

Perceptions, Expectations, Choice



First impressions matter. It only takes seconds for someone to form an opinion about an institution based on appearance. Well-designed spaces can set the tone for how an institution is perceived by prospective students, their parents, alumni and staff.

The effects can be far reaching – from increasing enrollment, to attracting top faculty, to engaging alumni and increasing endowments.

“When I first saw the campus, I knew this was the right college for me.”

PERCEPTION

More than 80 percent of first-time freshmen applied to at least three colleges. According to *The American Freshmen* trends report, the number of enrolled first-time freshmen who applied to seven or more colleges reached 36 percent in Fall 2015. But “applied” does not translate into “enrolled.” The deciding factor for some students when selecting a school is the institution’s academic profile, prestige or cost. For others, touring the campus or walking into a classroom space can be the deciding factor.



The significance of these places begins the first time students visit an institution; in a survey by APPA of more than 16,000 students at 46 institutions, 50 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “When I first saw the campus, I knew this was the right college for me.” Two-thirds of respondents claimed the overall quality of campus facilities and the attractiveness of the campus were either “very important” or “essential,” and nearly a third of respondents rejected a particular college or university because it lacked facilities they considered important. (APPA 2014 Thought Leaders Series)

As competition continues to grow, institutions must differentiate themselves and implement innovative strategies to recruit and retain students and staff. A recent NACUBO report states that enrollment is one of several pillars holding up the higher education business model; that students are the lifeblood of colleges and universities and any significant change in enrollment causes concern for institutions. Institutions with increased freshmen populations over the last four years (Fall 2010 to Fall 2013) largely attribute this growth to improved recruitment and/or marketing strategies (57.4%). More than one in four CBOs think updated or new facilities (32%) are a factor. Improving facilities and providing amenities are not marketing gimmicks; they are a response to parent expectation and student demand.





RISING EXPECTATIONS

The cost of a college education is on the rise, along with parent and student expectations. A “given” on the list of expectations is a quality education – a basic requirement for success in today's and tomorrow's competitive job marketplace. Tuition breaks and expanded financial aid programs are a close second.



When it comes to the educational environment, students are looking for a place where they are able to study, learn, collaborate and engage with others. They expect technology-rich, well-equipped, state-of-the-art facilities; modern and versatile learning spaces; amazing recreation centers; well-equipped casual spaces where they can work individually; and social spaces where they can relax between classes, eat meals, study and meet for group work.

When it comes to campus housing, the expectation is a high-end, well-equipped space with private rooms or suites and a host of amenities. Today's students grew up not just with convenience, but also with variety and quality dining experiences, and they evaluate campus dining options the same way they evaluate restaurant experiences; with fueled expectations for higher quality food, service and décor on campus. What may seem like unrealistic expectations are merely an extension of incoming students' current lifestyle.

THE NEED TO DIFFERENTIATE AN INSTITUTION

University presidents were asked in a 2015 Gallup poll to describe their institution's identity – why they exist, how those at the institution interact and get work accomplished and how they are known to others. The presidents' descriptions of mission, purpose and brand were so similar that it made differentiating one institution from another difficult.

Paying attention to their physical space is one way institutions can differentiate themselves and influence how people perceive them in the marketplace. Facilities, furnishing and design can be used to create a “personality,” establish an institution's signature identity and create a marketplace distinction. Is your institution state of the art? Do you support various learning styles? Are you providing a compelling value proposition that clearly addresses the needs of students and staff? The value of a well-designed learning environment is both functional and emotional... adding to an institution's ability to provide a quality education; helping to differentiate institutions and enhancing their abilities to recruit and retain students and staff; deepening an emotional connection with ‘place’ which improves the success rate of alumni-giving; influencing choice.

