

Compelling Branded Environments in Higher Education



The world of higher education faces many challenges. Ever-increasing tuition is prompting students and their families to take a close look at the value being offered by the schools being considered. Rising costs are compelling many students to consider alternatives to the traditional four-year university, including competitors that offer online education.

Even in traditional institutions, emerging technologies and the wider variety of teaching and learning styles demanded by Generation Y students and offered by younger faculty are creating pressure for change in everything from design of pedagogy to student unions. In the midst of all these challenges, the overriding need to attract and retain top students and faculty and to offer a high quality teaching and learning experience has never been greater.

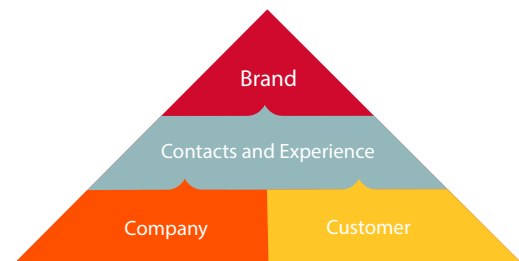
While many higher education institutions are investing in new buildings and spaces in a functional response to these challenges, there is a greater opportunity for future success by integrating the brand of the institution throughout campus buildings and interior spaces

If we agree that culture is important, shouldn't all spaces reflect it? Most modern construction is built around functional considerations—increased density, one-size-fits-all rooms, office reductions, etc.—usually because it is viewed as a cost rather than a driver of performance. Recognizing space as a way to support brand begins by first defining existing institutional culture, comparing that to desired culture, and then designing spaces to expressly support the elements needed for change.

Creating compelling branded environments in Higher Education can drive engagement and success

A well-designed, branded environment expresses an institution's core identity and the values students relate to. It communicates and supports an institution's mission and values, and leaves a lasting impression by creating engaging spaces that enhance the user experience. It resonates with current and potential students and allows them to visualize what they can achieve on campus. It can boost recruitment, retention, and engagement; support growth plans and partnerships; raise the profile; and create a higher perceived value with various constituencies. It is a vital component of higher education marketing.

The campuses and spaces of institutions themselves can be used to address these challenges—in particular, to engage students. The brand of an organization can be represented through design and furnishing elements that reinforce the culture, values, and even desired behaviors. Translating the brand into the architecture and interiors of a higher education institution is a powerful way to leverage the investment in space and guide decisions about its design. And, a "spatial" branding strategy can play a significant role in engaging top students and faculty with the institution.

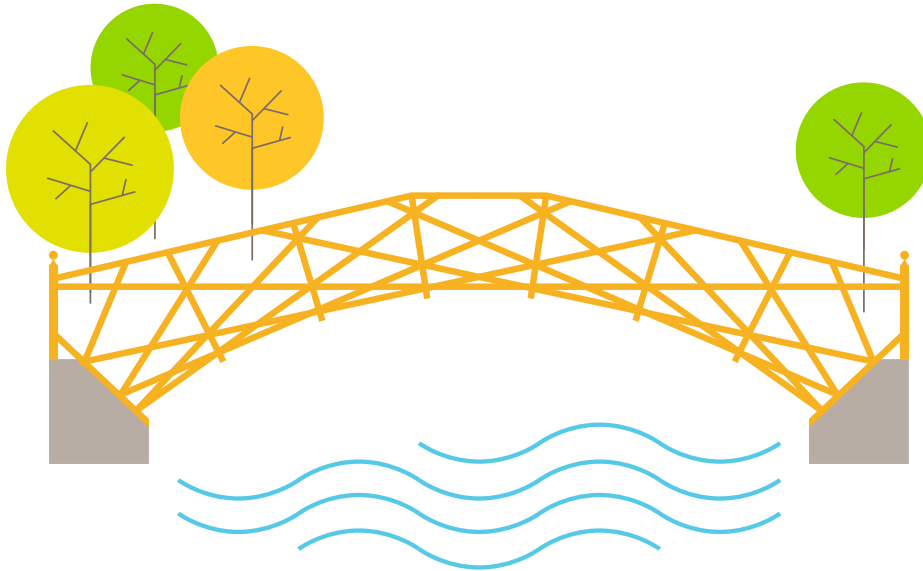


What is a brand?

A brand is the sum of impressions and experiences a customer holds about a product, service, or company. It is more than just a tagline or brochure. It grows out of many elements, from an organization's marketing pieces to its buildings, to all customer interactions with employees—both planned and unplanned. A brand is critical in influencing what customers think and feel about an organization, and whether customers will ultimately partner with the organization.

Insights around translating brand themes into campus planning, architecture, and interior spaces.

In this section, we offer ideas on how branding concepts can be integrated into the physical fabric of the institution. Organizations can start by developing a unique brand message. From there, the brand story can be connected starting at the broadest level, to regional geographic elements, then to outdoor spaces, building and campus features, and finally into architectural and interior design features, furnishings, and technology elements.



1. Identify the distinct and meaningful message that differentiates the institution

Inspiration and guidance can come from many sources. While a business organization might start its story with corporate values, technology, or human focus, campus brands generally start with the school, its buildings, and its heritage and history, explains Doug McCoach of architectural firm RTKL.

The brand message may relay the stories of successful students, present the institution's aspirations, celebrate societal contributions, recount historical achievements, or immortalize prominent alumni. A brand that expresses what success means for that institution can help differentiate it from other institutions and help students decide if the campus is the right fit.

"Students today need to feel like they belong," said Eileen Jones of Perkins+Will. "They want to know not only that you have the program I want, but that you have what supports me and fits my lifestyle." Once the elements of this unique story have been developed, use architecture and space to establish communicate those messages.

2. Use elements of geography, location, and key spaces to support the brand story

Some of the most distinctive and authentic identities can originate from the institution's unique location. Localized themes might come from a surrounding landscape or particular geographic distinction: a mountain range, a waterfront, a hilltop. Expressed through the space, these elements can be reinforced. "Graphics, style, and imagery can create a real sense of place that transmits the value of the institution and reflects the locale, climate, economy, or even a state of mind," according to D.J. Stout, partner at design firm Pentagram. Situating high profile spaces in strategic locations can underscore a university's mission. At the University of Alabama at Birmingham, a new visitor's center will be centrally located in the student center so visitors can experience the university environment immediately upon entry. "They'll see students engaged in student organizations, studying and hanging out in lounge spaces, enjoying the retail options provided by dining and the bookstore and other day-to-day campus interactions," described Carolyn Farley, UAB director of academic and student

services operations. Unlike the former visitor's center that was disconnected from student life by virtue of its location away from the core of the campus, the new center showcases views of the campus green and the buzz of student activity through the glass curtain wall and large cased windows that are an integral part its design. "We're sending an intentional message about what you have a chance to be a part of and the experience you'll have here," said Farley.

At the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University, planners acknowledged that a major part of the institution's brand identity is its connection to the city of Chicago and the opportunities that proximity offers. Its location on Lake Michigan was identified as a major differentiator and benefit, so planners located the new visitor center as close to the water as possible with south-facing views to Chicago. "When you're coming into the space as a student and you're exploring whether this is right for you, you immediately see the water and how close Chicago is," explained Brian Weatherford of Perkins+Will. "The first impression is a part of that brand and a larger picture of the school's vision, which is important because that is often when decisions are made.

"You don't have much time when touring. When you see so many places, things can become a blur. Those unique differentiators and how they are conveyed are important. You want a 'wow' effect when you come in. You'll remember lake and view. That was a key decision," Weatherford added.

A well-known and recognized marker—bridge, clock, statue, monument—can help confirm sense of place. Ideally, it should be oriented to offer visibility from many points on campus. In some cases, making a beloved landmark more visible is about reorganizing or removing surrounding elements such as parking lots. Repeating it on multiple campuses can unify the brand message within an institution that spans many locations within a city or even around the world.



3. Outdoor spaces can communicate history, culture, and brand

Well-designed outdoor spaces can not only be used for interaction and learning, but they can also express the brand and culture of the institution. An outdoor space might focus on a particular element—such as an arch or statue of a figure from the history of the campus—or incorporate iconic campus spaces, such as stadiums, quads, courtyards, or even the town’s commercial district, according to Doug McCoach of RTKL. Embellishments such as paving, planting, furniture, lighting, graphics, and monuments can create central spaces on campus in areas that may be lacking, underutilized, or ill-conceived, he added.

4. Buildings and campus design features should create a sense of place to engage students

Schools have a constant challenge: Make an impression and create a sense of belonging during a very short campus tour. An effective visit should invoke a sense of attraction and create an enduring emotional attachment with the physical campus. “Once a prospective student and their family leaves the campus tour, schools hope they will remember how beautiful

the spaces are and understand that the school invests in their customers,” explained Chip Young of Ayers Saint Gross architectural firm.

“There are many important ways in which ways brands augment experience, creating a sense of place where people thrive,” explained Eileen Jones of Perkins+Will. “It can create a feeling of hearth and home on campus. It can provide a grounding place for those who live on campus, or for commuters, a place to hang out in between events,” she explained.

Tapping outside resources and partners can provide real-world problem-solving experience for students, which can build attachment with the university. At the University of Utah, the Lasonde Entrepreneurial Center exposes students to the entrepreneurial community. Students can take advantage of an environment that provides encouragement, resources, and exposure, explained Craig Hamilton of Cannon Design, which is designing the Lasonde Center in association with EDA Architects, Salt Lake City.

At Clemson University, the Watt Innovation Center will be the first center of its type, paving new ground

in academics for the 21st century, according to founding director Charles Watt. Providing an environment for cross-disciplinary study and collaboration, it will allow students and faculty to work side-by-side with government agencies and industry partners (including Haworth) to explore and discover new concepts and solve complex problems, noted Watt, former dean of the Clemson College of Business & Behavioral Science, as well as an alumnus, benefactor, and professor.

Such leading edge partnerships provide a meaningful focus that is a differentiator in the marketplace of higher education. These partnerships, and the physical space they inhabit, form part of the brand story and message that is communicated both through the spaces and programs being offered.

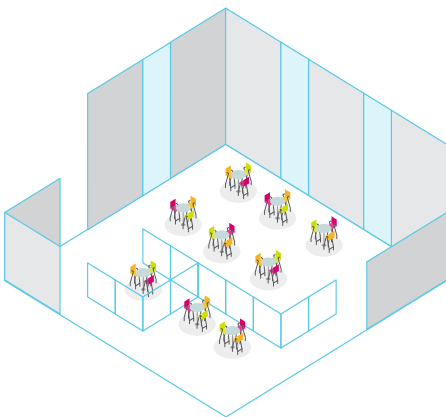
Dropout rates are a concern for those starting their freshman year. Student attrition can impact a school's ranking and its financial footing. Each year, 25 percent of first year college students do not return to the college or university they started with for their second year. For a private institution, a 20 percent attrition rate can mean 100 or more students lost, at \$30,000 or more per student. Improving retention rates is one of the best strategies for maintaining revenue streams. In particular, supporting freshmen in the first six weeks—the make-or-break period for a student's academic, social and emotional engagement—is the key to a successful transition and improved retention.¹

¹ Bryan Matthews, 2009

5. Employ architectural and design elements to drive the brand message

Branding is not just about applying environmental graphics of images and words to a wall. Elements of design, scale, proportion, line, pattern, and shape can also form the message at different scales within branded environments.

External public spaces could serve as a gateway, an entry zone into the more private working areas of the institution. For instance, within the main building, a reception area could provide numerous visual cues that create a distinguishable identity for the different units and capabilities within the institution. This common identity could support the positioning of different centers within the institution, and promote sharing of information among these groups. The reception and other public spaces could display information about culture and achievements.



- **Size and scale of architectural elements convey values and behaviors**

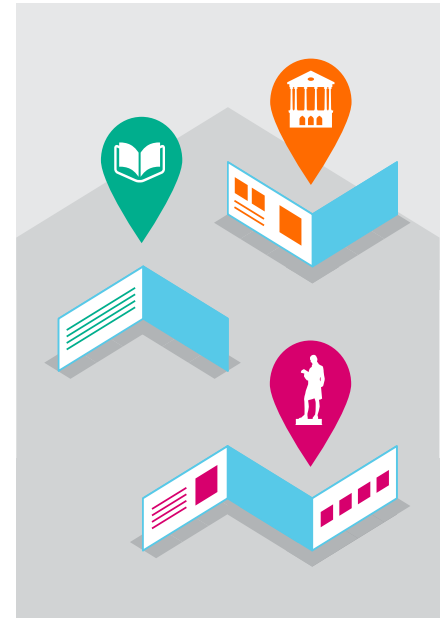
Double-height spaces and windows with expansive views suggest a large gathering point. Similarly, architectural treatments can add a more human scale to a voluminous space if intimacy is part of the brand. Glass on multiple walls creates a greater sense of space and may help to suggest a transparent approach to information sharing. Integrating casual social areas into grand spaces demonstrates a school's interest in supporting interaction and idea exchange.

- **Colors and textures of construction materials add context to a building**

"Materials should be authentic to place and integrate into the formation of experience you have with this particular building," advised Eileen Jones of Perkins+Will. "The way the materials connect to the view, mountains, or other elements of the environment create a sense of place and a unique identity that says you can't be anywhere else but at that university."

Staying true to the original rich and traditional materials respects the heritage of a campus filled with historic buildings, explained Doug McCoach, RTKL. In other instances, such as dorm spaces, clean and contemporary finishes can signal up-to-date surroundings consistent with the comforts of home.

Color—which can be quiet and restrained or boldly expressed—plays a significant role in branding environments. It can be used to send a subtle message that connects and builds continuity within a campus palette, explained Perkins+Will's Eileen Jones. This is much the same concept that is used with branding corporate logos and literature. A consistent color palette can connect disparate elements in a subtle way.



- **Environmental graphics make good storyboards**

Literal messages can tell the story via film on glass, a series of framed pictures, banners, or other two-dimensional graphics. When presented in a series, they help illustrate a tour guide's story (e.g., notable history, distinguished alumni) as they walk visitors through the space. For instance, a university with a strong legacy of athletics wanted to give equal play to its strength in academics and did so via a museum to each area, within a single space. Similarly, employee and donor recognition elements within a space can honor benefactors, celebrate staff, and reflect the institution's history and purpose.

- **Surface features continue the story within the space**

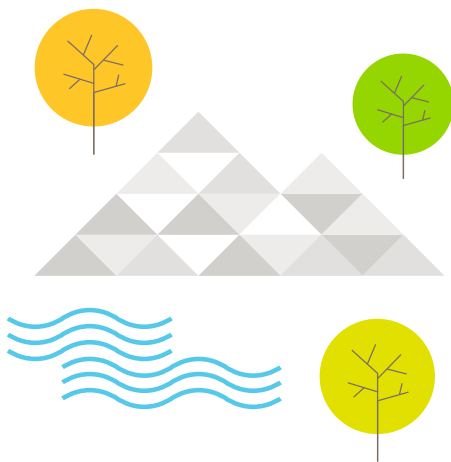
A variety of textures and finishes such as metallic, glossy, and shiny versus soft, warm, and woody can convey different messages and emotions: technology, humility, the human factor. "Dialing up" the colors and finishes can suggest that the institution is undergoing cultural change.

“Today’s classrooms and presentations tend to be multi-sensory.”

- **Connecting inside learning spaces with outside elements communicates brand**

“While yesterday’s classrooms closed off the outside in an effort to focus attention onto the lecturer, today’s classrooms are more engaged with context,” explained Chip Young of Ayers Saint Gross. “Today’s classrooms and presentations tend to be multi-sensory, in an approach that embraces the setting. Instead of closing off a distraction, an academic space in an urban environment with expansive views of an active waterway is now celebrated. Large windows with panoramic views, natural lighting, and furnished outdoor spaces enhance academic settings rather than disrupt them.

“For example, fabric-mesh window shading is preferred over solid slat blinds since it allows for natural lighting and views after the shades are closed,” said Young. “Occupying today’s classrooms for long periods of time is more comfortable and therefore conducive to learning. Experiencing these types of academic spaces is another way to show students that they’re at the forefront of education,” he added.



- **Emerging space types for social interaction, such as cafés, drive brand and values**

Not only does a café provide access to refreshments, it also creates place for social interaction, group work, and learning. Furnishings within a comfortable café space can soften a traditionally sterile space such as the campus library and encourage students to use the space for informal meetings and gatherings, as well as study and research. A café space can also convey an up-to-date image of an institution and reinforce institutional values of collaboration and interaction—while getting students more engaged with each other and the school.



- **Furnishings reflect values and promote desired behaviors**

Comfortable lounge furnishings, when combined with extensive technology and amenities, encourage lingering and discourse, supporting learning and interactions that build connections and a sense of place. Moreover, furniture plays a huge role in creating the aesthetics, tone, and atmosphere of the space, explained Chip Young of Ayers Saint Gross. “The quality and beauty of furniture can convey how much the school invests in its customers. At the same time, the furniture has to perform and meet the functions desired. We want furniture to be compelling and creative, and at the same time, be a workhorse as a very strong performer,” he added. Within meeting spaces, comfortable seating around a low table provides a generous worksurface area to spread out backpacks, tablets, laptops, and snacks. Providing storage space for backpacks and other materials in chairs or tables maximizes the workspace by reducing clutter. Within a variety of meeting spaces, these furniture elements drive the brand message that informal collaboration behaviors are valued.



- **Available technology, including mobile technology, helps tell the brand story**

To position itself as progressive through technology and design of space, the University of Alabama at Birmingham focused on developing active areas where students can collaborate. “We used Haworth’s Workware® technology, which lets users sit down, plug in, and share information via large monitors, as an example of the level of technology and resources we provide to the students,” related Carolyn Farley, UAB. Use of media walls adds instructor mobility and opens up room orientation options by eliminating cords and cables. Another tactic used by schools to convey a progressive image is the support of mobile technology, including ease of connection to power and Wi-Fi within not only traditional learning spaces but also informal meeting areas and social interaction spaces—both indoors and outdoors. Technology also includes flat screen solutions to allow students maximum opportunity to share and display visual information at many locations.

Branding through the physical space is a key opportunity for higher education

Blending place with interaction and connection to community provides a chance to move beyond designing only for function. It can enhance the sense of place and celebrate the spirit and physical nature of campus, according to Craig Hamilton of Cannon Design.

Integrating branding within a designed environment requires a deft touch with a large design palette including campus plan, exterior spaces, building design, interior design, furnishings, environmental graphics, landscaping, imagery, and signage. Many factors—themes, icons, words, places, products, and services—come together to embody the mood, ambience, and feelings associated with a brand's unique personality. Successful projects integrate design and branding to deliver spaces that engage the senses, communicate culture, and elicit engagement.

The physical environment has the capacity to communicate a message to multiple audiences—employees, funding sources, future faculty and students, and the community. The physical aspect of the institution should communicate the brand, culture, and values as soon as one enters the campus. This experience can be part of an integrated theme that engages the visitor and leaves a distinct impression.

Successful branding creates an educational experience that alumni cherish. It's not just about the diploma, but also the experience of reaching that degree—one that alumni speak about to their grandchildren with special memories and an attachment to their alma mater.

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