Adjust the Built Environment of Academic Spaces

A USC Well-being Collective Toolkit



USC Well-being Collective

The USC Well-being Collective harnesses the power of Collective Impact for a variety of distinct and often siloed academic departments, administrative units, recognized student organizations and local non-profits to come together and work with the whole student community towards our common agenda: **strengthening a campus culture driven by student wellbeing.**

This goal is supported by four interrelated strategic goals:

Equity and Inclusion – enhancing the culture of equity and inclusion

Resilience and Thriving – creating a culture where individuals and communities thrive

Alcohol and Other Substance Use – disrupting the culture of at-risk substance use

Consent and Healthy Relationships — fostering a culture of consent and healthy relationships

Introduction

Today, mental health professionals have access to various levels of treatment that can effectively help people with a variety of mental health concerns. Many colleges are going beyond simply providing treatment services by expanding efforts to prevent mental health problems from arising and promote the mental well-being of all students. In other words, they are adopting a public health approach to address the social and environmental risk factors that influence student mental health (Davidson & Locke, 2010; SPRC, 2004). Factors affecting student mental health and ability to thrive can be shaped by individual attitudes and beliefs about mental illness, interpersonal group norms, institutional environments, community access to mental health resources and public policies.

Furthermore, students with diverse backgrounds and experiences enter into institutions of higher education expecting the ability to equitably pursue their academic goals and to be welcomed into a supportive student community. Nonetheless, the student experience is not the same for each individual, and not every student is treated equitably or accommodated in the classroom or on campus. In addressing disparities students may face while attending institutions of higher education, campus leaders can enhance the culture of equity and inclusion by implementing fair treatment, equality of opportunity, and open access to information, resources and physical spaces. Inclusive practices build a culture of belonging by actively inviting and fostering participation from all students. Such practices consider a person's voice, add value to the university and the student experience, and create balance in the face of power differences.

The built environment has a strong influence over how people think, feel, and behave in a space. Academic buildings are an important space to consider, as students conduct most of their academic activities within these settings. Research has shown the classroom environment affects academic performance, attention, and goal achievement. Interestingly, students' perception of the physical environment is a stronger predictor of achieving learning outcomes than past academic achievement. With this research in mind, campus planners and university administrators can make a commitment to creating or altering classroom spaces to enhance student wellbeing

Adjust the Built Environment of Academic Spaces

Toolkit Description:

Adjusting the built environment of academic spaces to promote inclusivity

Strategic Goals:

Equity + Inclusion
Thrive + Mental Health
At-Risk Substance Abuse
Consent + Healthy Relationships

Building healthy public policy

Strategies:

Creating supportive environments
Strengthening community action
Developing personal skills
Re-orienting all sectors towards prevention

A Toolkit For:

Faculty
Staff
Student
Parent/Guardian
Administrator

Goal

The built environment has a powerful impact on the mental health and wellbeing of students. Planning, zoning, and transportation policies directly impact the overall health of students. It is important that institutional policy makers take into account the long-range and far-reaching effects that planning decisions have on campus-wise well-being and health. This toolkit is about adjusting the built environment of academic spaces to create supportive environments for students and and incorporating thoughtful planning into design approaches for promoting campus-wide wellbeing

Intended Outcomes

Key Performance Indicators:

- Increase positive mental health
- Increase sense of belonging
- Additional Outcomes
- Increased student satisfaction

Evidence of Effectiveness

Scientifically Supported - Strategies with this rating are most likely to make a difference. These strategies have been tested in many robust studies with consistently positive results.

Implementation Ideas

For Students/Faculty/Staff

The thermal environment (aka temperature) can be adjusted for comfort as classrooms are often too cold, which is not conducive to learning.

Adjustable furniture, classroom accessories, and/or devices can be utilized or purchased to meet different needs of students.

Lighting can be adjusted or installed in spaces to adequately illuminate the environment and prevent mental fatigue. Classroom and meeting locations can be arranged to take advantage of the presence of natural light.

Classes and meetings can be held in larger, amply sized rooms. Classroom spaces are often too small to comfortably accommodate large classes, hampering concentration.

Two types of common spaces can be provided in academic buildings: designated space to collaborate on academic projects and separate space to interact socially.

Classrooms and meeting spaces can include multiple seating options to accommodate different sized students.

Academic buildings and meeting locations can open after working hours to provide flexibility to meet students' needs.

Office hours and student meeting times can be flexible in terms of timing and remote/virtual offerings to accommodate alternative schedules and access.

Meeting every student's need with a single design can prove difficult. Therefore, classroom and meeting spaces can be designed or remodeled with an adjustability focus. This includes the ability to choose from different furniture, desks with sit-stand capabilities, modifiable lights, and further environmental options. Universal design concepts can also facilitate various learning modalities as well as accessibility of campus buildings and spaces.

For Administrators

Campus planners and administrators are well-positioned to invest in a health-promoting built environment. It is important that policy makers consider student wellbeing when constructing new spaces. Research has shown there are a few key elements of academic spaces that are most influential on student wellbeing: comfort, space design, inclusivity and control. The following are examples of how each key element can be adjusted, and also apply to students, faculty, and staff who are interested in applying this strategy to their setting.

Implementation Resources

USC Guide to Accessible Events

<u>USC Viterbi School of Engineering: Center for Intelligent Environments</u>

USC Center for Excellence in Teaching: Universal Design for Learning Overview & Teaching with Tech

<u>Increasing Physical Activity: Built Environment Approaches</u>

<u>Learning in Comfort: Ergonomic considerations are an important factor in classroom</u> furniture

<u>Seven Principles of Universal Design</u>

<u>Applications of Universal Design</u>

<u>Mobility</u>, <u>Universal Design</u>, <u>Health and Place</u>

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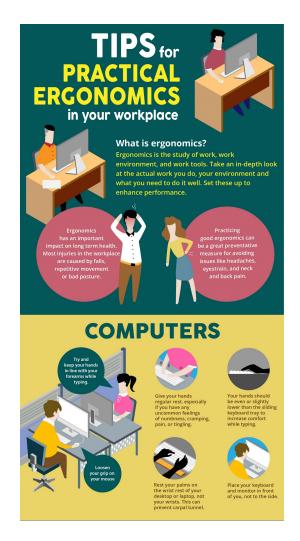
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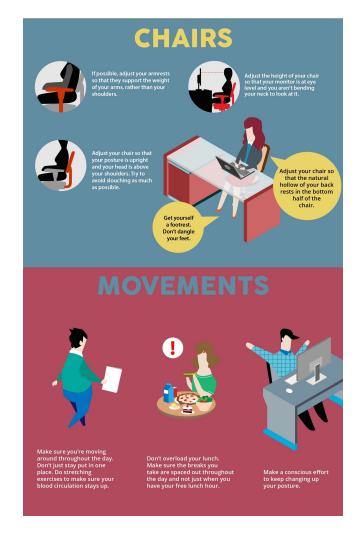
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Produced Examples









USC Student Health

Office for Health Promotion Strategy

Backbone for the USC Well-being Collective

The Office for Health Promotion Strategy, backbone for the USC Well-being Collective, is embedded in USC Student Health and serves as the administrative core to support campus partners in aligning their strategic objectives with student wellbeing. The Office for Health Promotion Strategy works with participating partners, the Steering Committee, and most importantly, students to activate change at USC.

For additional questions, please contact: USC Student Health, Office for Health Promotion Strategy, Backbone for USC Well-being Collective at wellbeingcollective@usc.edu.

