

Home Away From Home

by Hilary Moreno

Every fall freshmen across the country pack up childhood bedrooms and move into college dorms. Many new students have never lived away from home. Some have never shared a room. Yet, here they are, hoping to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Creating a comfortable and welcoming living space goes a long way to making their college experience a success.





Living on Campus

According to The College Board, 64 percent of students attending private universities live on campus. Choosing to live on campus has been shown in multiple studies to lead to a higher retention rate among students, especially from their Freshman to Sophomore year. It is vitally important to create a healthy academic and social community where interaction between fellow students and with faculty is fostered beyond the classroom. A sense of community is imperative to both mental and physical health.

Jeremy Bauer-Wolf, in *How Dormitories Have Evolved*, states, "Residence halls are definitely more important today. Many prospective students have no idea what they want to major in, or they have only a generic idea about majoring in business or pre-med. For them, the comfort and convenience of their daily lives will guide their choice of college."

For many freshmen, this may be their first experience with true independence and having a place on campus to call their own helps to ground them. With easy access to the library, classes, the student center, counseling services,

and teachers, students can be fully engaged in everything the campus has to offer.

Students living on campus are more likely to finish their degrees at their initial campus, complete more credit hours, show greater gains in interpersonal skills, experience deeper satisfaction with their undergraduate years, and be more involved in the campus community.

There is mixed data as to whether on-campus living has a positive effect on students' GPAs. What has been found is that many factors influence a GPA but for some minorities there is a marked rise in GPAs for students who are able to live on campus.

"Students spend an inordinate amount of time studying, interacting and sleeping in their dorms, so it is important to provide an environment that is conducive to these activities taking place," says Hope Walton, director of University of Richmond's academic skills center. "Concentration and creativity increase when you continuously work in particular spaces. That's why making sure you have the right set-up for you is important."

Why Does Dorm Furniture Matter?

The relatively new field of study known as embodied cognition focuses on how our bodies, minds, and environments subconsciously influence our ability to think, remember, and comprehend, notes Carolina Kuepper-Tetzel in "Embedded Phenomena: Increasing Comprehension of STEM Concepts Using Body and Space." Everything from lighting to the color of the walls to the material and design of furniture can impact how well we retain information and make decisions.

Space in typical dorm rooms is limited and with enrollment increasing, many colleges are trying to figure out how to house more students without the high cost of new construction. Dorm furniture must be both durable and flexible, easy to move and adjust without additional tools, simple to clean and maintain, and minimal enough to allow for students to create their own space—a home away from home.

Sustainability and maintaining a low carbon footprint are also considerations quickly becoming more globally important on campuses to students, faculty, and financial supporters. The material furniture is built from varies from wood to laminate to metal, and each has its benefits and drawbacks.

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The relatively new field of study known as embodied cognition focuses on how our bodies, minds, and environments subconsciously influence our ability to think, remember, and comprehend, notes Carolina Kuepper-Tetzel. Everything from lighting to the color of the walls to the material and design of furniture can impact how well we retain information and make decisions.

Natural vs. Man-made

Durability, cost, sustainability, and overall design need to be part of the discussion when considering purchasing new dorm furniture. Natural wood is environmentally friendly and offers students a piece of nature within the walls of their room but can also be cost-prohibitive. Laminates are easy to clean and offer multiple color and finish options but may contain toxins. Metal holds up well to the rigors of student life and is fire and water-proof. Here's a brief look at the pros and cons of each.

Wood

Wood is eco-friendly and, depending on how it's manufactured, creates zero waste and is recyclable. Wood is also more likely to be nontoxic, but it is important to check the amount of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in manufactured furniture before purchasing.

VOCs are carbon-containing substances that can become vapors or gases and can be present in paints and varnishes. As explained by a Harvard study, "Volatile Organic Compounds' Impact on Indoor Air Quality," students exposed to

normal furniture emitting standard levels of VOCs performed half as well as students who were tested in an environment that was VOC-free. Look for furniture that is MAS Certified Green to insure low VOC emission.

Other certifications to be aware of are Chain-of-Custody FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) Certification which certifies that the product is created with sustainable wood building materials and LEED Green Building Certification developed and administered by the U.S. Green Building Council—a nonprofit dedicated to sustainable building design and construction. Choosing to purchase LEED-certified furniture also earns points towards an overall LEED certification for your campus.

Solid-wood construction offers durability and strength that is hard to match and easy to repair. There are dozens of ways to finish, and refinish, wood furniture allowing for the natural beauty of the wood grain to shine through and last for decades.

However, solid wood is often the most expensive option and tends to be heavier and bulkier within small spaces. Also, due to the

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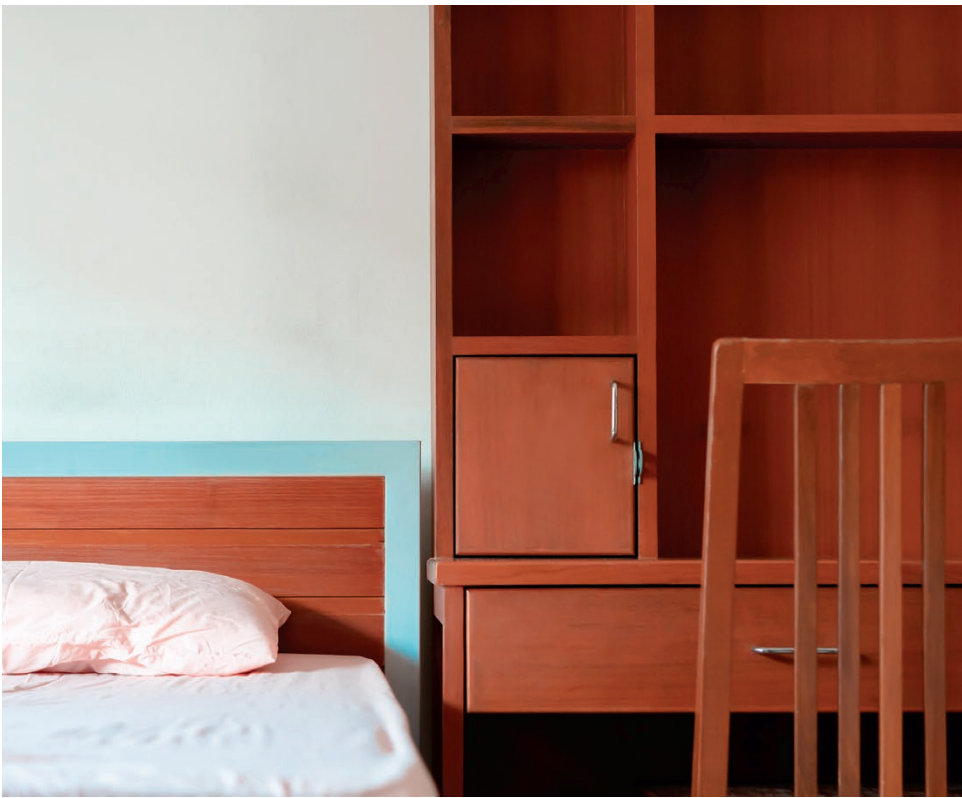
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softer nature of wood, it can be easily scratched or dented but is also easily repaired. Wood can also warp and its porous nature, depending on the finish, may be more welcoming to bed bugs. The more well-finished, smooth, scratch-resistant a piece is, the less likely bedbugs will become a problem.

Wood Veneer

Wood veneer is a thin layer of real wood applied to a plywood base. It is lighter in weight than solid wood and more cost-effective but maintains the rich and varied appearance of natural wood. Like its pricier rival, wood veneer is a more eco-friendly choice than laminate and uses fewer trees than solid wood—40+ sheets of veneer can be created with only a 1-inch section of wood.

Wood veneer can be sanded and refinished, when done with care, and is more resistant to warping. However, because the thin veneer is glued to the core material, water damage can occur between the layers and buckle or bubble the surface, so the use of coasters or desk pads is encouraged.





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Plastic Laminate

Laminate is completely man-made, durable, scratch-, fade-, and stain-resistant, flame-retardant, easy to clean, and more budget-friendly than wood products. With the aggressive use that dorm furniture experiences, laminate is an economical and practical choice for many campuses. Plastic laminate also helps prevent the growth of dust mites, and some companies offer antimicrobial finishes thus creating a healthier environment for students.

In contrast, laminates are not as strong as their wooden counterparts and cannot be stained or sanded, but color options and variations are unlimited and can be matched to university colors. Toxicity is also a concern. Adhesives used in some laminate manufacturing release formaldehyde and VOCs in the finished product which has been linked to cancer and other health concerns.

In consideration of green initiatives, laminates are not as recyclable as wood because they do not organically break down. Laminate furniture is not as easy to repair or refinish when damaged which shortens its lifespan and requires more frequent replacement.

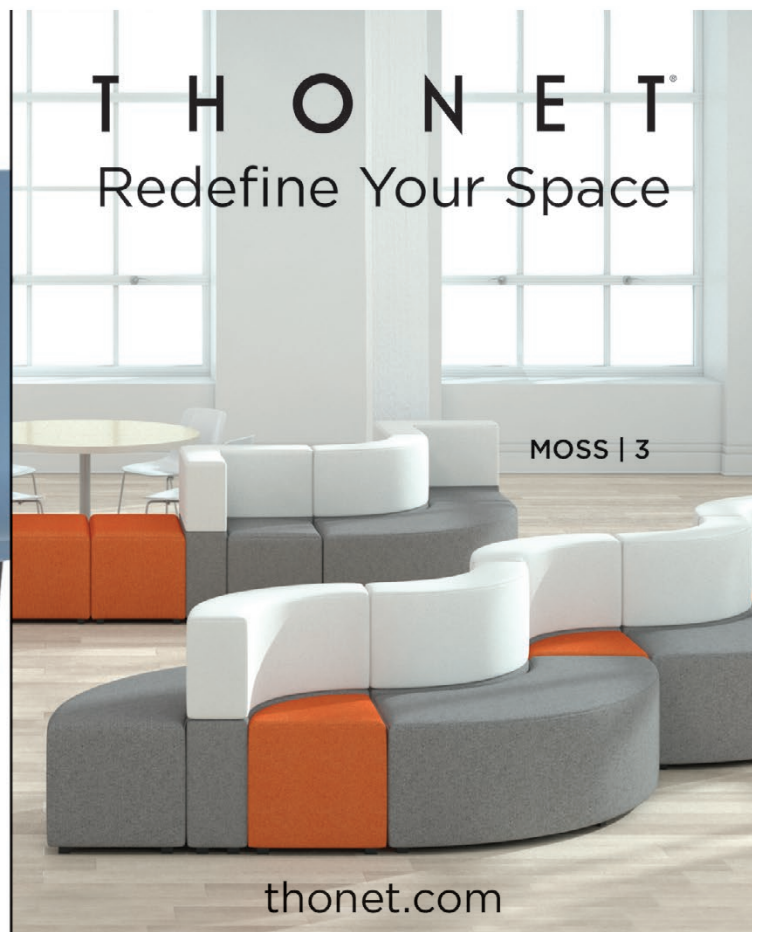
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Metal

The greatest advantage of metal furniture is its strength and lifespan. It creates a very modern look, can be assembled multiple times without damaging the material, is easy to clean effectively, is not affected by humidity, and does not burn. Metal resists bedbugs due to its hard, cold finish but the joints, bends, and weld points give bugs a place to hide. Luckily, metal furniture allows for easier cleanup and tolerates pest-fighting chemicals better than wood due to its less absorbent surface.

Metal furniture, although less bulky than wood, can be extremely heavy and without proper care can scratch floors, especially hardwoods, when being moved. Environmentally, metal furniture decreases the amount of harvested timber.

While high-quality metal furniture may be more expensive than wood, its expected lifespan is 10-15 years or longer. Many companies offer warranties that cover normal use for ten years or more. Metal furniture may require a larger initial investment but replacement is less frequent.



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Other Considerations

Bunk beds and desk-bed combinations offer the best options for small living spaces by maximizing vertical wall space. The same goes for storage, bookshelves, and dressers; go tall instead of wide to avoid using valuable floor space. Furniture should be adjustable without tools so students are able to change bed height and shelf placement easily.

Having the ability to rearrange pre-existing dorm furniture is the first step in creating a truly personal space for students to escape the daily pressures of college life, focus on work in a familiar setting, connect with friends and study groups, and recharge. By taking design, durability, flexibility, sustainability, and materials into consideration when deciding on how to furnish residence halls, colleges can positively impact the mental, emotional, and academic lives of their students.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Hilary Moreno is an alum of Birmingham-Southern College. Currently, she is the Creative Director and a staff writer for Flaherty Media.

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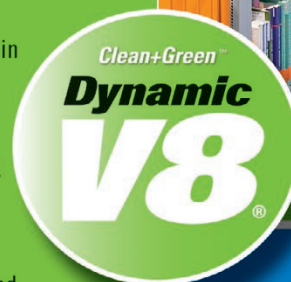
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