

Adjust the Built Environment of Academic Spaces

A USC Well-being Collective Toolkit



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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

Strategies:

Building healthy public policy

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-wide well-being and health. This toolkit is about adjusting the built environment of academic spaces to create supportive environments for students 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](#)

[USC Viterbi School of Engineering: Center for Intelligent Environments](#)

[USC Center for Excellence in Teaching: Universal Design for Learning Overview & Teaching with Tech](#)

[Increasing Physical Activity: Built Environment Approaches](#)

[Learning in Comfort: Ergonomic considerations are an important factor in classroom furniture](#)

[Seven Principles of Universal Design](#)

[Applications of Universal Design](#)

[Mobility, Universal Design, Health and Place](#)

References

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Roelofsen, P. (2002). The impact of office environments on employee performance: The design of the workplace as a strategy for productivity enhancement. *Journal of Facilities Management*, 1(3), 247–264.)

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Wilson, H. K., & Cotgrave, A. (2016). Factors that influence students' satisfaction with their physical learning environments. *Structural Survey*, 34(3), 256.

Produced Examples

TIPS for PRACTICAL ERGONOMICS in your workplace



What is ergonomics?
Ergonomics is the study of work, work environment, and work tools. Take an in-depth look at the actual work you do, your environment and what you need to do it well. Set these up to enhance performance.

Ergonomics has an important impact on long term health. Most injuries in the workplace are caused by falls, repetitive movement or bad posture.

Practicing good ergonomics can be a great preventative measure for avoiding issues like headaches, eyestrain, and neck and back pain.

COMPUTERS

Try and keep your hands in line with your forearms while typing.

Give your hands regular rest, especially if you have any uncommon feelings of numbness, cramping, pain, or tingling.

Your hands should be even or slightly lower than the sliding keyboard tray to increase comfort while typing.

Loosen your grip on your mouse

Rest your palms on the wrist rest of your desktop or laptop, not your wrists. This can prevent carpal tunnel.

Place your keyboard and monitor in front of you, not to the side.

CHAIRS

If possible, adjust your armrests so that they support the weight of your arms, rather than your shoulders.

Adjust the height of your chair so that your monitor is at eye level and you aren't bending your neck to look at it.

Adjust your chair so that your posture is upright and your head is above your shoulders. Try to avoid slouching as much as possible.

Adjust your chair so that the natural hollow of your back rests in the bottom half of the chair.

Get yourself a footrest. Don't dangle your feet.

MOVEMENTS

Make sure you're moving around throughout the day. Don't just stay put in one place. Do stretching exercises to make sure your blood circulation stays up.

Don't overload your lunch. Make sure the breaks you take are spaced out throughout the day and not just when you have your free lunch hour.

Make a conscious effort to keep changing up your posture.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Use pens with large barrels. They are better for your grip.

Try not to use wrist splints for extended periods of time as they may cause further damage to muscles.

If you are typing a lot, try to keep your nails short.

Make sure you wear glasses if you need them. This can help protect your eyesight and prevent headaches.

Drink water throughout the day. It's good for you and it makes you get up and move around every few hours.

Think about your general comfort in every aspect. You are more likely to function well if you are comfortable.

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.

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