





Enrollment Recovery and Improving Campus Life

BY DAVID VINSON, PHD

This fall, more than 14.8 million students in the U.S. will return to campus for full-time classwork. What this number tells us is that despite the decline in enrollment due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the commitment made by colleges and universities to improve campus life continues to provide impetus at one of the most challenging times for higher education in recent memory. Enrollment decline is steady, and we're even seeing sizeable growth in incoming classes across the country.



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Several notable developments are aiding enrollment recovery.

Prospective students are taking note, for example, of changes in the admissions process. One of the most significant trends in admissions for 2023 is the continued shift toward test-optimal policies. This trend accelerated in 2020 due to challenges posed by the pandemic, including the logistics of accessing test centers as well as health and safety concerns. While the weight of the pandemic is gradually easing, increasingly more institutions have extended this testing policy, and many have made the test-optimal policy permanent. In fact, 96% of colleges no longer require test scores because they recognize that test scores are hardly the best predictor of college success. Test-optimal and test-free policies likewise reflect a desire to improve educational access and equity, especially for underrepresented students. Another 2023 admissions trend is the continued role of selecting colleges with early action and decision options.

Approximately 50% of applicants now apply early, and colleges fill a significant portion (50-60%) of their incoming class via early decision. Moreover, considering the ongoing discussion around affirmative action and the most recent ruling by the Supreme Court, it is indeed now possible that more colleges will end legacy preferences. Legacy preferences are advantageous to applicants whose family members have attended the same institution, a practice that arguably perpetuates inequality and limits diversity. Colleges are seeking a more holistic review that focuses on personal essays, letters of recommendation, and lists of extracurricular activities to guide their choices among applicants with near identical GPAs or test scores.

Such changes to admissions processes are contributing to enrollment recovery, and yet other factors also play a key role. The quality of education offered will always matter to prospective students, and classrooms are being transformed by technological innovations and new modes of learning that have

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made knowledge acquisition and sharing more accessible to a diverse range of students. Our campuses are safer, cleaner, and more sustainable than ever. With new or renovated campus recreation and wellness centers, in addition to advances made in student mental health facilities, students have far greater opportunities to enjoy a healthy work/life balance. But none of our efforts to improve campus life would shine so brightly without the governing ethos of creating a community on campus, a home away from home. Integral to this process is applying meticulous attention to enhancing the look and feel of campus spaces, whether indoors or outdoors, in the dorms or the main library, on campus lawns or at an outdoor swimming facility. What the prospective student sees elicits an immediate response, one that has lasting impact. Either they are at ease or not. Campus life is informed by multiple factors and put in motion by careful strategic planning and execution—but if the campus itself does not evoke a sense of place and belonging, we risk losing prospective students regardless of our sizeable efforts.

Carnegie Mellon's Fostering of Community with Seating Solutions

Located five miles from downtown Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon's main campus spans over 157 acres between Schenley Park and the neighborhoods of Squirrel Hill, Shadyside, and Oakland. Carnegie Mellon is exemplary in its commitment to creating dynamic, welcoming indoor and outdoor spaces for its students. The institution, like many, has adapted to changes necessitated by time as well as a rotation of students whose needs and desires have evolved. For decades, the center of student campus life was Skibo Hall, the university's student union. Its design was typical of the 1950s, with mid-century modern architecture. However, the space was hardly equipped for the demands marked by a profound technological shift in the dissemination of knowledge. With the rise of computers, the Internet, and a pressing urgency for interconnectivity, Skibo Hall was replaced by the Jared L. Cohon University Center, which has since served as a 24/7 hub for the campus community. The building has undergone several renovations, each representative of students' evolving needs.

Today, it offers spaces for meetings and conferences, special events, recreational and fitness facilities, a pool spectator balcony, locker rooms, a renovated dining facility, and a new entrance way and lobby adorned with a Chihuly glass sculpture. To encourage students to feel at home, it also offers ample spaces for studying and socializing. This building, both inside and out, is precisely the sort that captures the imagination of prospective students while also satisfying, if not exceeding, current students' expectations.

New outdoor seating areas are popping up across Carnegie Mellon's campus. The spaces give students, faculty, and staff a place to pause and reset, to check email, enjoy the weather, or even host small group meetings. It is a simple, cost-effective idea with the lasting effect of bringing people together. Multiple large 20x40-foot tents and fifteen smaller canopies have been

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placed around campus. The tents contain a roof covering, folding chairs, and chair racks for storage, and they're big enough to hold nearly a dozen students each while allowing for social distancing if desired. Staying true to health and safety measures inspired by the pandemic, the tents are cleaned daily with electrostatic sprayers and contain hand-sanitizing stations. Other outdoor spaces have been converted to landing spots for the campus community, as well. Seating areas are available under the vaulted ceilings at the north and south ends of the Purnell Center for the Arts and the Cohon University Center. During the pandemic, stone benches along the tree-lined walkway in the Tepper Quad were used as makeshift coffee tables with a chair at either end.

Carnegie Mellon's Classroom and Learning Spaces Project has updated and redesigned classrooms based on data collected at the University's Eberly Center. The redesigned spaces include new and flexible furnishing, technology upgrades, and better lighting and acoustics to improve classroom function and accessibility. The improvements have allowed for a more pleasurable learning experience, and they offer new options for instructors to enhance student learning through evidence-based strategies such as active learning. Students benefit from single, moveable desks that are easy to arrange at different points in the classroom, and each desk itself can rotate to accommodate left- and right-handed notetaking. This design for flexible use is a vast upgrade over fixed seats with little table space. Moreover, because the desks rotate, they can be turned inward to form a table of sorts, thereby creating spaces for small group work. Instead of the "sage on the stage" model, instructors can now more easily incorporate interactivity, whether pausing for students to discuss a question or allowing groups of varying sizes to gather and work through problems. Versatile furniture facilitates exciting learning modes. Rather than the traditional, inflexible model of instructor to student, now available is the option to adopt flexible and multi-directional learning. In addition to moveable furniture, upgraded classrooms include expanded whiteboards, new AV equipment with enhanced touch panels and document cameras, and larger projection screens. An obvious pedagogical advantage to such improvements is the ability for students to share their work with ease. Whiteboards promote collaboration, and the DocCam allows students to quickly take turns sharing their work on paper with the entire class. Critical to the learning process, new AV systems make frequent practice and feedback a fluid, simple process during class sessions.

Innovative Seating Designs and the Future of Education

Custom seating solutions empower higher education institutions to maximize space, meet sustainability demands, and optimize the functionality of learning spaces for decades to come. Innovative seating designs are a superb recruitment tool, appealing to prospective students who seek versatile, welcoming learning spaces. A helpful means of approaching the relationship between seating and learning is to consider five characteristics

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applicable to a future-focused lecture hall, auditorium, or classroom.

First, students and teachers alike want collaborative learning spaces. Reaching this goal entails moving away from individual, forward-facing desks. Take the modern lecture hall, for instance. From subtle radial row configurations to chairs that swing and swivel, collaboration becomes more intuitive, and students can flourish. Second, students and teachers want convenience. One of the most convenient features to add to any new fixed seating installation is USB and power outlets, or what is called wire management. Wire management is an essential add-on feature for seating, whether in the intimate setting of a small classroom or in the larger hub of a lecture hall. Wire management is critical for students who type their notes or record lectures, simultaneously aiding in accessibility needs and putting students at ease when their laptops or mobile devices are low on power. Another convenient feature,

and one frequently overlooked, is tablet arms. Every learning environment should have a surface on which students can work, and this requirement is easily managed by adding a table arm to auditorium seating, adding a stand-alone table, or adding tables to accompany lecture hall seating. Using personal tech devices is not only the cultural norm but also a common requirement in the classroom. Tablet arms seamlessly accommodate these technologies.

Third, occupants of learning spaces want seating that's functional and comfortable but also pleasing to the eye. Those who specialize in creating customizable seating designs can do so with the aesthetic of any campus in mind. Fourth, students are increasingly attracted to campuses that embrace the virtues of sustainability and environmental stewardship. Seating can now integrate recycled materials and renewable resources. Some of these products are even certified Clean Air Gold. And finally, students and

faculty alike are relieved when space is maximized without crowding a room. A space where occupants feel constricted in movement and bombarded by noise hardly represents an ideal learning environment. Such issues can be avoided with seating in a variety of styles that optimize capacity, are aesthetically pleasing, and offer both comfort and functionality. To increase capacity, seating can even be installed along the wall of any room as needed.

Lighting Design and the Smart Classroom

A recent survey reports that 73% of colleges and universities have new construction projects planned for the immediate future. This wave of new construction reflects the need to keep pace in attracting and retaining students, faculty, and staff. The smart classroom is on its way to becoming a standard expectation in higher education. So familiar is the concept that we know precisely what it contains—an innovative array of technology that creates an

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immersive learning experience. But even the most gadget-equipped learning space can fall short of its potential when an element as simple as lighting fails to complement the features of the room. Lighting integration and a well-formulated sequence of operations that supports functionality are often overlooked in the rush to create a competitive learning environment. Poor lighting integration, a lack of personal control of operations, and a weak glare suppression can undermine an otherwise well-planned lecture. With distance learners, the difference between a successful lecture and one that falls flat can be determined by shadowed-out presenters, unfavorable color temperatures, and facial features obscured by glare or shine. The good news: lighting designers know how to make A/V, dimming, lighting color temperature, shading, and furniture configurations work together to best serve the specific demands of the classroom and course.

Higher education has weathered many storms, and the pandemic has been a tsunami and a hurricane rolled into one. The fact that enrollment

numbers have declined is understandable. Thankfully, the impact of the pandemic has made us smarter, more resilient, and better at our jobs. We have taken a holistic view of the current landscape and responded in ways that have made our campus communities safer and healthier. We have also internalized the inherent value of detail. Application processes have been altered, demonstrating a much-needed shift toward further educational access and equity. The classroom, how it looks and functions, has changed. Now we have spaces that are more accessible, more dynamic in the learning modes provided, more comfortable and pleasing on the eye. We are moving in the right direction.



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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