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# The Impact of Furniture on Both the Utility and Aesthetic Appeal of University Common Spaces

BY LEO DEDERING

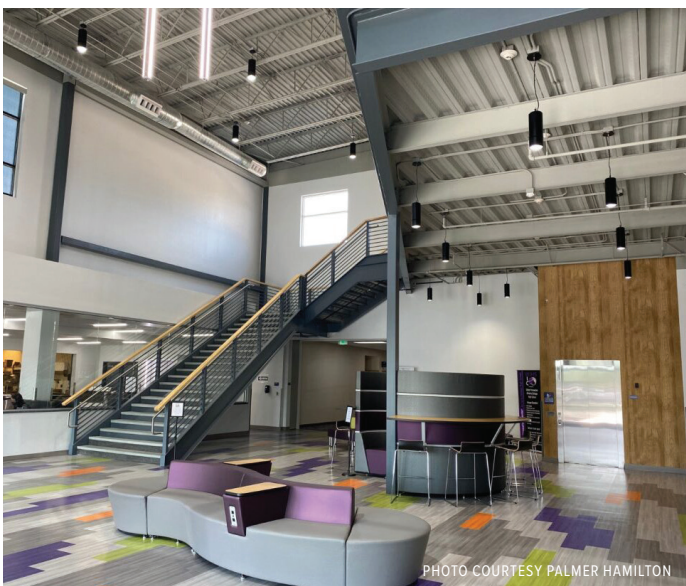


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Think about how students begin their journey on a college campus. Many start with a tour before applying, some may wait for an admitted students' event, and a few will have their first in-person experience with a campus at orientation. Regardless of when they first arrive, where they are introduced is almost always in some kind of common area.

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Many schools have prioritized these first-encounter spaces with projects like equipping media centers with the latest technology or upgrading the menu in dining halls, but the personality of these spaces often makes as much of an impact as what bells and whistles they offer.

It's hard to overstate the importance of thoughtful design in open-use areas such as cafeterias, media centers, student unions, and even dorm lobbies. These are the rooms where students go to eat, study, spend time with their friends, and generally enjoy the freedoms of being in college. They don't just create the first impression; they set the tone for a large portion of a student's college experience and should be designed with four key factors in mind to do so in the best possible way.

### 1. Functionality

Furniture that suits more than one need is important in almost any space. In many applications, this means furniture can be moved into several setups for different kinds of use. While most rooms will stay in the same basic layouts to serve their primary functions, the way students interact within the space creates a need for nuance in the design.

The college environment is unique in that many students live most of their life on campus while school is in session, and even commuter students will likely have considerable downtime spent on the property. Furniture pieces need to meet their needs by supporting both collaborative and individual workspaces, and they need to be relaxed enough for recreational use.

This is especially true for common spaces, which are increasingly becoming multi-functional. Designing a common space on a college campus requires flexibility for multiple formats in one system. Within one basic layout of a media center, cafeteria, union, or other space, students should feel welcome to study alone, study in a group, chat with friends, grab a quick bite or use it in any other way they need.

### 2. Visual Appeal

In addition to the functionality of the furniture, the look of the space needs to draw students in. Even the most useful common spaces also need to be inviting. "Design makes a huge difference on how people perceive a space," says Teri Wilson-Ruggles, director of PH Design at full-service furniture and design firm Palmer Hamilton. "Walking into the dining area of a nice restaurant has a completely different effect on a person than waking into the cafeteria of a prison. Ultimately, these two serve the same purpose of feeding people, but the ambiance and aesthetics of the environments could not be more different. They create two opposite ends of a visual appeal spectrum, and, unsurprisingly, most colleges want to be more on the restaurant end of that spectrum."



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To avoid appearing institutional, furniture should look comfortable and welcoming, reflecting the possibilities of how students can interact with the space before they even come in. This should also carry through into the design, with accent pieces to reflect the personality of both the space and the university as a whole. A student may not even notice how the feel of the space comes together, but they should get the right feel when they enter the room.

Consistency is also key in common spaces. While the functional design of a media center will be different than that of a dining hall, keeping design motifs generally consistent throughout campus creates a more unified feel and helps shape the identity of the university community.

### 3. Durability

The economic side of a furniture and design project also has a major role to play in decision making. Most colleges want their furniture

investments to last at least 10 years before needing replacement, presenting a bit of a challenge for furniture manufacturers. College students are rougher on furniture than office workers, for example. Furniture is dragged, set outside, stacked and pushed around in ways you just don't see in any other environment.

In the past, building furniture that could withstand this treatment required heavy-duty materials such as solid wood and basic sherpa vinyl fabrics. While this improved durability, it limited flexibility, aesthetic appeal, and comfort of the furniture with solid, blocky pieces that could not be moved anywhere without strenuous effort.

With modern technology and building materials, universities can have the best of both worlds. New construction methods offer pieces that are durable but more attractive and movable. Working with manufacturers who utilize these modern methods allows colleges

to choose pieces that best fit individual space requirements and appeal to students without having to worry they won't last long enough to justify the investment.

### 4. Collaboration

The benefits of finding the right manufacturer extend beyond durability and design. There are many companies that can deliver a design and furniture package to fit a space, but the best choice is a full-service company that goes beyond a one-size-fits-all business model.

A good furniture company will take the time to get to know the school and design spaces in collaboration with key decision makers from various populations. Beginning any thorough design process means collaborating with the people who will actually be using the space, most importantly students. Many administrators will try to put themselves in a student's shoes to ascertain what would appeal to them,

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but bringing students in for their input is a much easier and more accurate way to determine what they are looking for in the redesign. This is particularly important in universities, where the students are customers and their willing participation in the school is critical. Testing student responses will help administrators and designers understand how the space is used, how it could be used, what design motifs students will respond to positively, and other important information.

Student input can go even further. Many schools and manufacturers will open up the design process to student submissions, allowing the more creative university attendees to lend their talents to the space. This allows students to take further ownership of campus and feel represented in the community as a whole.

In addition to openness to the community, a furniture manufacturer needs to start with a solid basis of knowledge. Balancing functionality, visual appeal, and durability is not easy, but working with a company that understands furniture and the university market can be a huge help. In addition to understanding all the factors listed above, the manufacturer needs to know how decisions are made in a university structure. Colleges often have people on staff specifically for acquisitions of this nature. Salespeople who come in expecting to act in an advisory capacity rather than a collaborative one are vastly underestimating their audience's expertise and misunderstanding how best to work with them.

A furniture manufacturer with experience in universities knows how to build lasting working relationships that are mutually beneficial. Ultimately, that's the goal. Colleges are consistently working to upgrade the many buildings within a campus, making the challenge of finding a good furniture and design supplier nearly constant. A manufacturer that can reliably deliver functional, attractive, durable spaces with a collaborative business model is a valuable resource and potential partner for future projects.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Leo Dederer is the Midwest regional sales manager and manufacturer's representative for Palmer Hamilton specializing in furniture and space design in the education market. He can be reached by email at [ldederer@palmerhamilton.com](mailto:ldederer@palmerhamilton.com). For more information on Palmer Hamilton, visit [www.palmerhamilton.com](http://www.palmerhamilton.com).



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