



8 Things Every Great Classroom Wants You to Know

BY LIBBY FERIN

At Marco, we've spent decades building great K–12 furniture—but this past year, we've started asking bigger questions about the spaces those products live in. How does the shape of a room influence student behavior and outcomes. How does comfort affect confidence and productivity? How does flexibility support focus and collaboration?

The more we dig into the research, the clearer it becomes: learning is learning, no matter the age. College students may be older, but the fundamentals don't change—comfort still matters, flexibility still matters, and belonging always matters. And many of the same design principles that support great K–12 classrooms apply just as meaningfully for higher education classrooms.

Here are eight research-backed tips for designing higher education classrooms, and how the right furniture selection can support and enhance the goals of each classroom.

1. Start with the Question...

INSIGHT

Every great learning space starts with a simple question: What do you want to

happen here? Whether the goal is discussion, creation, or collaboration, the layout should make that natural. When you design around behavior—not furniture lists or floor plans—you're designing for engagement.

EVIDENCE

A major University of Salford study found that classroom design—layout, light, and color—can account for 16 percent of student learning progress*. That's real impact from the built environment.

ACTION

Desks and tables with varied shapes and easy mobility make it simple to shift from lecture to group work without losing momentum. When the space flexes, the learning follows.

2. Design for Movement

INSIGHT

Movement keeps people awake—literally and mentally. When students can roll, swivel, or shift into quick huddles, they stay more engaged. Static rooms encourage passive learning; mobile ones invite participation.

EVIDENCE

Active-learning research shows that students in flexible classrooms participate more and retain more than those in fixed-seating environments*. Additionally, ergonomic studies show that even small posture changes increase blood flow and cognitive alertness*. The longer students can stay comfortable, the more they stay engaged. Movement supports both engagement and memory.

ACTION

When tables and chairs are built to move easily, the whole class moves with them—switching from solo work to group discussion without breaking stride.

3. Mix It Up

INSIGHT

No two learners are alike, and no classroom should treat them that way. Provide a mix of “destinations” within one space; soft seating, open tables and quiet nooks give everyone a sense of choice and control — two ingredients proven to boost motivation.

EVIDENCE

Research on flexible seating indicates that students who choose where and how they work show higher engagement and focus*. Choice drives ownership.

ACTION

A thoughtful mix of lounge pieces, movable storage, and ergonomic chairs enable the space flex with purpose—inviting students to come together for group work or pull apart for quiet focus without disrupting flow.

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4. Encourage Conversation

INSIGHT

Space sends social signals. Curved layouts invite collaboration; straight lines focus attention. The shapes we choose can subtly say “let’s talk” or “let’s think.” In college and university classrooms, where group work and peer learning are essential, connection is everything.

EVIDENCE

Classroom studies show that collaborative layouts boost reasoning, creativity, and communication compared with traditional rows. Students facing one another interact more—and learn more.

ACTION

When space encourages people to face each other, collaboration isn’t something you plan for—it just happens. Thoughtful geometry—curves, angles, and organic forms—create subtle cues for connection, guiding how people gather, share, and learn.

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5. Hear the Difference

INSIGHT

We don't talk about sound nearly enough. You can have the best layout in the world, but if the acoustics are bad, no one can focus. The right balance of sound, light, and flow makes learning feel effortless.

EVIDENCE

Studies link good acoustics and lighting directly to student performance and comprehension*. In fact, even minor improvements in sound absorption have been shown to increase verbal clarity and reduce cognitive fatigue during long lectures.

ACTION

Add layers that quiet the room without deadening its energy. Acoustic panels, soft seating, and even mobile storage can absorb sound while defining zones. Think of it as shaping how the room feels as much as how it looks.

6. Support Belonging

INSIGHT

Students learn better when they feel seen and supported—it's that simple. The space can do a lot of that work. When a room feels comfortable, flexible, and welcoming, students let their guard down. That's the heart of Universal Design for Learning: build spaces that work for everyone from the start instead of trying to retrofit later.

EVIDENCE

UDL research shows that when environments offer multiple ways to participate—through movement, visibility, and choice—students are more motivated, persistent, and confident.

ACTION

Provide options. Make sure everyone can move easily through the space. Add small touches—warm colors, softer textures, better lighting—that make the room feel inviting.

When the classroom feels good, people relax, connect, and learn better.

7. Tech That Works With You

INSIGHT

Technology is part of every class now—laptops, tablets, and phones are as common as notebooks used to be. The trick isn't adding more tech; it's planning for it. When outlets, screens, and Wi-Fi are where students actually need them, the room runs smoother and learning feels seamless.

EVIDENCE

Studies on active-learning classrooms show that when technology supports flexible layouts—like movable screens, shared displays, or simple power access—students participate more and stay on task longer*.

ACTION

Design every space like it matters. Add spots to plug in, surfaces to work on, and

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8. Keep Listening to the Students and the Space

INSIGHT

Every classroom space tells you how it's working—if you're paying attention. Notice where students gather, which areas they avoid, and how they move through the room. Ask what helps them focus and what gets in the way. Those everyday details are your roadmap for what to keep, tweak, or rethink next time.

EVIDENCE

Research shows that regularly gathering feedback from students and faculty leads to smarter, more responsive learning environments*. Simply observing how a space gets used often reveals what no survey ever could.

ACTION

Walk the room once it's lived in. You'll see what's working and what's not. Ask a few honest questions and make small tweaks. Spaces will show you how to make them better—if you pay attention.

The Big Picture

Good design isn't about chasing trends—it's about supporting people. The same shape psychology that drives focus and collaboration in K–12 classrooms is the same for college and university classrooms. And, those same principles can be applied outside of the classroom too -- because some of the best learning doesn't happen in a classroom at all. It happens at the in-between spaces — the commons, library corners, student unions, even hallways. When those areas are designed with the same intention as general classrooms, they become extensions of learning instead of just places to pass through.

At Marco, curiosity drives everything we do. We're learning from educators and designers every day, finding ways to make our products serve real outcomes—not just fill rooms. Because when design, behavior, and purpose come together... that's where learning truly takes shape.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Libby Ferin is the head of marketing for Marco, a family owned

American-made manufacturer of high-quality education furniture. She can be reached at libby.ferin@madebymarco.net.



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