, be appreciated by most campus members. Residential facilities should play a pivotal role for creating community on campus and must be designed to ensure that meaningful interpersonal interactions occur there, in order to achieve campus educational outcomes.

### **Outcomes-Based Facility Design**

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) identified five key learning indicators or outcomes for campuses aspiring to achieve effective educational practices:

- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student-faculty interaction
- Enriching educational experiences
- Supportive campus environment

The continued growth and enhancement of technological resources can greatly support the achievement of these outcomes. Those responsible for shaping the design and function of campus housing facilities should consider these outcomes, along with the learning and teaching outcomes of the individual campus, when designing residential facilities that support student learning and engagement. This process will inevitably influence the design of campus residential facilities of the future.

### **Residential Space Design**

Roughly 80 million “echo-boomers” were born between 1980 and 1995 and are largely responsible for the nationwide enrollment surge on college campuses. This generation has enjoyed greater privacy growing up than the intended residents of many campus housing facilities built in the 1970s and earlier. Students increasingly expect personal space on campus. While sharing an austere living space may be tolerable or even desirable as part of the rite

of college for first-year students, it is increasingly difficult to describe such conditions as “supportive,” particularly for upper-division students. Nonetheless, while students may have increasing expectations for their living space, they also enjoy “seeing and being seen” and having opportunities for personal interaction with others. The design of student rooms, residence hall public spaces, residential academic support spaces and the areas between will be critical to ensure that high-quality interactions continue and a proper balance can be found between virtual and in-person campus interactions.

### **Public Spaces**

If quality student-student and faculty-student interactions are to remain a foundation of the campus learning environment of the future, campus facilities must be designed to ensure that opportunities for these interactions are woven into the fabric of the entire campus. Residential facilities must provide formal and informal face-to-face teaching and learning spaces that support campus educational outcomes. Colleges and universities are placing greater emphasis on student housing facilities designed to enhance teamwork and cooperation, particularly for sustaining a sense of community and identity as the heart of the collegiate experience. Notably, along with a trend toward more apartment-like residence halls with higher levels of privacy, additional classroom and “in-between” spaces are being added that are intentionally designed to foster community.

The challenge for creating the ideal educational environment within a residential setting, particularly during the coming decade, is to blend and balance the use of residential technologies with opportunities for quality interactions among students and between students and faculty. Indeed, some campuses – including Ball State University (Werner, 2008) and Princeton University (Klein, 2010) – are experimenting with residence hall public spaces to create new types of learning environments not found on other parts of the campus. These spaces are being designed to blend the social, recreational and academic experiences of students to heighten the formal classroom learning experience.

Additionally, spaces that readily convert to different day and evening functions will become common. A daytime classroom, for example, might be converted to group study or program space in the evening. Display screens in student rooms and public spaces will allow students to exploit the academic and social technology resources available to them. Common spaces for activities from laundry to fitness will feature glass walls with thoughtfully integrated adjacencies to appropriate space for private conversation and small group discussion.

Designing every space to have more than one primary function (preferably three or more) will improve opportunities for interaction more than any other single design technique. Integrating residential common spaces with academic resources – seminar rooms, dining, retail, recreation and even larger community functions, both inside and adjacent to housing facilities – are particularly inviting for the following reasons:

- Constituents are more likely to have 24/7 access.
- Community members are more likely to see one another.
- Integrated spaces create a feeling of place, with opportunities for both privacy and experiencing community.
- This arrangement makes it easier to multi-task, easily shifting from housekeeping chores, to private or group studies, to socializing, to interactions with non-residents including faculty.

### **Academic Support Space**

Based on departmental or institutional expected outcomes, future residential buildings will likely have innovative academic spaces that will provide the highest quality teaching and learning environments on campus. Classrooms, faculty office and work space, as well as academic support spaces, will be designed to maximize face-to-face teaching and learning requirements. Group study space and group project space for collaborative work will be essential.

### **Student Room Design**

Student rooms of the future must maximize flexibility and provide privacy, while ensuring that strong student communities are developed. Although the debate over single- versus double-occupancy rooms will continue, a consensus has developed that providing multiple options not only will appeal to a broader student market but also will more readily allow for varying programmatic emphases as students from different backgrounds arrive on campus and progress through their academic careers. Regardless, the need for privacy will demand newer room configurations, even when roommates are sharing space. Room interior design schemes should provide opportunities for students to individualize their spaces to support their personal and academic space needs. All student rooms should have current and expandable technology. The importance of integrating technology into personal, social and academic space was recently confirmed by The 21st Century Project, sponsored by the Association of College & University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I), which awarded first place in its Design Showcase to Jonathan Levi Architects of Boston. The firm's student room design, as well as those of several other finalists, included stackable rooms and fold-out

beds for options in configuring and personalizing space, and technological advances such as a smart-media wall and glass walls with adjustable transparencies (ACUHO-I, 2007).

### **Physical Connections**

Increased attention is now being given to the educational and community development benefits that are accrued by the spaces located between community rooms, student rooms and academic spaces within buildings. These informal spaces allow conversations to occur beyond the classroom, residential and social activity areas. Moreover, the spaces located outside of buildings are now recognized as important elements that support learning and community. Outdoor walking paths, benches, gardens and other informal spaces, if inviting, are locations where students will gather and interact with one another.

Although the above trends, taken together, will pose significant challenges for university administrators now and into the future, the intentional blending of modern technology resources with the traditional benefits of face-to-face interactions between students and faculty – including thoughtfully planned housing facilities as a cornerstone of the on-campus learning environment – will ultimately preserve the campus experience and provide richer learning opportunities for the next generation of students.



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## About Scion

The Scion Group LLC is a real estate services partner to higher education and not-for-profit institutions, in addition to third-party student housing providers. Scion supplies facility and strategic planning, financial services, development consulting and operational assessments. Its team of experts offers the first-hand perspective of educators, operators and owners which enables clients to create quality learning communities while improving financial performance.

Founded in 1999 by seasoned professionals from the fields of higher education administration, market and corporate real estate, and property management, Scion combines state-of-the-art methods for real estate analysis and modeling with the understanding and sensitivity to the unique nature, mission and specialized considerations of colleges, universities and other not-for-profit entities. Scion concentrates particularly on campuses where there are challenges to new or existing student housing - including markets with high barriers to entry, faculty/staff housing, housing for students with dependents, and schools seeking to create housing for the first time. The firm's areas of expertise also include urban settings, community colleges, public-private partnerships, Canadian institutions and underperforming properties.

A member of NACUBO and ACUHO-I, Scion is a recognized leader in the financial and operational analysis of educational housing and auxiliary facilities, has often presented case studies to professional audiences and has authored several articles. Scion has been cited by the Associated Press, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, CNN, ABC News, MSNBC and *Time*, *Forbes* and *Inc.* magazines. Scion's consultants have examined facilities and interviewed staff on hundreds of campuses. Scion itself has been engaged to perform consulting services on nearly 100 campuses in the United States, Canada, Mexico and the U.K.

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