

American School & University



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FACILITY PLANNING

“This is Our House”

With the right planning and design, colleges can maximize the value of campus convocation centers and enhance the school's identity.

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Millions of people who have attended a college or university have fond memories of going to events at a campus convocation center.

These versatile buildings are gathering places for cap-and-gown ceremonies, cheering teams to victory, attending concerts and all manner of life and culture unique to a modern college experience.

In order to give students, alumni, faculty and donors that “*this is our house*” feeling, a center must be designed and built to enhance the social, academic and athletic presence of the school. Here are a few important considerations when planning to build or renovate a convocation center.

A true multipurpose facility

Great sightlines, ease of entry and exit, excellent lighting and quality acoustics are must-haves to create a modern convocation center.

“A convocation center must be multiuse to achieve the greatest value for the institution,” says Kurt Ludwick, senior associate and Sports and Recreation Studio Director for McMillan Pazdan Smith Architecture. “A venue used only 50 times a year is impractical, especially for institutions with limited infrastructure budgets.”

The design should provide ample parking, seating, and health and safety measures that create an inviting atmosphere. Behind the scenes, a facility should have convenient paths to bring outside items into the building, then take them from the holding area to the floorspace.

Outfitting state-of-the-art sound, lighting and visual display systems should not be an afterthought. The initial design should account for the placement and use of the technology to maximize the equipment’s effectiveness and aesthetic fit.

Another critical element is having versatile and mobile seating to accommodate events of different sizes. Building capacity goes beyond how many tickets can be sold. After all, certain athletic events are improved by the feeling of a “packed house.” Think of the advantage of a Duke University basketball home game at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

At other times, the venue benefits from accommodating the free mobility of all its guests. The Jerry Richardson Indoor Stadium at Wofford College, for example, has virtually no place where the game or event can’t be seen or heard.

A design should consider the anticipated attendance for a particular sport and then determine the maximum desired capacity. During rivalry games, temporary seating may be brought in if necessary to accommodate more fans.

Code requires restrooms based on the number of fixed seats, so it may be best to design to the average attendance to keep the restroom counts reasonable.

Designated Spaces

Convocation centers are social interaction spaces as much as they are event venues.

The building's utility must be balanced by the inclusion of special areas geared to meet certain people's expectations and needs. How many VIP areas will be needed, and how will they be assigned? Suite, media, club and lodge seating capacity should all be calculated with consideration of current sponsors and an eye toward future growth.

Of course, a venue's design is about more than just its main events. It should have designated places where students and alumni feel welcome to gather and socialize before, during and after events.

Easy access to merchandise and concession sales areas also is important. Great food and beverage service enhances the social interaction within a venue, and ensuring accessible concession areas improves the building's economy. Rentable meeting rooms and backlit advertising opportunities also have become staples of most recently constructed buildings of this type.

Consider if any campus groups will make the center their permanent work site. Many centers include coaches' offices, practice courts and media rooms equipped for modern campus broadcasting. The University of North Georgia's convocation center filled a specific need by including specialized classrooms and lab areas to house the school's kinesiology department.

Practically speaking, the design of the loading, storage, custodial, restroom and staff-only facilities will have the greatest impact on how efficiently events are managed.

These areas also make the center attractive to potential renters and additional revenue sources generated by concert tours, conferences, trade shows, receptions and conference tournaments.

Safety and Sustainability Certifications

For buildings of this scope and scale, LEED certification is always an admirable pursuit. In the long run, LEED can help a school or university save money by reducing energy, water and resource consumption.

Green Globes certification is another approach that can be addressed in the planning stages. A good architectural firm will work with a school's planning committee to determine what sustainable building practices suit the institution's needs best.

However, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, creating a WELL building may be the most important certification to pursue.

WELL Certification uses a flexible framework of registration options meant to leverage a building's ability to improve health and human experience through design.

The most rigorous standard, WELL v2™, includes specific achievements for air, water, light, sound and movement qualities.

Backed by scientific research, WELL buildings deliver more thoughtful and intentional spaces that enhance human well-being. For a public building's longevity, WELL Certification makes a lot of sense, as society seems to be moving toward an era where these types of building standards will become the norm.

Branding and wayfinding

Today's convocation centers don't just have large land footprints to fill, they also must represent the brand traditions of the school.

"In sports design today, graphics and branding in an athletic venue can make the difference between an average game day experience and an impactful one," Ludwick says.

These places are both monuments to success and beacons pointing toward a prosperous future. Detailed design discussions should take place to decide whether to match existing campus architecture, present a new type of architecture or find an attractive in-between.

“The form of a new building may be quite modern, but can still be contextual if the brick, stone, metal panels and glazing match other campus colors or like materials,” Ludwick says.

Whether a school’s reputation is new or steeped in long-standing tradition, the branding and identity of the center need to be built into the design itself, not just printed on the signage out front.

Some good wayfinding principles to consider in the design of convocation centers:

- Long sight lines so visitors can easily get oriented and know what to expect.
- A display of easy-to-read maps and floor plans.
- Clearly designated navigational paths, so people don’t get confused about to which direction to go.
- Narrative markers that tell a school’s history and ground a building in the bigger context of the college’s mission and vision.

All these elements should be designed in a manner that reflects the school’s brand without creating visual clutter or distraction.

A well-designed convocation center not only becomes an important and iconic part of a college campus, but also serves as a visual landmark for the surrounding community.

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