

5 things to look for on a college campus that benefit mental health

September 9 2020, by Carly Drake and Diane Bruce Anstine

Researchers have studied college students' mental health for decades. [Even in the 1920s](#), it was clear that the many stresses of higher education—like academic demands, post-graduation plans and financial concerns—wear on students. This stress [can incite new mental health concerns and worsen existing ones](#), such as anxiety and depression. Sleep disturbances, restlessness, irritability and even feelings of hopelessness can make college feel harder than it already is.

For all of these reasons, it pays to take campus design into consideration when selecting a school. Campus design affects the [college](#) experience, and students can choose a campus or change their existing routines to support their mental health. Such consideration is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when new rules and norms have left many students [more anxious and depressed than normal](#).

As a [researcher](#) and [administrator](#) who focus on the student experience, we've analyzed [research](#) on how people interact with their environments. Below are five things that we believe students should look for in a college to help them stay as healthy as possible.

1. A quiet sleeping space

Getting a good night's sleep is a building block for staying mentally well. [Sleep-deprived students](#) are more sensitive to disruptions in their day, have trouble staying awake, and have trouble completing tasks. They

may also be irritable or easily angered. Significant and frequent [sleep disturbances](#) are [linked to depression](#).

The physical environment can influence sleep. Most colleges require students to have at least one roommate, depending on the amenities available. However, roommates' nighttime conversation or lighting can be disruptive. Students who live alone have better nighttime routines that allow them to get more sleep, but the room where a student sleeps is also important. A room with a [comfortable temperature can improve sleep](#), thereby lowering depressive symptoms, so make sure you can change the temperature in your room. The eco-friendly Dialynas Hall at Pomona College has air conditioning that [turns off when the windows open](#), while nearby Sontag Hall has a [rooftop garden](#) for some pre-bedtime fresh air.

Some colleges, like [Georgia Tech](#), are encouraging students to move into single dorms in an attempt to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Still, it may remain difficult to social distance in residence halls that are designed to encourage [social interaction](#) through features like shared lounges.

2. Places to socialize

Students seek a supportive campus that [makes them feel wanted and accepted](#), which is possible partly through developing a social network. For those dealing with mental health concerns, though, the fear of social situations often [interferes with daily routines](#), relationships and school work. Even for those without mental health challenges, [crowded public spaces can increase stress](#).

While some students may be tempted to [rely on alcohol to ease social anxiety](#), a healthier strategy is to purposefully [find a friend](#) who can provide some positivity in daily life. "Third places," like coffee shops, are neither home nor classroom, and [may offer the opportunity for social](#)

[support to those lacking connection](#). University programming, like the University of Utah's [student entrepreneurship residential group](#), can create support networks among strangers.

COVID-19 restrictions will, no doubt, limit the spontaneous in-person interactions that can make a campus vibrant for some time to come. School-sanctioned social or educational events, like virtual movie nights or skill-building workshops, may provide a social outlet when regular social life doesn't come easily.

3. Green space and natural light

Natural light—the kind that streams in through a window on a sunny day—offers vitamin D. This free pick-me-up can [enhance students' concentration and productivity](#), while [improving mental health and emotional well-being](#).

Spending time in nature is just one way to enjoy [natural light](#). Green spaces, such as parks and playing fields, allow students to escape daily stress. Those who regularly connect with nature are generally happier than those who do not. [One study](#) connects campus "greenness" to students' satisfaction with their college experience, as well as graduation rates.

There are plenty of schools to choose from if outdoor space is a priority. Colorado College is nestled in the Rocky Mountain foothills, making it a haven for hikers and climbers, while [North Central College is an accredited arboretum](#). For a change of pace, Florida Gulf Coast University is located a few steps away from sunny beaches in Fort Myers.

It's easy to take advantage of [green space](#) in good weather, but students should create a plan for getting vitamin D in the colder months as well.

During this time, [light therapy](#) – which can involve sitting under a lamp emitting light that mimics natural light—may be a welcome escape from the winter blues.

4. Nearby services and amenities

College students don't just study and sleep while they're getting their degrees. Student services, and access to off-campus amenities, can improve any [student's](#) experience. Campuses that follow this principle are part of a trend in which colleges—often historically located on isolated plots of land – [purposefully integrate](#) within their broader communities and cities, planning campuses with students' daily needs in mind.

For students trying to stay on top of their mental health care, on-campus counseling can be great, but these services are often [under-funded and under-staffed](#). Students' use of community facilities can [positively affect their college experience](#). While New York City—home to institutions like New York University and Columbia University – [is ranked as the number-one "most walkable" city](#) in the United States, Fayetteville, Arkansas, which hosts the University of Arkansas, [holds the lowest rank for 2020](#).

Since some parts of campuses are either shut down or facing higher demand during the pandemic, creating a roster of off-campus resources and emergency service providers can prepare students for any mid-semester surprises.

5. Mood-boosting design

Studies in education show that, from a young age, students' [moods and behaviors are responsive to their learning environments](#), which affects

both their mental health and how they fare in school. [A building's design can affect how people act](#), feel and make sense of their environments. The colors used in the design of campus buildings can make people feel warm, cool, calm, invited or excluded. For example, while red can be energizing, green can be relaxing, which can [affect the functionality of a space for college students](#).

Beyond paint choices, students' learning environments should include views that allow their minds and eyes to take a break. Something as simple as a landscape art poster hung indoors can offer stress relief. Many universities, such as Loyola University Chicago, have art galleries that can break up otherwise office-heavy and classroom-heavy views, offering respite from a morning of PowerPoint presentations.

If the campus or local art gallery is closed, students might consider making their own galleries. Many websites curate collections of prints and original works that won't break the bank, and craft stores stock canvas, paint and other supplies to help them bring out their inner Monet.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: 5 things to look for on a college campus that benefit mental health (2020, September 9) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-college-campus-benefit-mental-health.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--