

# 4 TIPS to Transform Your Admissions Building and Attract More Students

**A**ttracting and retaining students is an increasingly competitive prospect for higher education institutions. Colleges and universities face an ever-expanding list of internal and external challenges, including a growing dependence on revenue streams such as tuition and fees. As the higher education business model evolves, leaders are wise to recognize the inherent value in their institutions' built environments. Facilities professionals know well that school facilities often serve as either a drain on college and university resources or as a key support for their institution's mission. Perhaps no facility is a better example of this potential tension than admissions offices.

For many years, admissions offices were viewed simply as a gathering place to share information or a meeting point to begin and end a campus tour. Those days are long gone. Recent research illustrates the powerful effect these facilities have on attracting new students, the lifeblood of any educational institution. For example, a 2007 Eduventures survey of high school juniors and seniors found that the campus visit was the student's most trusted source of information. Other studies, such as APPA's report, *The Impact of Facilities on the Recruitment and Retention of Students*, have reported that a campus visit is the most important factor in a student's decision on where to apply and that students are likely to matriculate after a campus visit.

The design of admissions offices, whether in new buildings or when renovating existing facilities, plays a critical role in any campus visit. As such, these facilities have a direct impact on the ability of institutions to attract new students and generate additional revenue. From capitalizing on the arrival sequence to creating emotional connections and delivering efficient workspaces, the four best practices for admissions office design outlined below showcase the powerful role these facilities play in furthering a school's mission and financial health.

Photo by Ansel Olson





Virginia Tech Admissions and Visitor Center lobby with view of campus.

## Tip #1

### COMPOSING THE ARRIVAL SEQUENCE

It all starts at the beginning and, just as with meeting new people, the first impression made by a college, university, or school matters. Fortunately for facilities professionals, the admissions office provides the opportunity to frame that first impression in whatever way you desire. These facilities typically mark the entry point to a campus and should be located to reflect this vital role.

Creating a welcoming environment begins at the point of entry. Whether building a new facility, relocating to a different building, or renovating an existing admissions office, location matters. The site should have easy access with clear directional signage. Think also about the walk from the parking lot to the admissions center's front door. Not unlike your home, what does that walk convey about your institution? Is it attractive and well maintained? Don't forget about accessibility. To create a truly inclusive environment, the facility should be easily accessible for all, including extended family members.

An admissions office should offer a gracious arrival that sets



Virginia Tech Admissions and Visitor Center

Photo by Joel Lassiter

a positive tone for the visit. Ensuring such an arrival requires a certain level of choreography, from planning how someone will enter the facility to optimizing their experience as they move around the admissions office. An enjoyable visitor experience is reinforced by thoughtful design of the surrounding landscape and hospitable interiors.

Virginia Tech, for example, incorporated these details when the university built its new Visitor and Undergraduate Admissions Center. The facility, located adjacent to the main campus entry on a knoll overlooking campus, includes a glass wall in the lobby where a prospective student and their family can soak in the bucolic campus and picture themselves exploring it. Additionally, the school understood that many visitors travel for several hours to reach the university. In order to instinctively meet the needs of these guests, the design included benches along the walk between the parking area and building entry so visitors have a place for a brief respite.

## Tip #2

### **MAKING THE PRESENTATION SPACE MULTIPURPOSE**

Every room in an admission center is an important part of that facility's fabric and its ability to both create an inviting atmosphere and frame a guest's experience with the broader university. However, of all the rooms in the center, the presentation space is typically the largest and most impactful.

## TOP QUESTIONS FOR YOUR ADMISSIONS OFFICE

### **1. Arrange the Arrival Sequence**

- Where is the facility located?
- Is it accessible?
- Have you choreographed the visitor experience?

### **2. Make the Presentation Room Multipurpose**

- Can this room be configured for various groups?
- Do you need multiple rooms?
- What is the transition to the campus tour?

### **3. Craft Memorable and Emotional Connections**

- What feeling does the facility evoke?
- How does it reinforce your institution's brand?
- Where are the "wow" moments?

### **4. Create Effective and Collaborative Workspaces**

- Does the facility serve the needs of admissions staff members?
- Have you clearly created public, semipublic, and private zones?
- Does the facility provide collaborative work environments?

As many facilities professionals understand, managing large and cavernous spaces is difficult; but the presentation room must enhance a visitor's experience. A presentation room's ideal design allows for groups of multiple sizes. Arranging furniture to meet the needs of a group will make a large space feel more intimate. Variable seating layouts require ample furniture storage nearby and a selection of furniture that is easy to move. Depending on the size of an admissions office, consider having multiple presentation spaces. For example, if the presentation room has a capacity of more than 100 people, it's best to provide an additional meeting room, which could accommodate smaller groups of 35 or fewer, for example.

The architecture and infrastructure of a presentation room should fit its size. Based on classical proportions and desirable viewing angles for the presentation screen and presenters, the ratio of the width to length of the room should be between 1:1 and 1:1.6. A ratio greater than 1:2 should be avoided if possible. The ceiling height also needs to be suitable for the room's dimensions and purpose, so it does not feel constricting. Integrating technology in the presentation room is a key feature as well. It's advisable to use technology that's appropriate for a specific institution, its resources, and the expertise of those operating the equipment. The institution's facilities professionals will need to make these determinations in conjunction with IT support staff and/or audiovisual specialists. Given the rapid pace at which technology evolves, colleges and universities shouldn't finalize the selection of this technology until the project is within six to nine months of completion.

Finally, a truly multipurpose presentation space will perfectly set up the campus tour that usually follows the information session. The presentation room should be situated to allow for easy access to begin the tour and provide adjacent exterior spaces that can be used for groups to mingle before departure. This smooth transition to the tour, sometimes referred to as "the golden walk," is one way that a university can create a memorable connection.

## Tip #3

### CRAFTING THE MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE

Attending an educational institution is often the biggest investment a person or family will make, aside from buying a home. Universities must connect on an emotional level with prospective students and their families to secure that level of fi-

Christopher Newport University—  
Newport Hall West Facade



Photo by Virginia Hamrick



Photo by Ashley Oaks-Clary

beautiful or dramatic focal points can create a strong and lasting impression, particularly when experienced early in the visit.

These memorable moments are created through eye-catching architectural features, such as a two-story lobby space, beautifully appointed presentation rooms with impressive technology, a focal point such as a fireplace, or a breathtaking view. For example, Christopher Newport University's new Admission Welcome Center in Christopher Newport Hall features a well-appointed reception area that is open to a skylit dome above. A beautiful environment such as this one elevates the spirit and creates a strong impression.

## Tip #4

### CREATING EFFECTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACES

With increasing pressure on colleges and universities to keep their costs low, many

campus facilities must serve multiple functions. Admissions offices are no exception, and they can't just be about the visitors. Providing an efficient and effective workspace that also encourages collaboration should be a priority.

Admissions office staff should be located in the same facility to enable adequate supervision of both the campus visit and back-office operations by the Dean of Admission. Thus, establishing public/private zones and ensuring necessary security must be considered when designing, building, and maintaining these facilities. Understanding the various requirements and utilization needs of admissions staff doesn't have to be a daunting task.

Programming questionnaires, for example, are a useful way to understand and record the quantitative, qualitative, and technical requirements for spaces in an admissions office. Customizing these questionnaires for each type of space in the building will provide a vehicle for gathering and filtering input from the staff members who will be using that space most frequently.

The need for clear delineation between public, semipublic, and private areas remains paramount. A well-planned admissions office will create zones organized by the type and frequency of access required. Institutions will need to address specific amenities in these spaces. However, the most effective workspaces are configured to facilitate the efficient performance of tasks. Collaboration areas are important to allow for brainstorming and exchange of ideas.

Traditionally, these spaces have been limited to conference rooms, but providing a small seating area along a corridor, or at

Christopher Newport University—Newport Hall Admissions Lobby

financial commitment. Establishing this connection is one reason that matriculation rates are much higher for students who have toured a campus. Certainly the campus tour is a major opportunity to connect with visitors, from the presentation room transition to the excitement of soaking in the campus environment. But admissions offices can facilitate countless other memorable experiences and emotional connections as well.

Architectural design and identity are powerful tools to consistently reinforce a college or university's brand. Facilities professionals understand the messages that their buildings, landscaping, and campus design send. The importance of these messages is amplified in an admissions office. The facility's primary purpose is to attract potential students, create an inviting atmosphere, and showcase the university in the best possible light (literally and figuratively).

During the planning stages of a new or renovated admissions office, pay particular attention to reinforcing the school's identity and brand. It is important that this facility reflect the university's traditions and vision, as well as the campus's broader context, all of which will impact a student's impressions. Emotional connections are crafted through an immersive experience that reveals an institution's identity, culture, and traditions. Incorporating technology such as touchscreens, augmented or virtual reality, art, and other visuals, is a further way to establish and enhance those connections.

Admissions offices are an ideal canvas to create a "wow" moment. Simply put, aesthetics connect with people's perceptions and emotions. Admissions offices that contain one or two

the perimeter of a workroom, allows for impromptu meetings and collaboration. Ultimately, considering factors such as seating, noise reduction, and desk allocation ensures that workers are more efficient, effective, and collaborative.

### FACILITY INVESTMENTS THAT PAY DIVIDENDS

The four best practices noted above must serve as the foundation for a university's admissions office. A final piece of advice is to be open to new ideas. This suggestion seems like common sense, especially on an academic campus, but is frequently overlooked. As a university begins the process of designing or renovating an admissions office, facilities professionals and school administrators should tour other spaces to understand what features are most appropriate for their project. Don't just look at peer institutions. Think more broadly about the purpose of the admissions office. Tours should include hospitality spaces, hotels and resorts, museums, and visitor centers. Consider visitor experience, configuration of workspace, and architecture and interior design options.

Components from these various facilities can be repurposed for an admissions office. After all, the primary goal of this space on your campus is to create a truly inviting environment that sets the tone for someone's experience with the school.

When possible, it is useful to include the architect and interior designer engaged to design the new or renovated facility on these tours. The benefits are multifaceted: They develop camaraderie, generate ideas and discussion about alternative ways of doing things, provide a frame of reference for the building committee going forward, and serve to bring differing points of view toward consensus. Finally, don't forget to speak with users of the facility; they will share valuable perspectives and identify features that will enhance or detract from their ability to work within and maintain the space.

Investing time and resources into understanding and properly planning an admissions office will deliver the greatest possible return on an institution's investment. These facilities are increasingly critical in the highly competitive admissions landscape. They can make all the

difference, not just in the near term but for years to come, as this type of facility supports a strong pipeline of new students. 

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