





# Updating Campus Bathroom Spaces

BY DAVID VINSON, PHD

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled higher education institutions to reassess best practices for keeping interior and exterior spaces clean and safe. Following campus closings and then the gradual return to classrooms in 2020 and 2021, the health of students, faculty, and staff was foremost on everyone's mind. Campuses were confronted with a moral obligation to do better—not simply to thwart the spread of germs but to adopt active measures across campus that created a culture of trust and cooperation. Students needed to feel safe in the classrooms, dormitories, bathrooms, lunchrooms, at the gym, or even outside in public gathering spaces. Indeed, it is one thing to devise an action plan but something else entirely to make it a reality. Creative and diligent teamwork, the emergence of new technologies, and commitment by students, faculty, and staff alike have led campuses to where we are today—as protected as we ever have been from the spread of viruses and other contaminants.

As of 2023, universities are transitioning into a new phase of campus improvement, one that continues to build on health and safety measures of the past few years but that also addresses the evolving needs and wants of students in spaces that receive less attention than, say, the classroom or a recreation center. Take bathrooms, for instance. The pandemic certainly generated the need for functional, health-oriented updates: touch-free fixtures, including toilet flush valves, soap and paper towel dispensers, faucets, and hand dryers. Hands-free cubicles are a recent innovation that allows users to avoid touching door handles when accessing toilet rooms. An added benefit to infection control measures is their contribution to healthy building guidelines. According to the Well Building Standard, paper towels are more effective in removing bacteria than using air dryers. The Well Standard also provides guidelines for

bathroom sink dimensions to avoid recontamination in addition to bulk refillable soap dispensers to reduce potential bacterial contamination.

Health-oriented updates are a priority for students, but campus bathroom updates are likewise in increasing demand due to changing societal norms and the desire for more privacy, equity, and inclusion, as well as the wish for new and appealing designs.

### Campus Bathrooms and Changing Societal Norms

Campus bathroom updates are shifting to the top of the facilities priority list, not least of all because students no longer want communal bathroom configurations in residence halls. This rather old-fashioned design was popularized because it maximizes efficiency and capacity, but students value their privacy. Perhaps this gradual cultural shift is linked to the fact that current students may have never shared a bathroom or bedroom, whereas

doing so was more likely in generations of the past. In turn, private colleges and universities are responding with diverse design strategies that increase privacy. Strategies range from reducing the number of students sharing a bathroom to increased privacy within a communal bathroom environment.

Renovations may include individual shower stalls with lockable doors and shower pods, which likewise incorporate a private dry-floor changing space. Toilet stalls are being renovated to include floor-to-ceiling partitions and doors with reduced gap or gap-free options. Stalls are also being replaced with hard-walled toilet rooms with standard doors. The changes must balance code requirements and, of course, address accessibility needs for disabled students. Some institutions are taking the concept of privacy further by providing individual bathrooms. These are generally located within a larger group bathroom off a corridor. Even if such designs are more costly due to requiring

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more square footage and materials than a communal bathroom design, such costs can be offset by increased enrollment and demand for renovated spaces.

Another reason students dislike communal showers: they're among the germiest places on campus. The sheer volume of use, combined with poor hygiene habits and bathroom etiquette exhibited by some students, may make showering a profoundly unpleasant experience. Keeping dorm bathrooms clean is imperative not only for usability reasons, but also to prevent the spread of harmful bacteria.

### **The Spa Bathroom and Sustainability**

Another strategy for modifying existing communal layouts is to create the "spa bathroom." A spa bathroom provides private shower and toilet facilities with shared vanity sinks. This hybrid approach recognizes the socialization benefits of communal bathrooms, allowing students to interact

while prepping for the day ahead. Spa bathrooms are usually centralized while also providing either complete or partial privacy. The model is growing in popularity and helps to balance privacy with a more economical approach that also maintains intentional social space.

The bathrooms, like many other configurations today, are also more efficient. Current strategies include low flow fixtures, LED lighting, water and light sensors, or energy-efficient systems. With the implementation of these devices, universities are making students more energy aware. For instance, energy dashboards, timers or water meters can operate as educational tools that may encourage quicker showers.

### **Equity and Inclusion**

Emerging student-led values that embrace gender neutrality have launched a new paradigm in bathroom accommodations. Some traditional male- and female-designated

bathrooms are being replaced with alternatives not based on gender. In particular, existing single-occupancy bathrooms are being updated with gender-inclusive signage. In addition to signage, many campuses are now publishing lists or online maps that locate every gender-inclusive bathroom on campus. Gender-inclusive bathrooms also provide equitable access for people with disabilities, especially those needing help from an assistant who may be of a different gender. Single-use restrooms are also beneficial to students with medical issues that can make multi-stall bathroom use uncomfortable. Moreover, for large-scale campus spaces such as performing art centers or athletic venues, gender-inclusive restrooms can help to alleviate long wait lines most commonly associated with female-designated restrooms.

Updating signage to reflect programming changes can present its own challenges. In some cases, gender designations have become obsolete. "Gender neutral" may be referred



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to as “all gender” or something as simple as “restroom.” Many colleges and universities are converting bathroom signage to reflect this shift, and facilities management staff should solicit input from campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) leaders prior to any large-scale signage conversion. Similarly, campus planners should be sure to consult local building codes, many of which lag behind the social and political landscape. Despite the current push for gender-inclusive spaces, state and local building codes dictate a required number of men’s and women’s plumbing fixtures.

**Creating Durability and Lasting Visual Appeal**

High-use, unsupervised spaces must be made to last, and lasting value is achieved by selecting high-performance building systems, durable interior finishes, and energy-efficient fixtures. Updates should be maintenance friendly and comply with campus materials and stewardship objectives. Campus administrators should consider the following strategies for creating durability and lasting visual appeal:

- Updating exhaust systems can help to reduce moisture content more quickly in bathroom spaces. Ventilation rates need to exceed minimum code requirements to reflect student use, which may vary widely at different times during the week. Friday and Saturday nights, for example, typically have higher demand than Monday mornings. What results with updating exhaust systems is more comfortable spaces, easier maintenance, and longer periods between updates.
- New water-resistant partition options are more reliable in handling steam and high humidity. Examples include HDPE (high-density polyethylene) and HPL (High Pressure Laminate) or phenolic partitions. These highly durable materials are resistant to scratches, dents, and impacts. They are also graffiti resistant.
- Solid surface countertops can be cleaned with ease and are impermeable

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- The installation of new flooring can be managed with a continuous waterproofing membrane that helps guard against future framing deterioration caused by water leakage. The waterproofing membrane can be installed under new floor finishes and along new floor drains outside of shower bases.

In short, specifying materials and products that can withstand heavy use will require less maintenance and help campuses control life cycle costs.

### Bathroom Updates and Student Recruitment

Bathroom updates are no longer simply a matter of accounting for enough sinks, toilets, and showers to accommodate students. Today, campuses must offer appealing, functional, and welcoming bathrooms that are easily accessed, comfortable, and safe. Industry research, client discussions, and focus groups indicate that students vastly prefer a mix of single bathrooms and updated communal or spa bathrooms with private toilets and showers. In a survey of over 25,000 students, more than 78% of respondents said that the availability of high-quality housing affected their college selection. Bathroom updates may seem like a secondary priority for students, but this is hardly the case.

A few final suggestions for simple bathroom updates: good lighting is imperative, particularly near mirrors and shower areas. All materials should be easy to clean and should be able to endure frequent cleaning. Such materials may include ceramic tile flooring, acrylic tub and shower liners, paint finishes that make walls washable, shower doors rather than curtains, and stainless-steel plumbing fixtures that won't rust. Sufficient storage in college bathrooms is another must-have. Options include an area for storing extra supplies (towels, toilet paper, soap, and so forth), in-shower niches or shelving for body and hair products, an area to place clothing or hang a robe, and, of course, towel bars in close proximity to the shower. All of this can be achieved with strategic placement of bars, hooks, shelves, niches, and cabinets.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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