



HOT TOPICS IN STUDENT LIVING UNIT DESIGN

Design Considerations for Higher Education Student Housing | The Pros and Cons

Designing student housing for higher education institutions involves **balancing flexibility, durability, cost, and the social dynamics** of student life.

At the recent 2024 Campus Home. LIVE! ACUHO-I conference, three key debates in this realm emerged — wardrobes versus built-in closets, lofted versus grounded beds, and private versus shared living quarters—each have significant implications for cost and facilities planning. Each presents pros and cons worth considering when discussing student living unit design.

WARDROBES VS. BUILT-IN CLOSETS

The choice between wardrobes and built-in closets impacts flexibility, durability, and safety. Wardrobes offer flexibility, allowing students to rearrange their units as they please. This adaptability can enhance the feeling of personal space and comfort.

However, wardrobes are less durable, often requiring more frequent replacements due to wear and tear. Additionally, they must be equipped with specialty breakaway hanging bars to address anti-ligature concerns, which can add to the overall cost. In contrast, built-in closets are more durable and represent a lower overall capital cost. They provide ample storage possibilities, accommodating a wider range of clothing items and minimizing the need for frequent replacements. However, their immovable nature requires careful planning and can limit the number of residents per room. The fixed space occupied by built-in closets might reduce the overall flexibility of the living unit but offers a long-term, cost-effective solution for storage needs.

LOFTED VS. GROUNDED BED FURNITURE

The decision between lofted and grounded bed furniture affects space utilization and student satisfaction. Lofted beds are popular because they save floor space, potentially allowing for more residents in a single room and reducing the overall footprint of the housing unit. This can lead to significant construction cost savings across the entire student housing facility.



However, grounded beds, which cannot be lofted, offer less flexibility in terms of space utilization. Despite this, many facilities professionals observe that students often begin the academic year with lofted beds but end up un-lofting them due to discomfort with ladders or the preference for sleeping closer to the ground. Additionally, allowing students to configure lofted beds themselves can sometimes lead to injuries or damage to the furniture.

PRIVATE VS. SHARED LIVING QUARTERS

The debate between private and shared living quarters centers around student socialization, mental health, and cost. Traditionally, shared living arrangements, especially for freshmen, are believed to teach healthy boundaries, conflict resolution skills, and foster social connections. These “built-in” social networks can prevent isolation and help students acclimate to campus life and support student success.

However, the post-pandemic landscape has seen a growing demand for private accommodations. Some facilities leaders worry that private quarters might become a deciding factor for incoming students. While private living units significantly increase development and construction costs, costs often passed to students, they also cater to students’ desire for personal space and can potentially attract more applicants. Nonetheless, many experts argue that shared living arrangements are crucial for socialization and campus culture.

Recent research has even suggested that too much privacy for students leads to reduced GPAs because it reduces the socialization and chance encounters (Brown et al., 2019). During the pandemic, students in private rooms reported higher levels of isolation, suggesting that, despite initial intimidation, sharing living space can be an essential growth experience for freshmen.

These design considerations—wardrobes versus built-in closets, lofted versus grounded beds, and private versus shared living quarters—are more than just granular details. They have far-reaching implications for cost, durability, flexibility, and the overall student experience. Balancing these factors requires thoughtful planning and a deep understanding of student needs and institutional goals. By carefully considering each option, higher education institutions can create student housing that not only meets practical requirements but also enhances student well-being and fosters a vibrant campus community.

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Brown, J., Volk, F., & Spratto, E. M. (2019, June 17). The hidden structure: The influence of residence hall design ... Taylor & Francis Online. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19496591.2019.1611590>