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DESIGNING FOR SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

SUPPORT SPACES IN HIGHER ED ENVIRONMENTS



THIS IS THE SECOND ARTICLE IN A THREE-PART SERIES. READ THE FIRST ARTICLE **HERE**

Support spaces beyond the classroom play a vital role in shaping the student experience and should be thoughtfully considered in any renovation or new construction project. These areas foster collaboration, connection, and a sense of community. Equally important is their placement—locating these spaces strategically across campus helps ensure they are accessible, visible, and effectively support student success.

To inform these spaces, HCM believes it is important to look back at students' earlier experiences in their elementary education environments. Understanding what incoming students are used to — and what they expect — can inform more thoughtful, effective spaces in higher education.

When planning learning environments, either new or renovated, consider these questions:

- What skills do your graduating students need to succeed?
- What tools and spaces are necessary to support that growth?
- How does your space strategy align with the broader campus master plan?
- What experiences will your campus provide to build those skills?



WHY IT MATTERS:

Employers increasingly seek graduates with critical thinking skills, technology proficiency (including AI), and essential soft skills such as communication and emotional intelligence which can be best taught through face-to-face interactions.

01
SCHEDULED GROUP STUDY

Private/together rooms support small-group focus

02
UNSCHEDULED LEARNING

Public/together rooms foster open collaboration and public/alone spaces allow individuals to work independently while staying connected.

03
FINDING THE FOCUS

Clear wayfinding and environmental graphics make study spaces easier to discover, helping students feel inspired and more connected to their campus environment.



BORN AROUND
1997–2012
GEN Z
(CURRENTLY IN HIGH SCHOOL)

BORN AROUND
2013–2025
GEN ALPHA
(CURRENTLY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL)

> Unlike previous generations, today's elementary and high school students have grown up with technology as a fundamental part of their upbringing. As a result, they will likely spend a significant portion of their lives online and have less face-to-face interaction with peers.

Adele Wilson
Education Planner and National Market Sector Leader
for HCM's PK-12 Practice



4.5 HOURS/DAY

AVERAGE TIME GENERATION ALPHA SPENDS ONLINE

01
SCHEDULED GROUP STUDY



A GOOD RULE OF THUMB

plan one **enclosed study room for every 100–150 students who will regularly use the building.**

Because employers expect graduates to have both technical expertise and the soft skills to collaborate effectively, today's students are being taught to work together. This emphasis on collaboration has made enclosed study rooms—often called Private/Together spaces—highly sought after. These spaces give students a place to work through group projects or prepare presentations without distraction. They encourage extended academic conversations and community building around shared challenges. For example, Colorado State University is renovating and expanding the Andrew G. Clark buildings to better serve their students. The building is the most heavily used academic facility on campus, where 99% of students take at least one class during their college career, regardless of major.



During the post-occupancy analysis of the Colorado State University Biology Building, the three first-floor Private/Together study rooms were found to have higher usage than similar rooms on upper floors.

The 320,000 GSF building is expected to serve more than 6,000 students daily. The proposed design includes 38 dedicated student study spaces ranging in size from single-person phone booths to group rooms for up to eight people.

> “As architects designing for higher education, we recognize that study rooms are among the most in-demand spaces on any college or university campus—we simply can’t build enough of them. Thoughtful planning, flexible layouts, and strategic placement can transform these spaces into high-impact learning environments supporting academic achievement and campus community.
>
> **Travis Bostic**
> AIA, HCM Principal, Design Leader



Using glass walls in study rooms gives students the ability to write directly on the surface while creating a Private/Together environment that feels open and connected. The transparency allows natural daylight to fill the space and maintains a sense of security by keeping the rooms visually accessible. Plus, when students use standard dry erase markers, the glass is easy to clean.

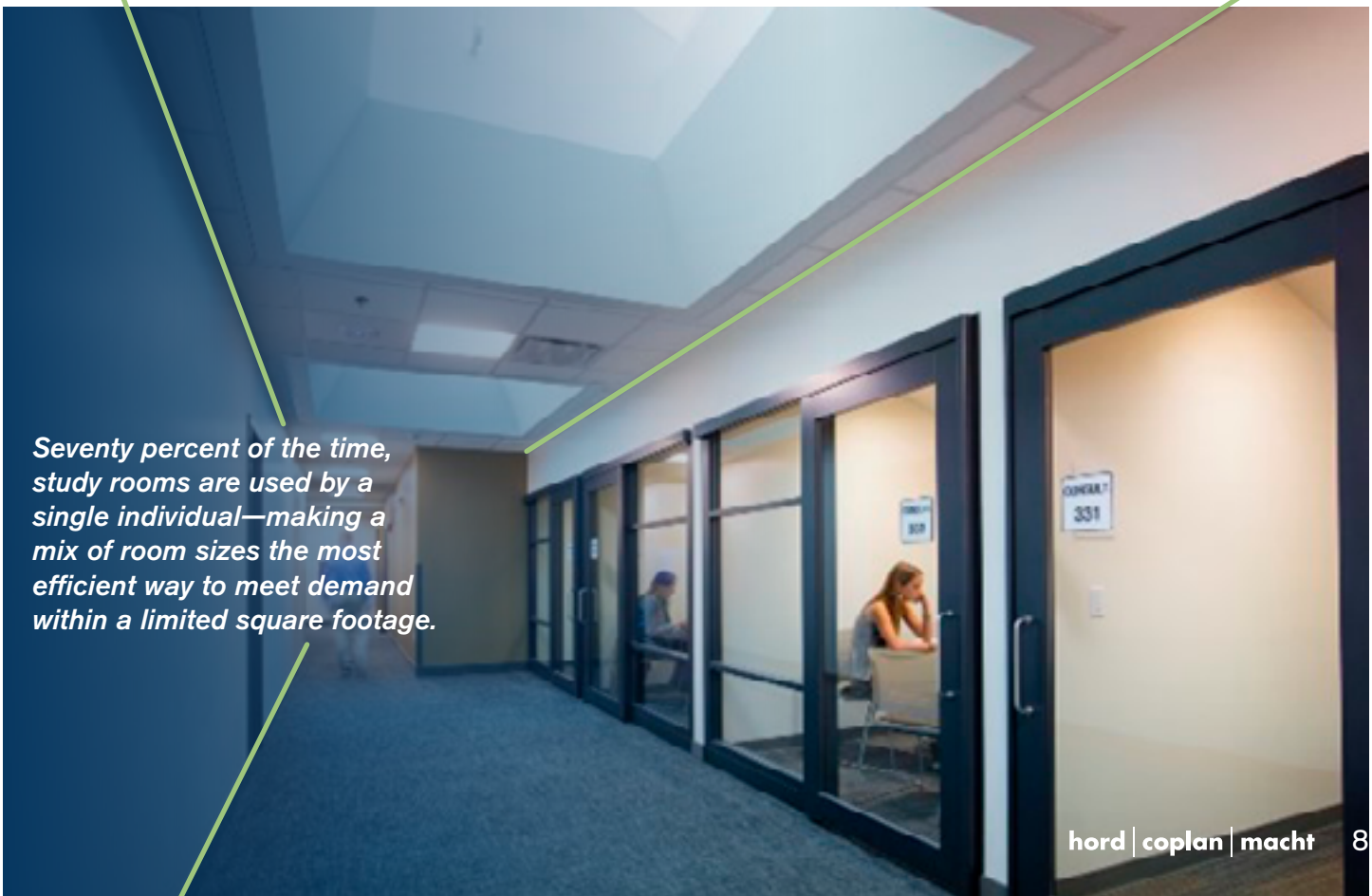
Most colleges and universities have added private study rooms to new and existing buildings around campus. Are they working? To answer this question, HCM studied past projects to analyze best practices around the design of these spaces. The study revealed that students typically used private study rooms on the first floor for an average of 5.3 hours daily. Additional study spaces, open and enclosed, near the front entry were used by students 67% more frequently than other study spaces within the building. Best practice indicates that proximity to the entrance significantly impacts student usage and improves the utilization of these spaces.

The research found that small study rooms are by far students' top choice. Interestingly, 70% of the time, a single student used a room built for four. This suggests it may make sense to design more one- or two-person rooms instead of larger ones.

Doing so would create more rooms within the same footprint, giving more students access and boosting overall use of the building. In addition, small open 'cove-like' spaces near common areas can give students a spot for quick conversations before heading back to a private study area. Using smaller furniture and tighter groupings can also help create a more inviting, efficient layout.

Another lesson from HCM's research is to avoid going overboard on transparency. Students prefer a little privacy. If your campus is concerned about safety for a fully enclosed study room, consider partial walls or glass partitions with a translucent film to create a sense of privacy without entirely surrounding the rooms. This eliminates cost and fulfills the goal of a Private/Together space. We observed that study rooms with three or more walls of glass were used less than study rooms with only one wall of glass; 16% less so save your budget for other opportunities.

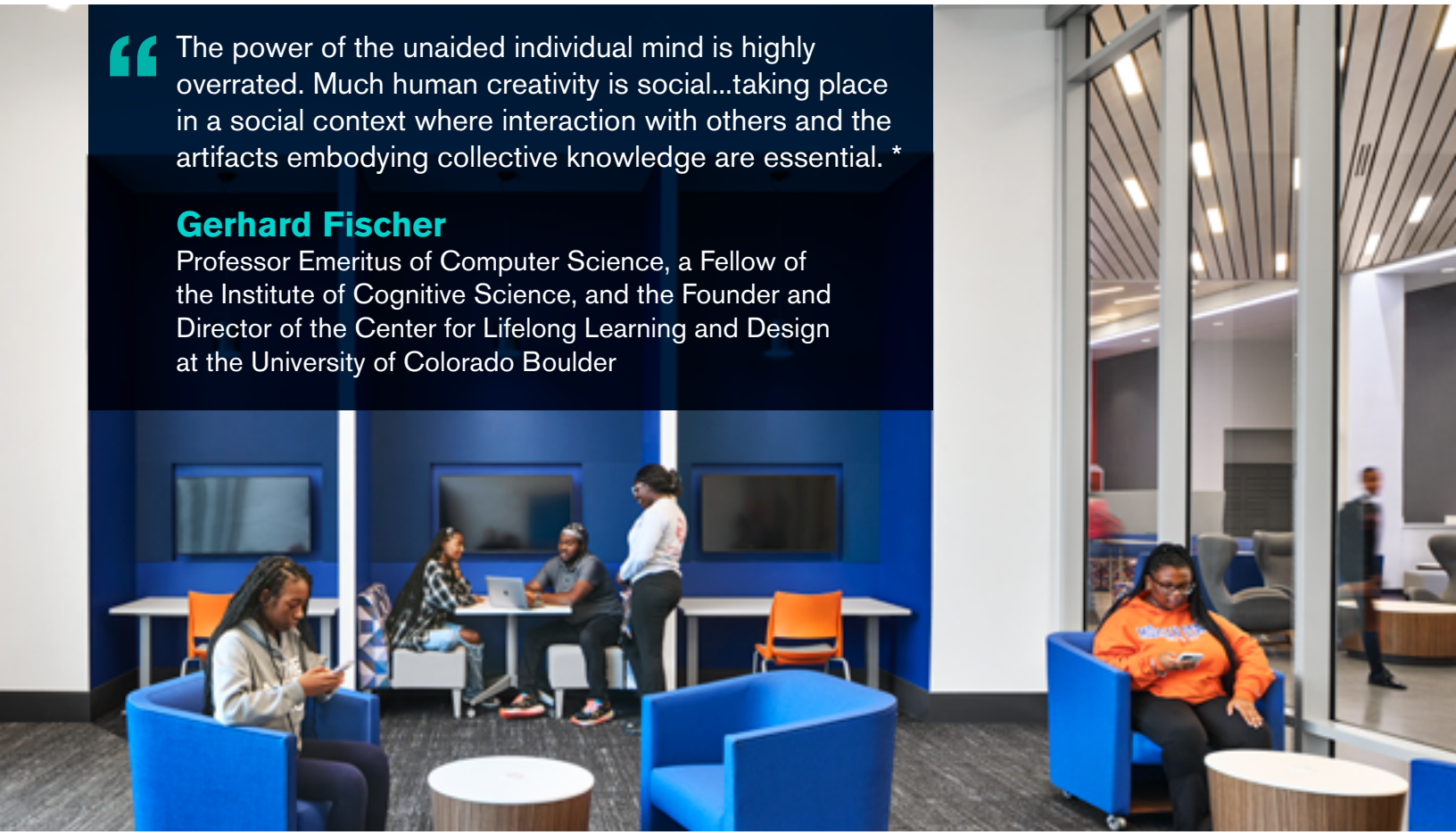
HCM's post-occupancy analysis found that study rooms with three or more glass walls were used 16% less than those with only one glass wall.



Seventy percent of the time, study rooms are used by a single individual—making a mix of room sizes the most efficient way to meet demand within a limited square footage.

02
UNSCHEDULED LEARNING

> “The power of the unaided individual mind is highly overrated. Much human creativity is social...taking place in a social context where interaction with others and the artifacts embodying collective knowledge are essential. *
>
> **Gerhard Fischer**
> Professor Emeritus of Computer Science, a Fellow of the Institute of Cognitive Science, and the Founder and Director of the Center for Lifelong Learning and Design at the University of Colorado Boulder



Enclosed study rooms aren’t the only places where learning happens. Informal zones like lounges, alcoves and open seating areas also support academic and social growth —especially when they give students choice and comfort. Students often want to be “alone together”— near others but with some sense of personal space. In our research, 54% of students were observed studying alone, even in group seating areas. The “average acceptable social distance to a stranger” is about 4 feet, and students tend to occupy entire furniture groupings by themselves if that distance isn’t maintained.

Design solutions like high-backed seating can offer semi-private experiences in open areas. These kinds of spaces support reflection, recharging, and chance encounters that strengthen community.

Still, even academic buildings benefit from social zones — especially just outside classrooms. These “pre-function” areas can be hubs for peer discussion, group meetups, and informal faculty interactions.

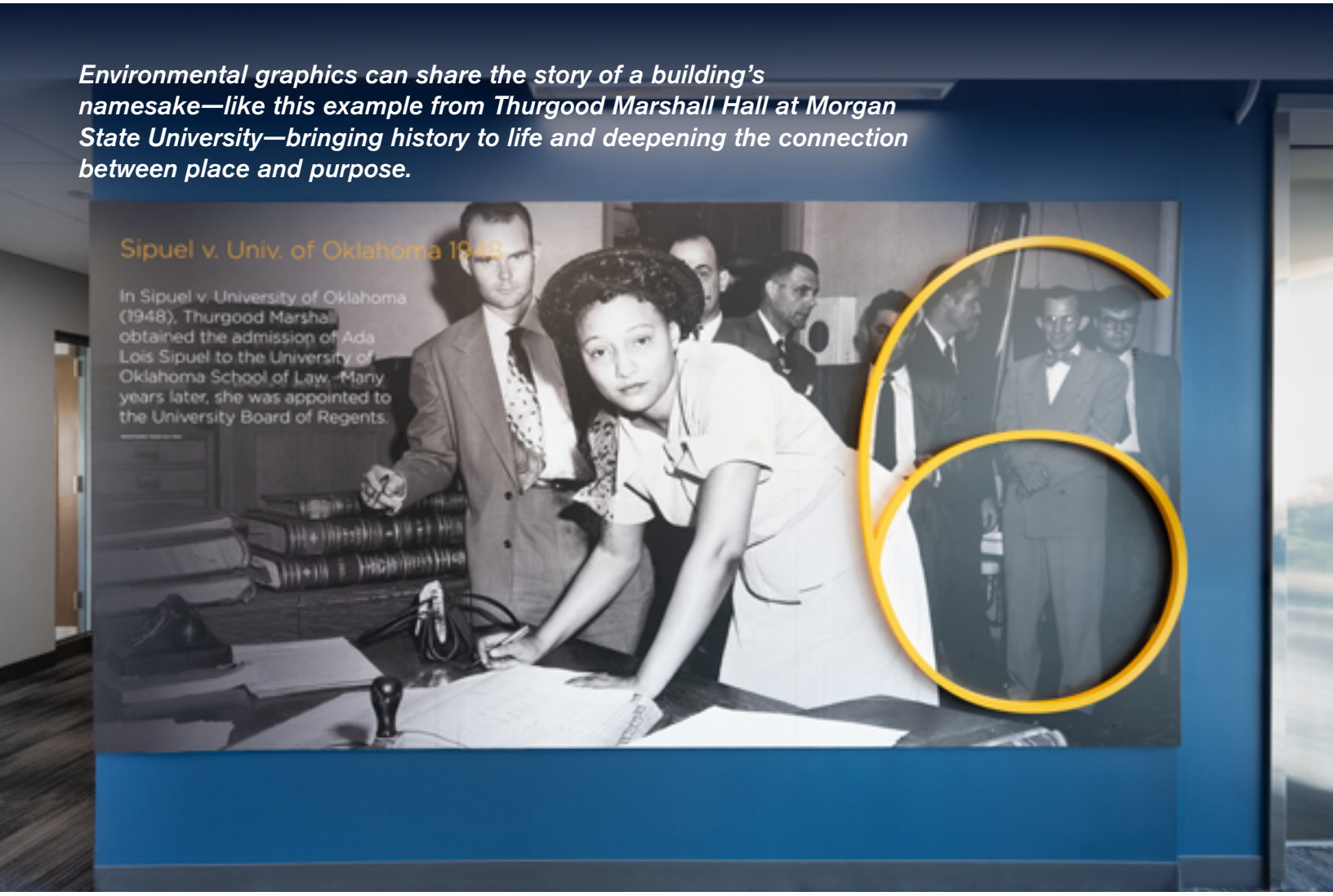
Faculty office areas should also accommodate waiting and conversation. Comfortable seating near food or coffee can turn a simple hallway into a sticky, social environment. A good rule of thumb: 6–10 square feet per student near classrooms, and 1–2 seats outside each faculty office for students waiting during office hours.



Strategically placing small study areas near faculty offices fosters informal interactions and supports out-of-class learning, while preserving privacy and acoustic separation from students who might otherwise congregate immediately outside office doors.



03
FINDING THE FOCUS



Environmental graphics can share the story of a building's namesake—like this example from Thurgood Marshall Hall at Morgan State University—bringing history to life and deepening the connection between place and purpose.

As colleges add more small study rooms and tucked-away learning spaces, wayfinding becomes essential. Students need clear, intuitive cues to easily discover and use these areas—otherwise valuable spaces risk going underutilized.

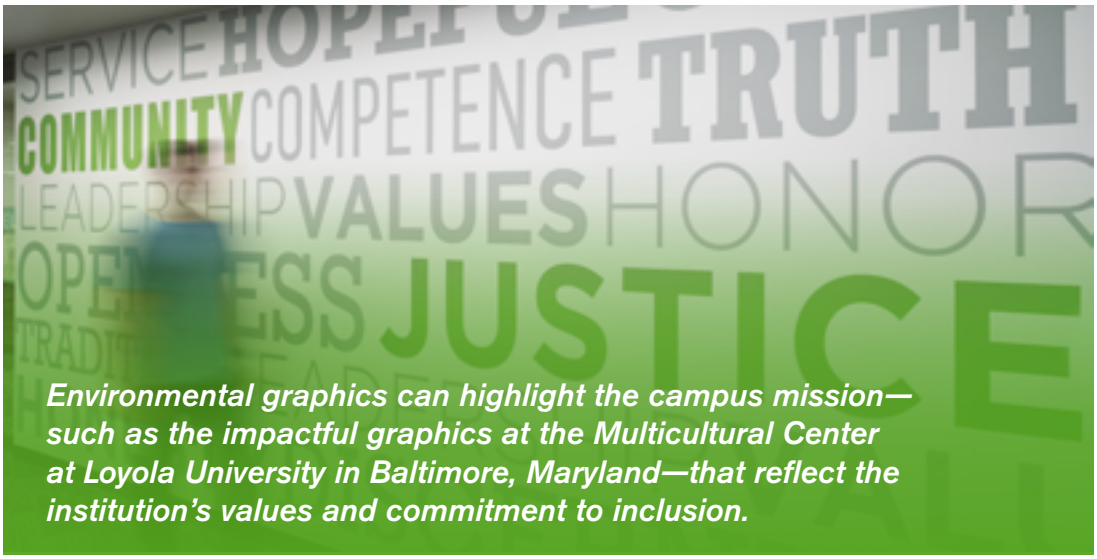
Environmental graphics and signage do more than point the way. They can bring a building's story to life, connect students to campus history, and reinforce institutional values. For example, Thurgood Marshall Hall at Morgan State University uses graphics to honor its namesake, while the "Story of Aims Wall" at Aims Community College shares the broader narrative of the institution. At Loyola University's Multicultural Center, graphics highlight the mission of inclusion and belonging.

This storytelling side effect not only makes navigation easier but also enriches the student experience. Wayfinding systems layered with environmental graphics help students orient themselves, find study areas, and feel more connected to their campus. In this way, practical navigation tools double as powerful storytelling devices that inspire pride and strengthen community.

Environmental Graphics can illustrate the story of the institution—like the "Story of Aims Wall" at Aims Community College in Greeley, Colorado—celebrating its history, mission, and impact in a visually engaging way.

SCAN QR CODE TO VIEW AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE ON HCM'S ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHIC DESIGN

OR CLICK HERE



Environmental graphics can highlight the campus mission—such as the impactful graphics at the Multicultural Center at Loyola University in Baltimore, Maryland—that reflect the institution's values and commitment to inclusion.

In summary, successful learning environments support the whole student—academically, socially, and emotionally. By designing spaces that reflect how, where, and with whom today's students learn, we create places that prepare them for graduation and for life. Through the integration of learning support spaces and environmental graphic design, institutions can transform their campuses into inspiring, navigable environments that foster pride, strengthen community, and support student success. Look for the final installment of this three part series: Furnishing Success: Furniture Best Practices in Higher Education

Stay tuned for Article 3: Furnishing Success: Furniture Best Practices in Higher Education in our series on Designing for Success in Higher Education

Sources: www.nikolaroza.com: Gen Alpha Social Media Usage: Statistics, Facts and Trends Guide for 2025, January 12, 2025.

** Social Creativity: Making All Voices Heard by Gerhard Fischer*



Thoughtful design of student study spaces can transform a building from a simple instructional facility into a vibrant hub of student interaction and learning.

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