



This building renovation project for the University of Florida Newell Hall Learning Commons was largely driven by student ideas and aspirations for how to use spaces and plan experiences—this ‘Connect 4’ interactive display allows for moments of play and rejuvenation.

# MAKING A MARK WITH ENVIRONMENTAL BRANDING



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College and university campuses are looking more colorful these days. Murals, installations, local artist commissions, graphic displays, and vibrant signage abound, creating extraordinary campus experiences that build a lasting impression on students.

This transformation is largely coming to life through a design strategy called environmental branding. It's a powerful tool for improving the campus atmosphere without having to completely reshape the campus environment. Extremely adaptable, it can be applied to a multitude of settings to infuse brand personality into your campus and make the student experience more engaging, rewarding, and fun.

Consider this: Imagine walking into a building and being met with an empty white wall. Now imagine walking into a different building and being met with a wall featuring vibrant colors and artful typography that says "We're so glad you're here!" Both walls give you an immediate sense of the culture within these buildings and the experiences they might likely facilitate. Which one would you gravitate toward?

The desire to invest in branded environments is being driven by a shift in how students define what makes an effective place. Historically, students had little choice but to adapt to static campus environments, but today, they rightfully expect campuses to adapt to student needs and reflect their identities, beliefs, and cultures. This is especially true when talking about student unions. These buildings are the heart and soul of any institution, and to be successful, they need to include physical elements that are welcoming, functional, and inclusive.

Environmental branding is a cost-effective way to do this. Engaging the student body in the process—which should always be advocated—enables leaders to give students a deep sense of belonging, pride in, and ownership of, their union. Environmental branding can also act as an easily attainable first step in a larger transformation of the union; graphic enhancements are generally faster to make than other labor-intensive alterations that may come further down the road, such as renovations or building expansions.

So where do you start? How do you effectively engage students in the process? How do you capture the identity and culture of a campus community with visuals on a wall? And how can you make the most of every branding opportunity?



## FIRST THINGS FIRST: WHAT'S A BRAND?

Defining the concept of a brand can be challenging because it encompasses so many aspects of an organization, both tangible and intangible. A brand is not just logos and colors; it's not something created independently. Instead, a brand is shaped primarily by the perception others have of an organization. At colleges and universities, these perceptions are informed by every experience, feeling, and emotion students have as they interact with the entire campus ecosystem—from buildings, staff, and classes to campus life programs, online offerings, and more.

While brands can't be manufactured, it is possible to influence how people perceive them. Elements like mission and purpose statements, logos, and visual brand identities can lay the groundwork for communicating what an organization believes, what they value, and what kind of culture they seek to create. Environmental branding takes these elements to the next level by making them tangible, interactive, and appealing to the senses. Within a building, spaces and surfaces become canvases for graphic design, technology, storytelling, and art—all choreographed to reinforce key messages and forge deep bonds with students. The experiences that result become an inextricable part of a brand.

A powerful example can be found inside Texas Woman's University's renovated student union. Texas Woman's University is the United States' largest university primarily for women, with one of the most ethnically diverse student bodies in the nation. The institution's purpose statement is incredibly inspiring: "Educate a woman. Empower

the world." Branded environments convey this purpose as soon as students enter the building. An exhibit wall showcases university alumni and celebrates their stories of success; a mirror is featured at the end of the wall so students see themselves as becoming part of this legacy. The purpose statement itself is featured as a prominent graphic element at the central staircase that connects the gathering spaces on the two main levels of the building, creating one of the most in-demand Instagram photo destinations on campus.

At Texas Woman's University's Hubbard Hall Student Union entry, a dimensional exhibit display celebrates the 'pioneers' of the university past and present. The photos

allow for changeability to continue to evolve and celebrate the trailblazing individuals that make up the university community.

The environmental branding seen in Hubbard Hall Student Union also demonstrates the important role psychology plays in design. As humans, we spend most of our lives indoors, and the design of interior spaces impacts our cognitive abilities, mental and physical well-being, and emotions tremendously. In student unions leaders always want to be looking for opportunities to create emotional connections with students by engaging them with messages and stories that positively impact the ways they think and feel, and how they experience the building.



At York University Student Centre, large-scale graphics create a strong sense of place and guide wayfinding.



### MIRANDA HALL

Miranda Hall is an associate vice president and environmental graphics leader at CannonDesign. With 25 years of experience as a designer and educator, Hall helps organizations leverage design to create a sense of place within an environment, through environmental graphics, wayfinding, exhibits, and interactive design. Equipped with this creative skillset, she forges beautiful, engaging, and successful design realities for her clients.



At the University of Florida's Reitz Union, the building identity, graphics program, and wayfinding signage strategy are all inspired by the school's iconic gator mascot. Elements of the gator can be found in surprising places, from ceiling fixtures and carpet patterns to the exterior cladding and terrazzo flooring.



#### **RITSAART MARCELIS**

Ritsaart Marcelis is an associate vice president and architect at CannonDesign. He has worked on the design of educational facilities both within the United States and in many other countries, and helps clients to develop unique visions for their projects that create exciting and dynamic environments that help to move their institutions into the future.



## ENVIRONMENTAL BRANDING AT ALL SCALES

Like all buildings, unions are designed and built with long lifespans in mind. Financial resources are precious and major renovations are infrequent. This can pose a challenge when it comes to creating an atmosphere that always feels fresh, contemporary, and relevant to new generations of students that continually cycle in.

Because environmental branding can be designed to be flexible and changeable, it's an extremely effective tool in keeping pace with trends—whether repositioning a long-standing building, providing a minor refresh of a recently built union, or planning a new building from the ground up. Here's a look at how branding can come to life across different scales.

### Small:

This might focus on one or a small number of high-impact areas to incorporate branded elements and graphics. This most often includes a visible brand identification at the entrances or high-traffic spaces. It could also involve decorative film on glass windows and large-scale decals and supergraphics applied to walls at low cost and without substantial effort.

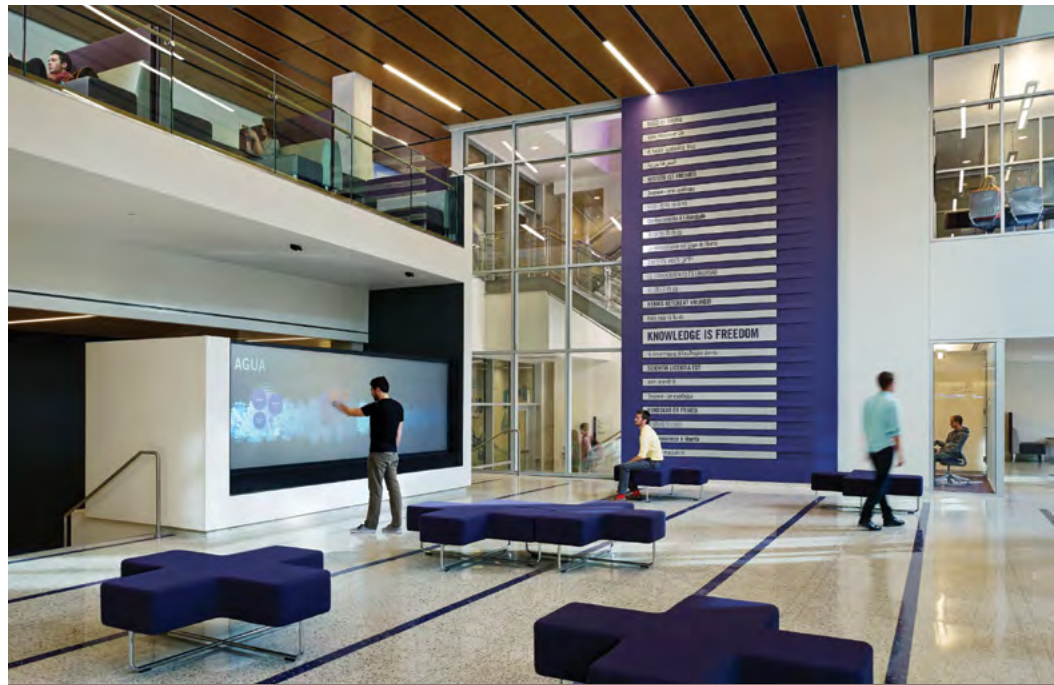
### Medium:

This could involve building-wide branding upgrades that bring together a number of media, materials, and graphic elements to create a consistent identity. In addition to flat graphics on surfaces, it can involve fabricated and installed three-dimensional elements like branded signage, exhibits and feature walls that merge art, artifacts, technology, and even nature, like green walls and water effects.

### Large:

This involves taking a comprehensive look at placemaking within the union and creating a strategy that repositions the student experience. Projects at this scale often blur the line between environmental branding, architecture, and interior design, with branding elements not only coming to life on traditional surfaces, but integrated into the architecture, furniture, and finishes. The goal with these larger projects is to create a truly immersive branded experience.

Regardless of scale, the environmental branding devices and tools most often used include:



In Rees-Jones Hall at Texas Christian University, students are met with a motto in 24 languages and an interactive wall encouraging the community to engage with thought-provoking content and with each other.

- Large-scale wall graphics
- Decorative and graphic glass film
- Exhibit and informational displays
- Artwork and curation spaces for student work
- Digital media experiences
- Interactive experiences that are analog or digital in format
- Wayfinding and signage programs
- Donor recognition including naming, donor walls, and plaque systems
- Integration of on-brand color, finishes, lighting, architectural elements

## SUCCESS STARTS WITH A STRONG PROCESS

Launching a successful environmental branding program goes far beyond discussions about what gets put on walls. It requires a thoughtful and deliberate process, fueled by student engagement and close partnerships with stakeholders at all levels of an organization—from marketing and communications to student affairs, affinity groups, admissions, student government and more. The aim is to create a program that represents the collective voice of your organization and your student population—and that requires extensive engagement and constant evolution.

One transformational project underway now is Western Michigan University's new student center and dining facility in Kalamazoo.

The 163,000-square-foot building—set to open in 2022—is designed to function as a new epicenter for campus life. While a new building, the process being employed is a model that can be applied at any institution looking to refresh and enhance their environments with environmental branding. Here are a few key steps from that process, and a look at the outcomes that are now coming to life.

### Engagement rules.

From the start, Western Michigan sought to create the most inclusive student center possible. Long before any architectural or environmental branding concepts were created, the university and project team listened to students. By casting a wide net through surveys, focus groups, open houses, meetings with student government, and continual engagement with an advisory group, the university created something specifically for the student center project called Institutional Diversity and Multiculturalism. Once the initial concepts were developed for both the building and planned graphic communication, students were re-engaged for feedback, continually refining concepts until a design direction was established that reflected their collective voice.

### Found in translation.

With input from thousands of individuals, and in partnership with a diversity, equity, and inclusivity consultant, key themes were

identified that resonated with the student body. Nature, specifically, was identified as a universally understood and celebrated aspect of life. The architectural design team made this idea a conceptual cornerstone and designed the building to be inspired by local natural elements. The ground floor of the building is wrapped in rocks to mirror the bedrock of the region, the middle levels feature extensive wood and are inspired by tree trunks, and the upper level is wrapped in a sunshade featuring metal fins reflecting the shadows from leaves on a tree. The heart of the building is a dramatic three-story open “gathering circle,” inspired by how many cultures find comfort in gathering in circles. Now the environmental branding strategy could be built off these elements in bold ways.

Forestry was one of the natural elements that shaped the building concept. On the exterior of the building, metal fins mimic light filtering through the forest canopy.

### Planning the communication.

Working closely with the architectural design team, the process began for identifying opportunities—big and small—for branded moments. This meant learning more about how students would be using the space, what day-in-the-life experiences would look like, and how they would navigate the building. The building includes a number of distinct programmed spaces, such as an admissions welcome center, student organization center, a dining facility, game room, the “mosaic” global lounge, meeting rooms, and the central core gathering spaces, so distinct yet connected ways to give each space a unique identity were defined. Mood boards reflecting the visual inspiration for these different spaces were created and then shared with stakeholders and students for their reactions.

### Designed for storytelling.

The existing student union is more so a conference center; it’s not a student-first building. The new student center, including the messages and stories shared through environmental graphics, is calibrated to students and designed for them to interact with and make their mark on. By working closely with Western Michigan’s project working groups and marketing and communications teams, the ultimate goal is to capture these stories and ensure messaging aligns with the campus brand and community identity. The overall message focuses on student voices, student achievement, and the history and contributions of Western Michigan.

In this changeable graphic display, student voices are represented through photos, stories, and even an integrated media piece.

### Surprising moments.

From a scale perspective, this is a large environmental branding project, including comprehensive branding, graphic informational and interactive displays, and an integrated signage and wayfinding strategy. In total, a system has been designed that includes over two-dozen communication elements, not including signage.

Beyond designing creative solutions for functional graphics like directional signage, panels articulating campus history and culture, numerous opportunities



Input and consensus was gathered from Western Michigan students and the community through a range of means, from surveys to focus groups, casting a wide net for full participation and to have as many voices as possible reflected in the building planning.



### PAUL TERZINO

Paul Terzino has worked in higher education for 30 years and is currently the director of the Bernhard Center at Western Michigan University. In addition to WMU’s new student center project, Terzino has been involved in three other multimillion-dollar student center expansion/construction projects including Price Center East at University of California–San Diego and the McCormick Tribune Campus Center at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.





A custom illuminated brand mark echoes the imagery of light filtering through a forest canopy referenced in the building fins at Western Michigan.

for unexpected and interactive branded moments were identified.

- Near the entry of the building, an expansive pin-up wall was included where students can control the content that's shared, along with a custom-fabricated logo mark that students will be invited to write on and share thoughts and goals.
- On the second floor, a gallery of student work is featured in the central circulation area, along with a sprawling piece of commissioned public art; the art piece will consist of relevant people and places that are woven together to create three-dimensional objects. Interestingly, the artist was selected through a public request process with the final artist selection being decided by a committee of students and university stakeholders.
- On the third floor at the residential dining center entry, a large-scale wood brand "W" was created, with illuminated perforations displaying an animated leaf texture that mirrors the fins on the exterior of the building

and changes with the movement of daylight. The color of the lights can be modified to celebrate different occasions, such as pride month or breast cancer awareness. This piece shows the versatility of experiential branding—it is as much a brand mark as it is an art piece.

- Across all floors, the building also incorporates motivational quotations and sayings that are hidden into railings, soffits, and stairwells to create moments of surprise.

A custom illuminated brand mark echoes the imagery of light filtering through a forest canopy referenced in the building fins.

### Bringing it all to life.

The project team is currently in the midst of collaborating with fabrication partners who will take the designs and concepts and implement them throughout the building. One big discussion is focused on what elements are fixed and permanent and what elements are flexible and can be easily switched out by the university. For example,

there is a large graphic that stretches 80 feet in the games room that's permanent, but there are also panels over the graphic that can be easily customized and changed out with student contributed posters. Having a clear understanding of what is changeable versus permanent is important, and working with university personnel and vendors who can help with that strategy is key. It's also most beneficial to work with an environmental branding team that understands the complexities of fabrication and installation to ensure everything that gets designed can beautifully and economically translate to an effective communication piece.

### Engaging means adapting.

When working on a project that engages various user groups and is truly collaborative, progress doesn't always happen in a straight line. To create something truly authentic to the culture of a college or university, leaders must be willing to adapt process, designs, and thinking as they go. What worked in the last project may be out of place in the current one. Throughout the collaborative planning process for Western Michigan's student center, designs

changed function, became more inclusive, and moved locations. Entire graphic locations were eliminated and others expanded to include more storytelling, with the hope being that the end result will feel unique and authentic to the campus community, especially students.

## SIX CONSIDERATIONS WHEN PLANNING CONTENT AND DESIGN

As in the Western Michigan University project, it's important to be intentional with the process employed and the branded moments created. While logos and school colors do play a role, they alone don't create deep connections between students and their college or university. To do this, it's important to tell a cohesive and inspiring story that engages the emotions of students and appeals to their interests. What follows are six considerations to keep in mind when interpreting an institution's brand into a visual system that can stretch across your union, as well as examples of institutions that have gotten it right.

1. Consider the institution's programs, academics, student services, student organizations, athletics—and connect to and celebrate these, as they are key to the identities and how the student community is united. Specifically, students often tend to associate with the identities of athletics programs in a visceral way, so it's worth exploring how these identities might translate into the union. Consider what makes the institution unique and how that can be showcased in the space.

For the University of Florida's Reitz Union, graphic and informational displays are located on every floor in the main circulation spaces, all reflecting the UF brand and directly representing the community through photos and stories.

2. Look for opportunities to strengthen inclusivity. If done with consideration, the visuals placed in these buildings can reinforce a sense of belonging in all students. Consensus gathering is key—how the community defines its identity and message priorities should be at the heart of the approach to the branded environment. However, this should be

supported with visuals that represent the breadth of student experiences and are accessible to all users so as not to alienate anyone.

3. Find ways to harness branding to provide a sense of direction and draw attention to important features, services, and offerings. For students, few things are more frustrating than feeling disoriented in a building, and for student life leaders, few things are more disheartening than seeing a space you helped create not being used to its full potential. Taking a direct and bold approach to communicating directions and space purposes can make experiences more enjoyable for all.

At the University of California–San Diego Price Center, graphics become a focal point and draw attention to the reception services, welcoming students to engage in the offerings and support from the staff. Subtle glass film and white-on-white dimensional letters on the ceiling of the Texas Christian University Mary Coats Burnett Library playfully explain the function of the space.

4. Consider every student touchpoint, from entry and primary public spaces to collaboration spaces, outdoor approach encounters, dining tables, and even inside restroom stalls (sometimes branding in unexpected places can be impactful). Nearly any surface can be improved with branded moments, big or small. Additionally, identify opportunities to seamlessly integrate environmental branding into the architectural framework as opposed to “adding on” as an afterthought. The goal is to always create a seamless design story.

At the University of Florida Heavener Hall, even stairwells are used as an opportunity to incorporate color and highlight academic program features.

5. Celebrate individual and community creativity, and allow contribution toward communication and visuals displayed throughout the union, giving students space to express, teach, learn and thrive. Features like art gallery walls

showcasing student artwork, monitors that pull in images students share on social media, or community boards providing space for students to pin up events and stories allow students to leave their unique mark on a space. One thing to keep in mind, though, is to design these elements to act as branded moments even when they aren't showing student-sourced content. For example, a pin-up wall could still act as a powerful brand moment even if nothing is pinned to it.

6. Design with flexibility in mind. Some elements should be timeless and permanent, but a good number of branded elements should be changed out every few years to keep spaces vibrant and current. Flexibility comes in many shapes and sizes, from using panels that house graphic posters and art that can easily be changed, to using free-standing banners that can be moved around and switched out based on the occasion. Digitized graphics are also becoming more common, which often involve using large-scale screens that can display graphics, signage, and messages that can be continually changed out without any redesign work required.

The work of a student life leader is focused on the growth, development and success of the incredible students at the institution. Environmental branding is a powerful strategy to help supercharge efforts—reinforcing culture, strengthening school pride, and reflecting and celebrating the beautiful differences across the student body.