TERRAIN LEVELING

Design Strategies for Improving Higher Education in Prisons

ITHAKA S+R
ennead lab

CONTRIBUTORS
Ennead Architects, including Amy Mielke, Elizabeth Austin, Molly McGowan, Sam Johnson

Ithaka S+R, including Catharine Bond Hill, Ess Pokornowski, Laura Brown, Sindy Lopez, Tammy Ortiz, Tommaso Bardelli

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Ennead Lab is the research, development, and advocacy initiative of Ennead Architects. Our mission is to advance critical narratives, ideas, and processes in support of a just and lasting world. We develop theories, tools, and objects that contribute to a larger discourse around architectural and urban spaces and inform our own practice. We support multidisciplinary collaborations working to solve relevant and transcending issues.

Ithaka S+R provides research and strategic guidance to help the academic and cultural communities serve the public good and navigate economic, demographic, and technological change.

Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a nonprofit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We believe education is key to the wellbeing of individuals and society, and we work to make it more effective and affordable.

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On September 13, 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, commonly known as the 1994 crime bill. The most far-reaching piece of criminal justice legislation Congress ever passed, the bill incentivized states to pass harsher sentencing laws and build more prisons.[1] Among a slate of punitive and "tough on crime" measures, the bill also eliminated access to federal Pell Grant funding for incarcerated students.

The effect on higher education in prison was swift. In the early 1990s, there were an estimated 772 college programs operating in 1,287 correctional facilities, but by 1997 only eight such programs remained.[2]

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INTRODUCTION

Despite overwhelming evidence about the benefits of attending college in prison for incarcerated people, their communities, and society as a whole, it took Congress almost 30 years to fully reverse the policy.[3] After extending federal financial aid to approximately 40,000 incarcerated students under the Second Chance Pell Experiment starting in 2015, on July 1st, 2023, Pell Grant funding was reinstated for all incarcerated people. According to Department of Education estimates, 800,000 people could now be eligible to receive federal financial aid and tuition assistance to attend college in prison,[4] and the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison estimates that there are currently 406 programs offering college courses to people behind bars across the US and its territories.[5]

The reinstatement of Pell Grant funding has also initiated a sector-wide reexamination of how higher education in prison is provided and how its impact and success are measured. Revised regulations, moreover, note that "oversight entities are required to consider whether a prison education programs' academic services are comparable to similar services that the institution offers to its on-campus students."[6] While it is an important development that regulations require services for students inside be comparable to those for students outside, it is left up to oversight entities (primarily departments of correction) to decide what exactly comparable might mean.

A growing body of research documents the barriers faced by incarcerated students—such as limited access to technology and conflicts with correctional staff—but far less attention has been paid to the role of the built environment in shaping educational experiences. This project, led in partnership by Ennead Lab and Ithaka S+R, examines how spatial, architecture, and design features impact learning inside prisons. It draws on qualitative interviews with formerly incarcerated students and prison education program staff and site visits to five correctional facilities, to advance both research findings and a portfolio of design interventions aimed at improving these educational environments.

When it comes to the built environment, some of the challenges incarcerated students experience are not different in nature from the ones faced by their peers in the most dilapidated corners of the American public education system.[7] Prison education program students and instructors told us about malfunctioning HVAC units, rusty water leaking from a ceiling, and poor ventilation inside their classrooms. Aging infrastructure and outdated equipment aside, however, carceral settings have little in common with even the most underfunded and neglected higher education facilities on the outside.[8] The design and aesthetics of the prison, criminologist Yvonne Jewkes notes, are deeply infused by an "architecture of harm."[9] "Hard architecture"—from thick bars and bare concrete walls to hard-surface floors and metal furniture—Jewkes explains, is meant to enhance security but also to dehumanize the incarcerated, destroying their self-esteem and influencing the ways in which staff think of, and behave towards, people in their custody.

This built environment poses unique challenges to both students and instructors. First, these spaces feature a laundry list of design and environmental elements that are proven to negatively impact learning, including overcrowded classrooms, persistent and loud noise, poor lighting and temperature control, and issues with air quality and circulation. Put simply: the environmental conditions prevalent in correctional settings often do not align with, and at times directly contradict, learning and educational best practices.[10] As importantly, the punitive and dehumanizing nature of the carceral built environment clashes with the primary purpose of higher education: not only providing knowledge and building skills, but nurturing independent and critical thinkers, able to question established assumptions and dogmas.[11]

Building on our research on the challenges faced by students and instructors in correctional spaces, this report advances a series of actionable strategies to integrate educational best practices in the redesign of these spaces. Ultimately, we propose that architects and designers working in correctional education should not just foster better learning experiences for incarcerated students, but shift the balance from punishment toward rehabilitation in carceral settings.

1. Udi Ofer, "How the 1994 Crime Bill Fed the Mass Incarceration Crisis," ACLU: News & Commentary, June 4, 2019, https://www.aclu.org/news/smart-justice/how-1994-crime-bill-fed-mass-incarceration-crisis.

2. Nathaniel J. Pallone, "Abolition of Pell Grants for Higher Education of Prisoners: Examining Antecedents and Consequences," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 39: no. 2 (2004).

3. Alexandra Gibbons and Rashawn Ray, "The Societal Benefits of Postsecondary Prison Education," *The Brookings Institute*, August 20, 2021.

4. Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education to Launch Application Process to Expand Federal Pell Grant Access for Individuals Who Are Confined or Incarcerated," Press Release, June 30, 2023, https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-to-launch-application-process-to-expand-federal-pell-grant-access-for-individuals-who-are-confined-or-incarcerated.

5. The Alliance defines higher education in prison programs as programs that provide postsecondary education, are formally affiliated with a college or university, and require students to have obtained a high school diploma or equivalent to be eligible for admission. See: https://www.nationaldirectoryhep.org/national-directory/stats-view.

6. "Pell Grants for Prison Education Programs; Determining the Amount of Federal Education Assistance Funds Received by Institutions of Higher Education (90/10); Change in Ownership and Change in Control," 34 CFR Parts 600, 668, and 690, *Federal Register* 87, no. 208 (October 28, 2022): 65435.

7. Victoria Jackson and Nicholas Johnson, "America's School Infrastructure Needs a Major Investment of Federal Funds to Advance an Equitable Recovery," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, May 17, 2021. https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/americas-school-infrastructure-needs-a-major-investment-of-federal.

8. That is not to say carceral logics play no role in the design of our educational infrastructure, especially K-12 grades. See: J. Schept, T. Wall, and A. Brisman, "Building, Staffing, and Insulating: An Architecture of Criminological Complicity in the School-to-Prison Pipeline," *Social Justice* 41, no. 4 (2014): 138.

9. Yvonne Jewkes, "Just Design: Healthy Prisons and the Architecture of Hope," *Journal of Criminology* 51, no. 3 (2018).

10. A large literature has documented the impact of spatial and environmental factors on both K-12 and postsecondary education outside of prison. See: Mary C. Hill and Kathryn K. Epps, "The Impact of Physical Classroom Environment on Student Satisfaction and Student Evaluation of Teaching in the University Environment," *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 14, no. 4 (2010): 65; Nurul Jannah Amirul, C. N. Ahmad, A. F. Yahya, M. F. N. L. Abdullah, N. M. Noh, and M. Adnan, "The Physical Classroom Learning Environment," *Proceedings of the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Conference* 2, no. 1 (2013): 1-9.

11. Basile Baudez and Victoria Bergbauer, *Carceral Architecture: From Within and Beyond the Prison Walls* (Berlin: JOVIS, 2025).

METHODS

Our portfolio draws on qualitative research that Ennead Lab and Ithaka S+R conducted between February 2023 and late Fall, 2024. We wanted to ensure that our analysis, and the recommendations we put forward, were grounded in the experiences, needs, and aspirations of the people closest to the issue, namely incarcerated students and prison education program instructors. Who better understands the impact of carceral spaces and architecture on teaching and learning, and how these spaces could be reimagined to support, rather than impede, students' educational journeys?

In early 2023, we started by conducting 25 semi-structured interviews across three groups: formerly incarcerated people who attended college-in-prison classes, prison education programs' faculty and staff members, and corrections officials. All interviews were conducted remotely, lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and were audio recorded. Formerly incarcerated students were paid $50 as a compensation for their time and as a token of appreciation for sharing their experiences and insights with us.

Qualitative interviews allowed us to delve into the lived experiences of those teaching and attending college inside carceral facilities; we heard about their everyday struggles trying to learn a new subject in noisy and dimly lit classrooms, often without access to even the most basic technological equipment. Beyond practical obstacles, we learned about what it feels like to be a student and an instructor in spaces that have been designed to punish and dehumanize, rather than to foster collaboration and critical thinking.

By bringing us closer to the experiences of students and their instructors, these interviews profoundly shaped our approach. Many of the design interventions presented in the following sections are directly informed by insights from our research participants, or seek to address the challenges they identified.

This initial phase of research also broadened the scope of our intervention. While our focus began with enhancing the experience of prison classrooms, we soon recognized that learning for incarcerated students extends far beyond these spaces, taking place in a range of formal and informal secondary learning environments within the prison—from libraries and chapels to individual cells or any space where a desk is available. Many participants shared how these secondary spaces, or their absence, had shaped their college journey. As a result, this portfolio also includes proposals for creating additional, more effective secondary learning spaces within the existing carceral infrastructure.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, two members of the project team visited educational spaces at five different facilities in Maine, Kansas, and North Carolina. At each site, they conducted focus groups with incarcerated students and had the opportunity to observe the educational infrastructure, including classrooms, libraries and study spaces, and, when available, living quarters designated for students.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts, along with ethnographic notes from site visit observations, were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, with categories and themes derived iteratively from the data. After completing the coding process, we presented our findings to an advisory board composed of field experts, including educational correction leaders, higher education in prison program directors, and system-impacted students.

DEFINING THE HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

(*Next Page*)
1. Jackie Ross and R. Gangi, "Education from the Inside, Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison," Correctional Association of New York, New York, NY (2009): 42, https://perma.cc/678G-979E; Laura Winterfield, Mark Coggeshall, Michelle Burke-Storer, Vanessa Correa, and Simon Tidd, "The Effects of Postsecondary Correctional Education: Final Report," Urban Institute (NJ1) (2009), https://perma.cc/H4ZJ-7KTG; Kyleigh Clark and Jason Rydberg, "The Effect of Institutional Educational Programming on Prisoner Misconduct," *Criminal Justice Studies* 29, no. 4 (2016): 325-344, https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2016.1229770; Ntombizanele Gloria Vandala, "The Transformative Effect of Correctional Education: A Global Perspective," *Cogent Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1677122.

2. Lois M. Davis, Jennifer L. Steele, Robert Bozick, Malcolm V. Williams, Susan Turner, Jeremy Miles, Jessica Saunders, and Paul S. Steinberg, *How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here? The Results of a Comprehensive Evaluation* Santa Monica, CA.:Rand Corporation, 2014), https://perma.cc/Q4RQ-DMZW.

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Higher education is more than just coursework—it is an immersive, holistic learning experience that extends beyond the classroom. College students need uninterrupted knowledge exchange, where they not only receive instruction from expert faculty but also have the time and space to absorb complex material, think critically, and develop their own ideas.

Incarcerated students, who earn degrees from the same institutions as their peers on campus, deserve an education that meets the same academic standards and provides a comparable level of intellectual engagement. While higher education in prison programs may not be able to replicate every aspect of the traditional college experience, they must uphold the core qualities of a rigorous and enriching higher education environment.

Unimpeded Access To Education

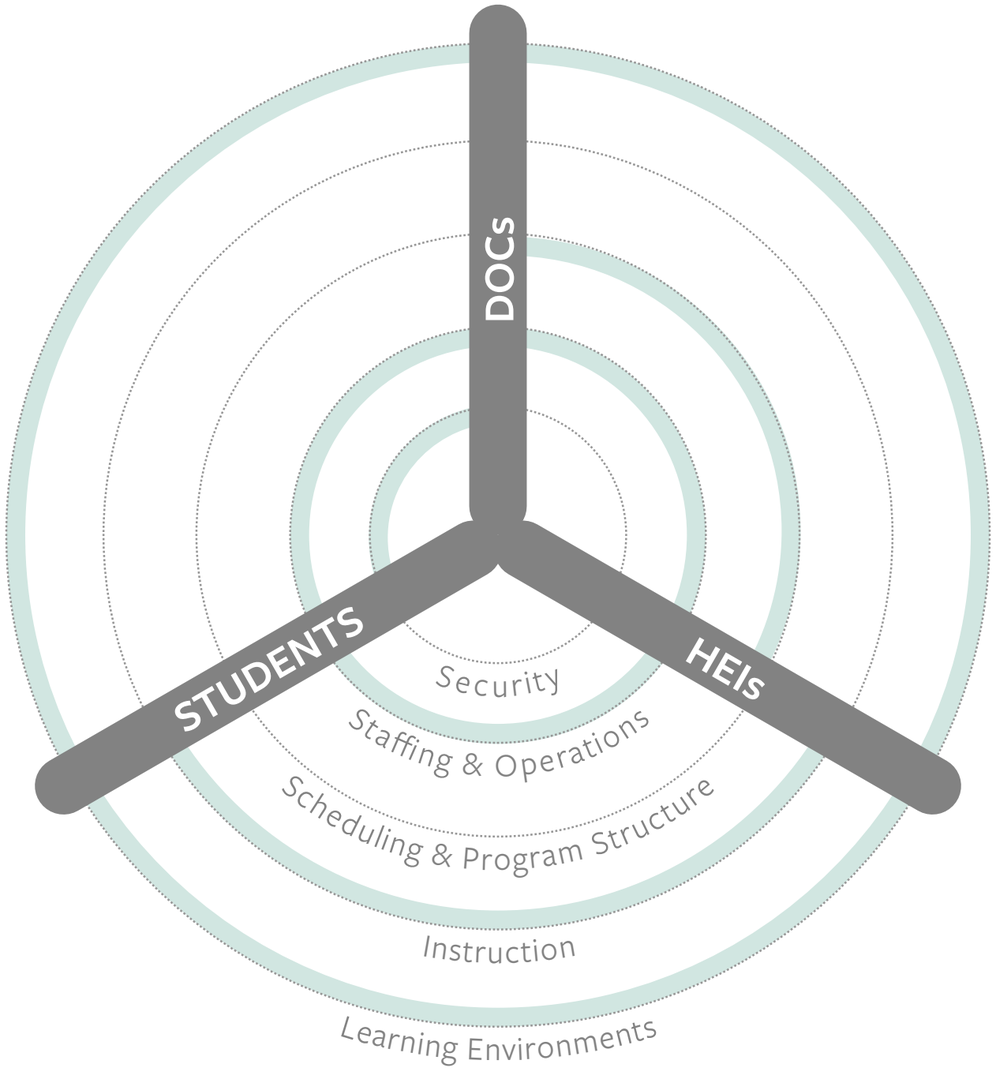
On a college campus, students have continuous access to their education—classes during the day, regular office hours with faculty, study sessions with peers, and 24-hour libraries filled with academic resources. Learning does not happen in isolated moments; it is a process that requires ongoing engagement.

Distraction-Free Learning Spaces

A productive learning environment requires spaces where students can focus, participate, and engage without unnecessary disruptions. On a college campus, classrooms are designed to support lectures, structured discussions, and various forms of group work, allowing students to concentrate and process complex material.

A Variety Of Learning Environments

College learning happens in many different types of spaces. Students attend lectures in large halls, participate in small-group discussions in seminar rooms, conduct research in libraries, and collaborate in study lounges or tutoring centers. They may take electives in ceramics studios or engage in hands-on experiments in science labs, depending on their field of study. These varied environments support different modes of learning, from independent study to interactive, experiential education.



This diagram shows the relationship of parties and responsibilities that together create a successful higher education in prison program. Blue areas show which inter-party relationships yield the biggest impacts for those elements.

A SHARED OBJECTIVE

For prison education programs to be successful, they must be supported by all stakeholders: the incarcerated individuals participating in the program (students), higher education institutions (HEIs), and departments of corrections (DOCs). Each plays a crucial role in ensuring these programs are functional, effective, and sustainable. Although many of the issues addressed in this report affect all three stakeholders, the responsibility for remediation falls primarily on HEIs and DOCs, given the power dynamics within the carceral system

BENEFITS FOR EACH PARTY	RESPONSIBILITIES OF EACH PARTY
Students gain access to an education, a productive way to focus their time while incarcerated, and the sense of purpose that comes with intellectual engagement and academic achievement.	**Students** must support each other, advocate for their needs constructively, and uphold positive behavior as part of their partnership with both HEIs and DOCs. They are also responsible for engaging in their coursework, attending classes, completing assignments, and upholding the academic integrity expected in any higher education setting.
HEIs expand their student base, increase diversity within their programs, and benefit from highly engaged students. Faculty members interviewed for this report consistently noted how rewarding it was to teach incarcerated students, describing them as motivated and eager to participate.	**HEIs** must provide high-quality instruction, ensure students have access to essential academic resources (such as research materials, advisors, faculty, and tutors), adapt curriculum delivery and necessary modifications and accommodations to the prison setting, and advocate for the sustainability of these programs.
DOCs benefit from improved facility conditions and improved reentry and employment opportunities for residents under their supervision. Research indicates that incarcerated students tend to have fewer disciplinary infractions, reducing the burden on correctional staff.[1]	**DOCs** must implement facility policies, staffing structures, and security procedures that allow education programs to function effectively. This includes accommodating academic schedules, permitting necessary access to resources, supporting educational access and success, and allowing students a level of autonomy that supports their educational progress.
Society at large benefits from reduced recidivism rates, improved post-release outcomes, and lower incarceration costs.[2]	**Society** at large must recognize prison education as a public good and advocate for its support and funding.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

COLLEGE IS MORE THAN JUST A CLASSROOM

Providing classrooms is only the first step—facilities must also support study spaces, resource access, and social environments that allow a college education to thrive.

RESPONSIBILITY LEADS TO CARE

When students are trusted to steward their educational spaces and resources, they take greater pride in maintaining and improving them.

LEARNING IS A COURAGEOUS ACT

Education in prison fosters growth, but only when students feel respected. Dismissive or hostile attitudes from staff can undermine their progress, while a supportive environment fosters confidence, camaraderie, and academic success.

THE RIGHT SPACE CREATES THE RIGHT MINDSET

Students are more likely to engage fully in their education when learning environments feel like true college spaces, distinct from the rest of the prison.

EDUCATION IS A LIFELINE

HEP programs offer students the tools for a better future after release, but they also provide purpose, structure, and connection while incarcerated. Expanding degree options and engaging alumni strengthens this impact.

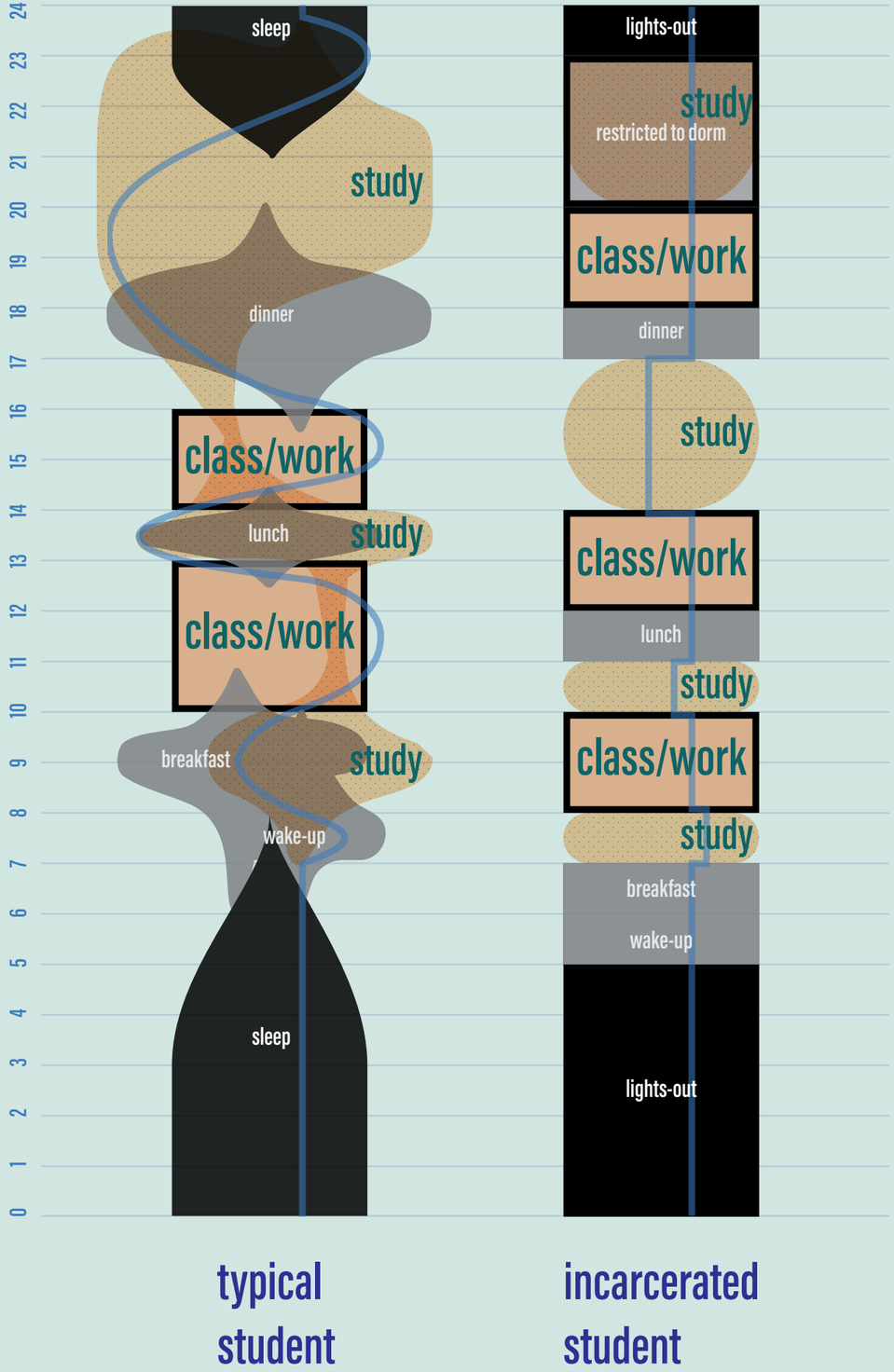
COLLABORATION DRIVES PROGRESS

Across the country, HEIs and DOCs are solving similar challenges in isolation. Sharing ideas, strategies, and successes between programs will inspire greater improvements system-wide.

> **“A lot of times there would be security issues. For example, they couldn’t find somebody in their dorm, and everybody in the library building would have to go back, and then they would just cancel class after that. The classes were canceled quite frequently because of that. Maybe once or twice a week.”**

B.W., *formerly incarcerated student*

01
OPERATIONS & RESOURCES



The typical college student's day is loosely structured. Students create their schedule based on the class times set by the university throughout the day. Meals, free time, and study time can be proportioned and arranged as the student pleases.

In contrast, the incarcerated student's day is rigidly organized, often allowing few—if any—windows for learning and study if not contained within one of the preallocated periods.

Spatial design alone cannot fully resolve the material challenges of running higher education programs in prisons. Even the most thoughtfully designed spaces will fall short if operational and scheduling logistics are not properly considered, or educational materials are not made available. Without commitment from both prison administrators and educational institutions, physical improvements can only go so far.

The solutions outlined in this chapter aim to lessen staffing burdens and account for related logistical constraints, but operational planning must work in tandem with spatial design. This chapter highlights key operational considerations and strategies that can support the long-term success of prison education programs.

Prioritizing Higher Education

In prison education, college programs are often treated as lower priority compared to vocational training and GED programs. This is largely because departments of corrections (DOCs) are legally mandated to provide vocational training and high school equivalency education, while postsecondary education is not required by law and is typically offered in partnership with a higher education in prison (HEP) program rather than as a DOC-led initiative. While vocational training and GED programs serve important roles, higher education should be recognized as an equally valuable pursuit. When postsecondary education is viewed as optional, it becomes more difficult to secure classroom space, instructional resources, and staffing support. For HEP programs to succeed, facility administrators must treat them as a core part of programming, rehabilitation, and reentry readiness, rather than as a supplementary offering. This means establishing policies that allow for students to have consistent access to their courses and dedicated study time.

Scheduling

Educational programs should be structured so that students don't have to choose between pursuing college coursework and participating in work assignments, vocational training, or other required activities. These conflicts can arise from direct schedule overlaps or from movement restrictions that make it impossible for students to transition between different areas during limited movement periods. Thoughtful scheduling—such as ensuring that academic programs are available at different times and do not conflict with meal times or mandatory programming, or aligning class periods with movement schedules—can help prevent these barriers.

Reducing Unnecessary Movement

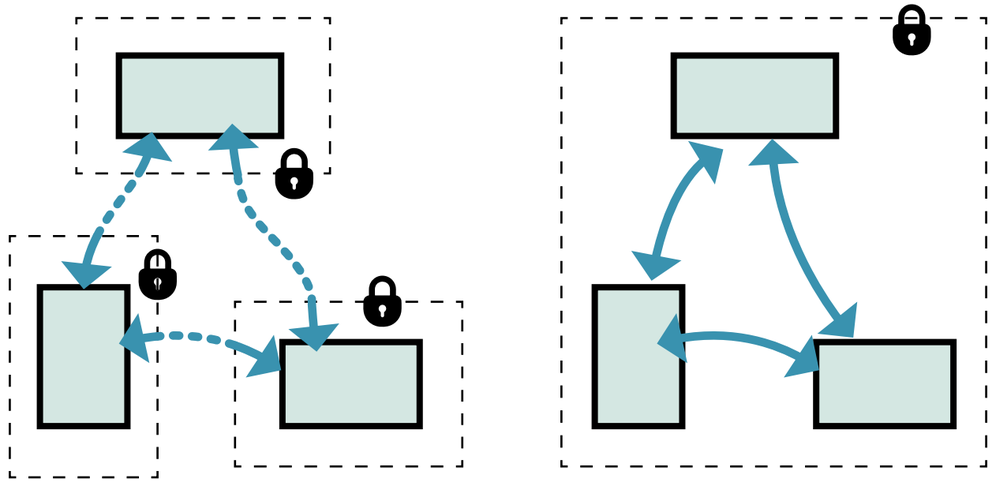
Managing movement within a prison is one of the most resource-intensive aspects of daily operations. Any opportunity to reduce unnecessary student transfers between spaces eases the burden on staff and increases the likelihood that students will be able to attend class regularly. In some cases, class sessions are canceled simply because there aren't enough officers available to escort students. Adjusting operational protocols can make a significant difference. For example, instead of requiring students to return to their housing units between classes or study periods, count procedures could take place in classrooms or study halls. This simple change would reduce movement-related disruptions, making education more accessible and less dependent on staffing levels. An effective relationship of spaces will also have a positive impact on the operational burden of movement. Concepts such as conversion of spaces within housing wings or consolidating academic activities are addressed in **CHAPTER 02: EDUCATIONAL SPACES** and **CHAPTER 03: SHIFTING THE BALANCE**.

Consistent Access to Resources

Students and instructors report inconsistencies in what materials can be brought into the classroom. For example, a professor may be allowed to bring in whiteboard markers one day, only to have them confiscated the next—despite no formal rule change. If basic instructional supplies aren't reliably available inside the facility, this unpredictability directly impacts student learning. To address this, prisons should establish clear, consistent policies on allowable materials and maintain on-site storage for essential classroom supplies so educators don't have to depend on bringing materials in from outside. Other amendments to policies, such as allowing students to keep study materials within their housing units, can help improve educational outcomes.

Engaging Students in Operations

Students can play an active role in maintaining and organizing their learning environments, which not only reduces the burden on staff but also fosters a sense of investment in their education. Students should be provided with greater access to the spaces in exchange for more administrative responsibilities, such as setting up classrooms or organizing materials. HEIs and DOCs should also coordinate to allow paid job opportunities within the facility for current students or graduated alumni, including positions such as tutors, teacher's assistants, and even



Locating educational spaces within the same security boundary can reduce staffing burdens and movement times between spaces.

co-teachers for entry level classes. Fair compensation should be provided for students serving in such roles and they may need greater access to classrooms and other educational spaces. This approach creates a more self-sustaining learning program, reinforces students' sense of agency and accountability, and provides valuable employment experience.

Building Trust In Students

Strict policies that limit access to materials, movement, and study spaces can make it difficult for students to engage fully in their education. Trust is an essential component of a successful program. Allowing students greater access to books, study spaces, and materials outside of scheduled class hours—while maintaining appropriate security measures—demonstrates confidence in their commitment to learning and supports education beyond the classroom setting.

Additionally, disciplinary measures within prisons, even those considered routine, can severely disrupt a student's progress. Situations beyond a student's control can result in measures such as lockdowns, temporary loss of privileges, or restricted movement—any of which can prevent a student from attending class, meeting with instructors, or completing assignments on time. Given the fast-paced nature of college courses, even a short absence can create setbacks, sometimes making it impossible for a student to catch up. In interviews, students emphasized how these interruptions derailed their academic progress, preventing them from completing coursework or even forcing them to withdraw from their programs entirely. To mitigate these challenges, policies should be established to protect students from suffering adverse educational impacts resulting from circumstances beyond their control, such as lockdowns or interruptions caused by other individuals.

Technology

Education and learning spaces on typical college campuses feature a host of integrated technology—from instructional tools like projectors, smartboards, and classroom computers that are connected to the internet and campus IT systems; to integrated environmental controls, like digital lighting presets and automated shades. They also increasingly support students using personal electronic devices in classrooms and other learning environments, often providing access to high speed wireless internet and power sources to charge personal electronic devices. Departments of corrections and their postsecondary education partners should consider what technology must be in place in a given space to ensure that education and learning experiences in prison are comparable to those on a higher education institution's main campus. Features like digital lighting presets and electronically raised and lowered projection screens may not be necessary, for example, but providing modular lighting and enabling the screening of video content, might be essential to a given program's educational experience.

Likewise, independent learning and study spaces should afford access to technologies that can help students focus—like headphones and individually controlled lighting in study carrels. Correctional agencies and their college partners should also consider how to establish access to technology that will digitally empower students, mirror the student experience on campus, and allow them to perform basic higher education learning functions—like reading course materials, performing independent research, digitally completing and submitting assignments, and accessing study aids or supplementary materials and services.

Correctional agencies should put measures in place to ensure that students have adequate access to technology to complete coursework, perform independent research, and compose and submit assignments digitally. This may involve creating loan programs that allow devices to be checked out for extended periods rather than locked away, addressing staffing shortfalls to keep libraries, study spaces, and computer labs open as scheduled, and ensuring equitable access to technology without barriers like movement restrictions, inaccessible spaces, or program conflicts.

While integrating education technology may sound like a luxury, it is crucial for building digital empowerment, helping smooth the transition to education and work on the outside, and ensuring that there is a measure of parity between the student experience inside and out.

> **"You may miss class because somebody decided to act up and they locked everything down. So, there was a lot of challenges in terms of trying to get the education, but bottom line is you had to stay motivated and inspired. With that mindset, I just kept going no matter the obstacle."**
>
> P.P., *formerly incarcerated student*

> **“In a 80-men unit, we only had three tables. So, it was hard to find tables and you couldn’t stay in your cell too much because your cellmate wanted cell time. There wasn’t a study area that you could go to and there wasn’t accommodation for people in college to have a place to go work and do their papers.”**
>
> P.P., *formerly incarcerated student*

02
EDUCATIONAL SPACES

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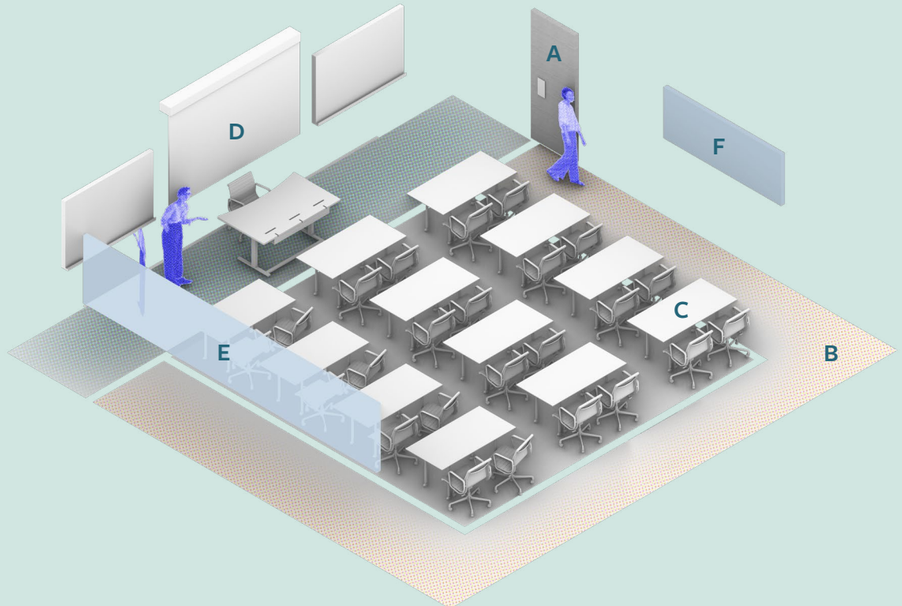
Access to dedicated educational spaces is a foundational component of prison-based higher education. However, many existing spaces within prison facilities that are currently being utilized for these programs were not originally designed with learning in mind. While structural changes may be necessary in some cases, significant improvements can be made by optimizing the spaces that are already available.

This chapter examines the key elements that define effective educational spaces and outlines strategies to improve their functionality. It is divided into two sections:

1. **Classrooms**, which explores the physical, spatial, and environmental factors that contribute to a productive learning environment, including layout, lighting, acoustics, and accessibility.

2. **Accessory Spaces**, which addresses the broader ecosystem of learning beyond the classroom, including individual study areas, group collaboration spaces, and resource storage.

The recommendations in this chapter emphasize practical interventions that enhance existing spaces to support student success within the constraints of the facility. **CHAPTER 03: SHIFTING THE BALANCE**, will address how to combine some of the recommendations made throughout this section together into large scale conversions and comprehensive educational spaces.



COMPONENTS OF A CLASSROOM

A | Entrance
A transition point into the classroom that is observable if desired without interrupting instructional flow

B | Circulation Space
Clear and appropriately sized pathways that support smooth movement and minimize disruption between seating and teaching zones

C | Seating & Work Areas
Flexible arrangements that offer students options for proximity, visibility, and comfort, while allowing freedom of movement

D | Teaching Zone
A defined area for instruction that ensures visibility of all materials and accommodates faculty presence and storage

E | Views to Outdoors
Sources of natural light are optional but provide connections to the outside environment and support well-being

F | Views Into Classroom
Prison security protocols often require at least one window into a classroom space. Seating should relate to this window such that students are not forced to observe it if preferred.

CLASSROOMS

While this report emphasizes the importance of a holistic educational experience, classrooms for structured instruction remain at the center of learning. At its most basic level, a classroom must provide an environment conducive to focused learning. This means ensuring that students and instructors can see, hear, and move through the space without unnecessary disruptions.

The hallmarks of a well-functioning classroom include:

1. **A Distraction-Free Environment:** Comfortable temperatures, good acoustics, and lighting that supports different learning activities, such as reading, writing, or using digital screens
2. **Clear Circulation Routes:** Pathways that allow students and faculty to move without interrupting others
3. **Sufficient Seating:** Desks and chairs that accommodate different body types and mobility needs
4. **Functional Teaching Surfaces:** Whiteboards, projection screens, or other tools that allow instructors to present materials effectively

Beyond these essentials, classrooms benefit from thoughtful enhancements that improve engagement and accessibility. Natural light, adaptable seating arrangements, and dedicated storage help create an environment that not only meets the basic requirements of instruction but also supports long-term academic success.

While these elements are important in the planning of a traditional classroom, in a prison environment, their quality and relationship to each other becomes even more critical, and even more precarious. Seemingly pedestrian decisions, such as the relationship of the seating layout to the entry door, can become highly charged in the carceral context. The following sections examine how spatial design, layout, and infrastructure impact the classroom experience in prison settings—and how strategic improvements within existing constraints can help create educational spaces that are both practical and effective.

LOCATION

The placement of classrooms within a prison facility impacts accessibility, security efficiency, and overall program effectiveness.

Proximity To Housing

Prison classrooms are rarely located within housing units, meaning students must travel to attend class. This presents both advantages and disadvantages due to the logistical requirements within a prison.

CHALLENGES OF DISTANT CLASSROOMS	BENEFITS OF DISTANT CLASSROOMS
Longer travel times reduce total available instructional time	A distinct learning space allows students to shift into “student mode”
Students with limited mobility may be unable to travel to distant classrooms	Relieves congestion within already crowded common areas of housing units
If travel is outdoors, classes may be canceled due to bad weather like heavy snow or dangerous winds	Classrooms may be closer to other educational resources like libraries or workshops
Distant classrooms may require passing through additional checkpoints and security screenings, leading to delays, increased staffing demands, and potential disruptions to students’ focus due to the dehumanizing nature of these procedures	Can potentially allow for greater control over environmental factors, such as lighting and noise, minimizing distractions

Proximity To Other Spaces

The placement of classrooms in relation to other key spaces affects accessibility, security efficiency, and the overall functionality of educational programs.

Classroom Clusters
Consolidating educational spaces within a facility can improve security efficiency and create a more structured learning environment. Instead of requiring separate security staffing for individual classrooms, one or two central monitoring stations can oversee multiple spaces, reducing staffing demands while maintaining oversight. Clustering classrooms in a dedicated academic zone can also help reinforce the legitimacy of education as a priority within the facility.

Proximity to Other Programs
If classrooms cannot be placed near housing, they should be located near other key spaces students visit regularly, such as dining halls or job training sites. Clustering educational and vocational programs within the same security perimeter allows staff to oversee multiple programs at once, reducing the need for constant escorts and supervision. However, if higher education is placed too closely alongside other programs, it risks being deprioritized in favor of vocational training or GED programs. Additionally, mixing different program types too freely may create distractions that make it harder for students to focus on their coursework. Striking a balance between proximity and program distinction should be considered.

Accessibility

Once inside a building, the location of classrooms impacts accessibility and usability, particularly for students and faculty with limited mobility or those responsible for transporting materials.

Floor Level
If classrooms are only accessible by stairs and there is no elevator, students with limited mobility may be unable to attend. Whenever possible, classrooms should be located on the ground floor to allow for accessibility.

Restrooms
Accessible restrooms should be nearby to support students with disabilities.

Material Transport
Transporting books or other materials between floors without an elevator creates logistical challenges for both students and instructors, disabled and non-disabled alike. While routes to all classrooms should be step-free, designated storage solutions on each floor can help reduce the burden of carrying materials between levels if upper-floor classrooms are necessary. See **RESOURCE STORAGE & ACCESS** for more information. Where students are expected to bring their own materials to and from class, solutions for addressing the burden of transport should be implemented, such as providing rolling bags, particularly for those with disabilities.

> **“Design of the environment can really shape people’s pedagogical choices, even unwittingly and especially inexperienced instructors might assume that they need to leave the space the way it is and teach accordingly.”**
>
> A.D., *HEP director*

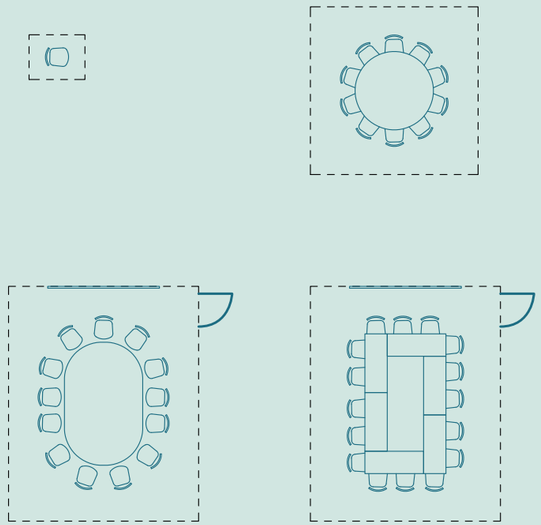
LAYOUT

The layout of a classroom affects learning dynamics, collaboration, and accessibility. In prison classrooms, layout challenges often stem from space constraints, fixed furniture, and the need to accommodate multiple classes in a single room. Classrooms in prison settings can vary widely in size, often because they were not originally designed as educational spaces. A poorly arranged classroom can create barriers to student engagement, limit instructional flexibility, and make it difficult to incorporate different teaching styles. While entirely reconstructing classrooms to an appropriate scale or shape may not be feasible, strategic modifications can help mitigate these challenges.

Classroom Types

The appropriate layout and scale of a classroom depend on the style of instruction taking place. While an imperfect classroom is better than no classroom, a better understanding of different teaching formats allows for a more effective assessment of available spaces within a prison facility. This also enables corrections and education staff to make informed decisions about adapting existing spaces to better support the types of courses being offered.

For the purposes of this report, we categorize educational spaces into four main typologies: discussions, seminars, lectures, and labs. Each has distinct spatial and furniture requirements that influence how students engage with course material, instructors, and each other. The diagrams in this section illustrate general layouts and classroom dimensions suited to each teaching style.



Discussion-Based

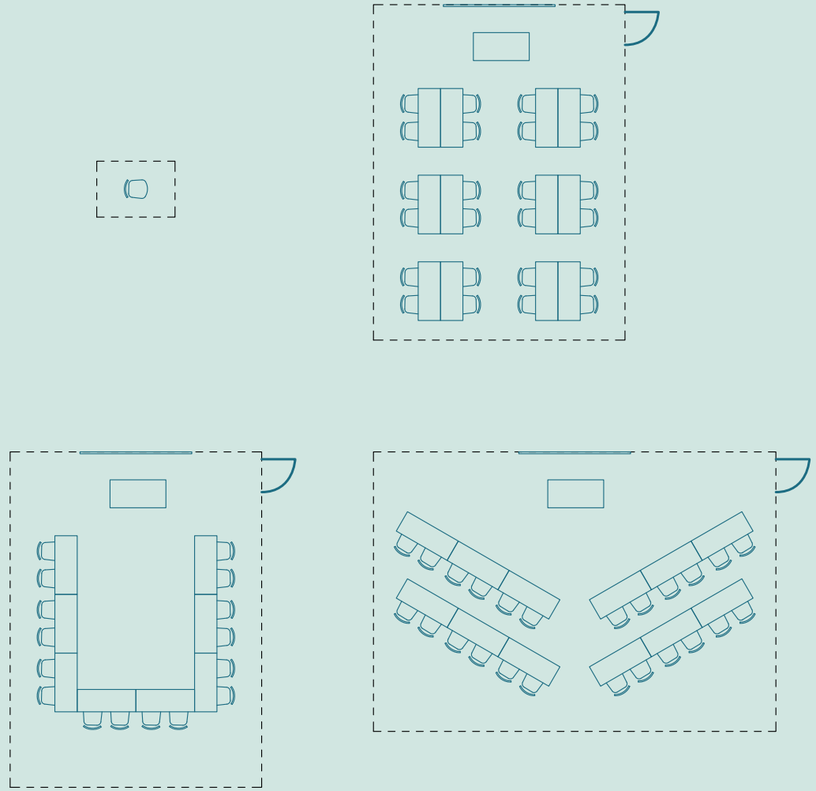
Discussion-based courses prioritize conversation and student engagement, with faculty acting primarily as facilitators rather than lecturers. These courses are typically small, ranging from eight to fifteen students, and require seating arrangements that promote face-to-face interaction. An iconic model for discussion classrooms is the Harkness Table, a singular central table that seats 12 students in a way that allows for equal participation and visibility.

Because discussion courses do not rely heavily on instructional materials such as whiteboards or projection screens, the space itself can be relatively compact. The only essential spatial requirement is enough clearance—at least four to five feet around the seating area—to allow for movement. These classrooms can often fit into repurposed offices, small conference rooms, or other modestly sized spaces within a facility.

Seating Capacity
8–15 students

Square Feet Per Student
15–20 SF

Notable Characteristics
Seating should be located in the center of the space.



Seating Capacity
10–20 students

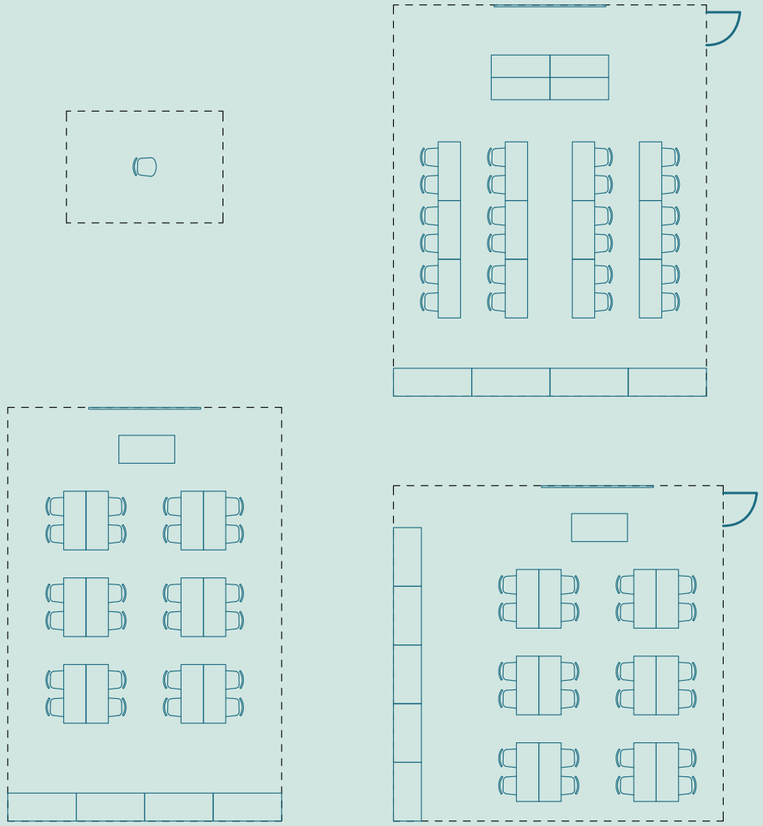
Square Feet Per Student
20–35 SF

Notable Characteristics
Seating layout should allow for fluid switching between presenter-style lectures and inter-student discussions.

Seminar

Seminars accommodate slightly larger groups, typically 10 to 20 students, and blend elements of discussion and lecture. Faculty members present information from the front of the room, but they typically do so in a way that encourages frequent student participation and interaction. Seating should be arranged to allow for both clear sightlines to the instructor and teaching materials as well as student-to-student discussion. A horseshoe or U-shaped seating layout is often effective, as it provides a direct view of the instructor while maintaining a level of engagement between students. Rows of desks can also be oriented at angles or in arches to promote better visibility between students.

Seminar rooms should be a minimum of 20 feet in each dimension to allow space for seating, circulation, and teaching areas. The longer dimension should not exceed 1.5 times the short dimension. If a room is too deep, students in the back may struggle to engage. If it is too wide, visibility of instructional materials may be compromised for students seated at the sides of the room.



Active Learning Environments (ALEs)

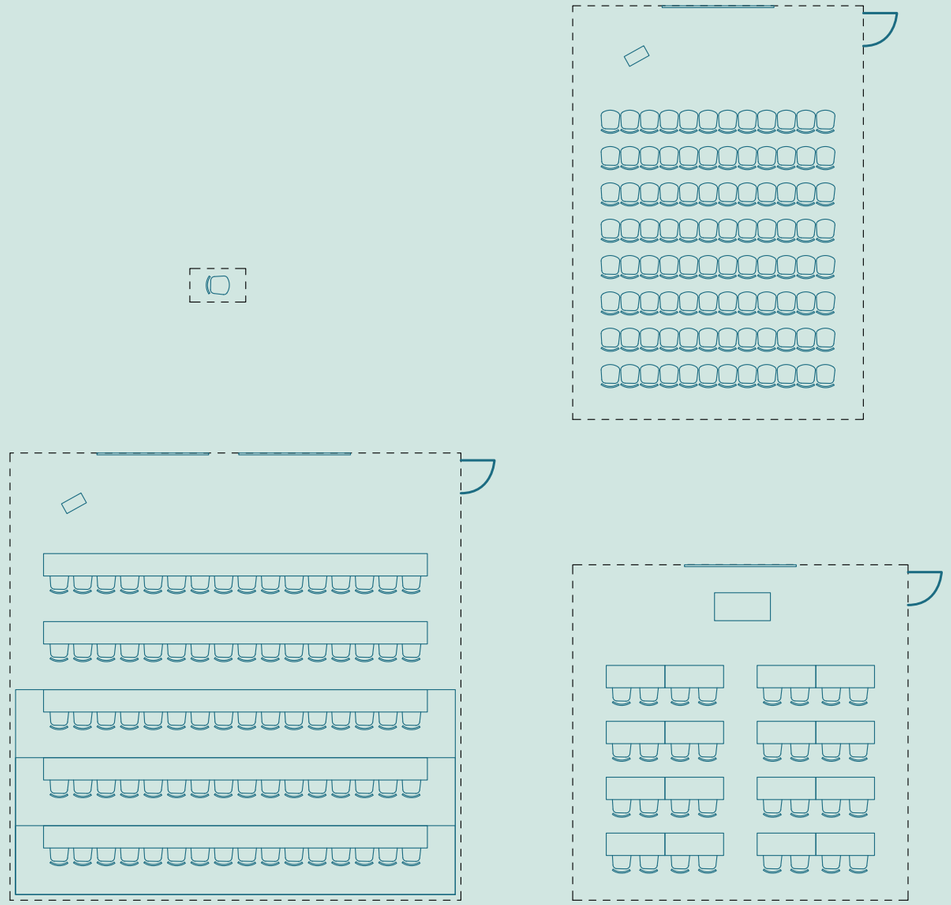
Active learning environments are a specialized subset of seminar spaces which incorporate any combination of faculty-led instruction, discussion, and hands-on work. Science labs, art classrooms, and maker spaces are typical examples of active learning environments. These courses require high flexibility, as instructors must pivot between teaching and supervising students. ALEs often involve small-group or individual work and frequently require specialized equipment or materials. Unlike other classroom types, where a singular focal point is typically practical, ALEs benefit from multiple distinct teaching zones, allowing instructors to provide demonstrations in one area while students work independently or in groups in another.

Because of these varied instructional needs, ALEs should be larger than seminar or discussion spaces and must be adapted to the specific requirements of the coursework. In prisons where classroom space is limited, repurposing irregularly shaped or unusually sized rooms for ALEs may be more viable than trying to fit other course types into them.

Seating Capacity
10–20 students

Square Feet Per Student
35–70 SF

Notable Characteristics
Needs vary greatly depending on the course and often requires specialized equipment.



Seating Capacity
20–100+ students

Square Feet Per Student
15–20 SF

Notable Characteristics
Seating may need to be tiered to allow for visibility from further seats.

Lecture

Lecture-style courses vary in size, accommodating anywhere from small groups of 20 students to much larger cohorts. While some lectures incorporate student feedback or Q&A sessions, the primary format involves faculty delivering information to attendees, often with limited interaction. In traditional college settings, lectures are typically held in auditoriums or tiered classrooms designed to support larger audiences. However, in prison education programs, such spaces are rarely available, requiring existing rooms to be adapted to lecture-style instruction.

A well-designed lecture classroom should be deeper than it is wide, as this layout naturally directs focus toward the instructor and presentation materials. If the room extends beyond 35 feet in depth, tiered seating should be introduced to prevent visibility issues for students seated farther from the front. Where tiered seating is not feasible, alternative solutions, such as multiple projection screens, strategically placed whiteboards, or instructor mobility throughout the space, can help ensure all students have equal access to the material.

Oversized Classrooms

Large classrooms may host multiple classes simultaneously, creating an environment where competing discussions make it difficult for students to concentrate. Even when only one class is present, it is an inefficient use of space, and an oversized room can feel impersonal, reducing student engagement and making it harder for instructors to facilitate discussion. The sheer scale of the space may also result in poor acoustics, with sound echoing and making communication less effective.

Room Dividers
Movable partitions, acoustic panels, or bookshelves can break up large rooms into smaller, more manageable sections. This helps reduce noise transfer when multiple classes are being held and allows for more structured group work when only one course is present.

Learning Zones
Rather than physically dividing the room, creating distinct areas for different activities—such as a reading corner, discussion space, or hands-on work zone—can make the space feel more intentional and manageable. Strategic seating arrangements can further reinforce these zones; instead of spreading students evenly throughout the room, desks and tables can be clustered to support different types of engagement.

Mobile Whiteboards & Display Screens
Positioning instructional materials closer to students, rather than relying on a single focal point at the front of the room, can improve visibility and participation. Mobile whiteboards and display screens can also act as flexible dividers, helping to visually segment the space as necessary.

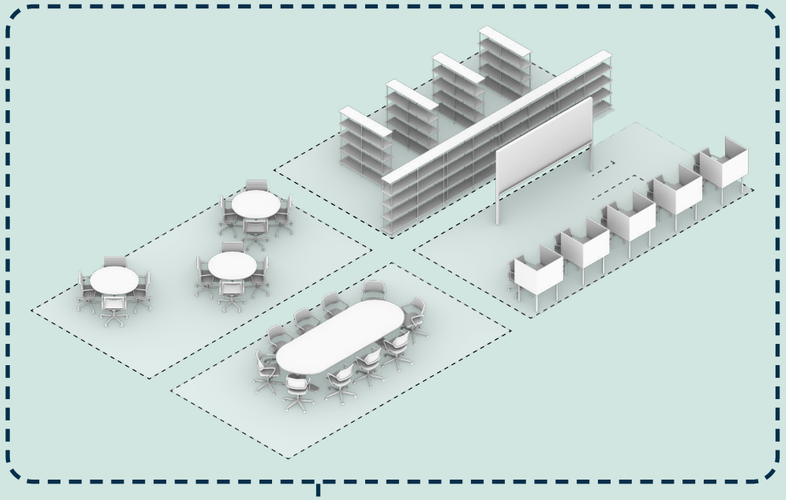
Acoustic Enhancements
Large classrooms often suffer from excessive reverberation, making it harder for students to hear instructors clearly. For specific strategies to address noise control, see **ACOUSTICS**.

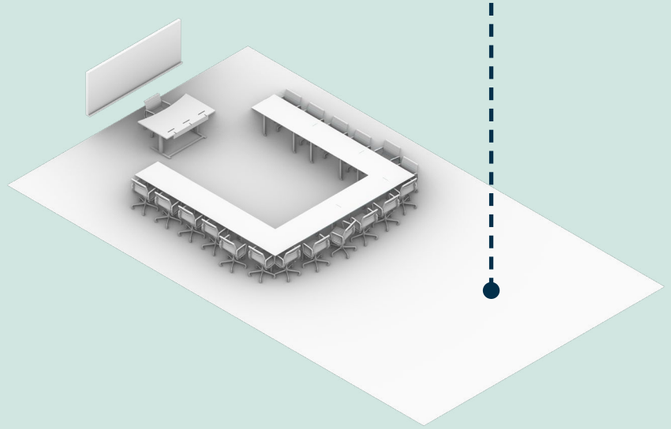
Undersized Classrooms

Small classrooms can suffer from overcrowding, restricting movement and limiting instructional flexibility. When space is tight, students using wheelchairs, walkers, or other mobility aids may find it difficult to navigate, reducing their ability to fully participate in class. Additionally, instructors may struggle to integrate different teaching methods, such as group work or hands-on activities, when there is not enough space to accommodate varied seating arrangements. While classrooms below a certain size may not function effectively for full-class instruction, smaller spaces can still serve as valuable group or individual study areas. For strategies on utilizing these areas, see **ACCESSORY SPACES**.

Flexible & Multi-Purpose Furniture
Furniture that can be easily rearranged or serve multiple functions helps maximize limited classroom space. Stackable or foldable desks and chairs allow instructors to adjust the layout as needed, while multi-purpose furniture, such as tables with built-in storage, provide additional functionality without adding clutter. More information about furniture selection can be found in **FINISHES & FIXTURES**.

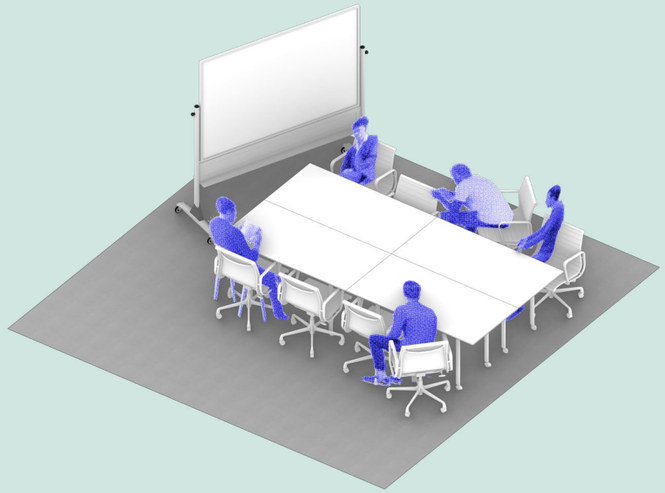
Maximizing Vertical Space
Integrating storage and instructional tools into walls helps keep floor space open in smaller classrooms. Wall-mounted whiteboards, projection screens, and storage units reduce clutter, while floating shelves, cubbies, and compact lockers can provide organized storage without encroaching on floor space.

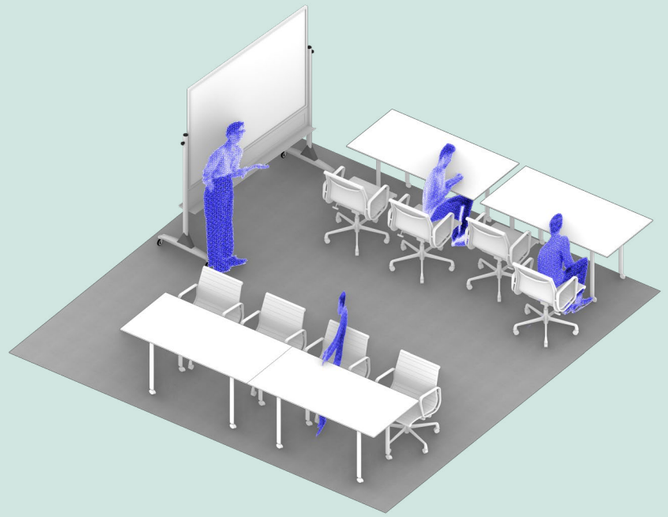




Depending on the amount of space left in a room beyond what is appropriate for the type of educational instruction it is being used for, a variety of accessory spaces can be paired with the typical classroom furniture.

As space is at a premium in prison environments, maximizing the use of the space, in an efficient way that doesn't compromise the use of the space as a classroom, is critical.





Moveable furniture can be particularly useful in undersized classrooms as it allows the instructor to rearrange the space and elements on the fly to best suit the type of instruction or activity happening during a class session. The benefits of moveable furniture are furthered elaborated upon later in this chapter.

Sightlines

The layout of a classroom affects how students see instructors, presentation materials, and surroundings. In prison classrooms, sightlines are shaped by both instructional needs and security requirements. Many classrooms have observation windows or glass interior walls, allowing guards to monitor the space from the hallway. While these features are meant for oversight, they can impact students differently.

For some, visible security presence can be a distraction, drawing attention away from coursework, especially when hallways are busy with movement. Others may feel overexposed, finding it difficult to concentrate when they know they are constantly visible to people outside the classroom. At the same time, some students feel more secure when they have a clear view of the entire room, particularly entrances and exits. Past experiences with trauma or violence may make it difficult for them to focus if they cannot monitor their surroundings. Trauma-informed design acknowledges these varied responses by creating a learning environment that fosters both security and concentration.

Seating Orientation for Comfort & Awareness

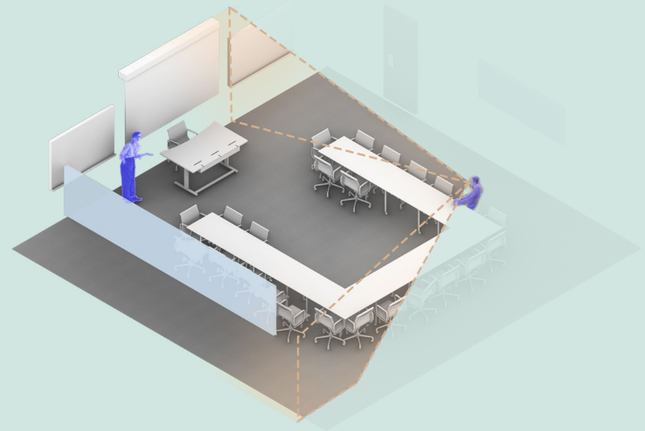
Providing students with options for where they sit allows them to position themselves in ways that make them feel safe. Some students may prefer to sit facing the door to maintain awareness of their surroundings, while others may want to position themselves away from visual distractions outside the classroom.

Creating a Sense of Security Through Layout

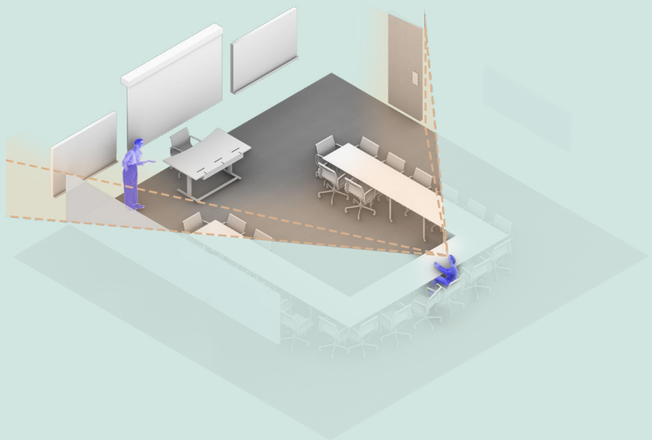
Furniture placement can be used to create a sense of enclosure without blocking necessary sightlines. Bookshelves, low partitions, or strategic desk arrangements can help create defined spaces within the classroom. U-shaped seating arrangements can offer a balance between open discussion and clear visibility so that all students can see the instructor and instructional materials without feeling overly exposed.

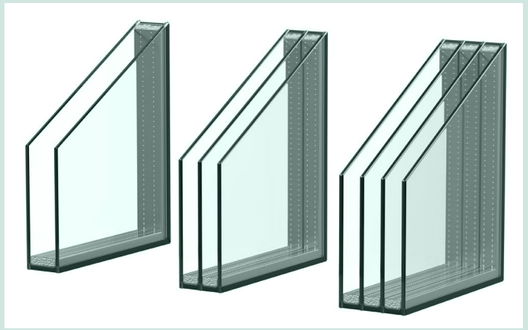
Minimizing Visual Barriers to Instruction

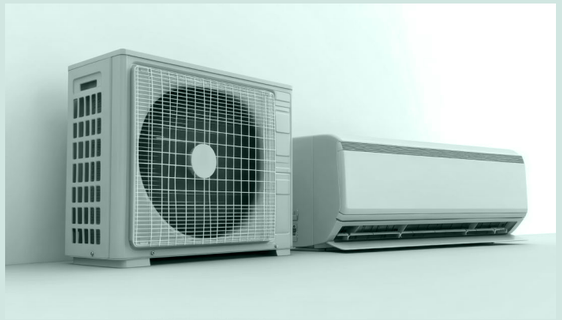
In some facilities, classrooms are repurposed computer labs with unused computer stations that obstruct views of instructors. Permanent fixtures that block sightlines prevent students from fully engaging. Fixed seating should be arranged so that all students have a clear view of instructional materials, taking into account obstructions like mid-room columns. If redesigning seating is not an option, instructors should have access to mobile whiteboards or projection equipment that can be repositioned.



Well-considered seating layouts can allow students to choose where to sit so that they can position themselves in various ways to frame or exclude elements within their field of vision. Whether they prefer to have a view of the door, the exterior, or the full space, students must feel comfortable to fully focus on learning.







VENTILATION & TEMPERATURE CONTROL

Retrofitting existing classrooms in prison settings with effective HVAC systems can provide a comfortable and functional learning environment. Many prison classrooms have limited—if any—means of natural ventilation, and they often lack adequate heating and cooling. Additionally, outdated HVAC systems can be noisy and disruptive. As climate change intensifies seasonal temperatures, the reliance on subpar HVAC systems creates an inhospitable environment for students and may discourage educators from teaching during extreme weather months. Addressing these challenges requires creative HVAC solutions that enhance air quality, maintain a comfortable temperature, and minimize noise while being cost-effective and adaptable for retrofitted spaces.

While upgrading the entire HVAC system would typically be the most effective solution, there may be cases where this isn't viable. Full-scale HVAC overhauls can be cost-prohibitive and structurally challenging within older buildings, particularly in secure facilities where construction may disrupt operations and require extensive planning. In such cases, it becomes essential to focus on targeted improvements that can maximize comfort and air quality with minimal disruption. Additionally, passive solutions can play a significant role in enhancing airflow, reducing temperatures, and increasing comfort without relying heavily on traditional, potentially noisy HVAC systems. These approaches can be integrated into the existing infrastructure to manage both temperature and air quality.

Ventilation

Since many prison classrooms lack windows that can be opened for fresh air, improving indoor air quality through mechanical ventilation becomes crucial. Without fresh air circulation, classrooms can experience a buildup of carbon dioxide, allergens, and airborne pollutants, all of which negatively impact cognitive function and concentration. Indoor air quality (IAQ) standards are established by American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) Standard 62.1-2022.[1]

Operable Windows
Installing operable windows where feasible offers a simple, low-tech way to introduce fresh air, significantly improving ventilation. These windows can be designed to open only partially, maintaining security while allowing air exchange. Operable windows also provide a psychological benefit by connecting indoor spaces with natural light and outdoor air. Tempered glass and security films can increase safety while still allowing fresh air flow.

Standalone Air Purifiers
In spaces where installing full ventilation systems is impractical, standalone air purifiers with HEPA and carbon filters can effectively remove airborne particles and improve air quality. These purifiers are portable, making them easy to add to classrooms without significant infrastructure changes.

Wall-Mounted Ventilation Fans
For some retrofitted classrooms, wall-mounted ventilation fans can help circulate fresh air without the need for a complete HVAC overhaul. Fans with air filtration and low-noise technology can effectively draw fresh air from nearby areas or exhaust stale air, contributing to healthier airflow.

Energy Recovery Ventilators (ERVs)
ERVs can be installed to bring in fresh air while reducing energy costs by capturing and reusing the energy from outgoing air. ERVs are especially effective in classrooms with few or no operable windows, as they improve air quality without creating a major energy burden.

1. American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers, ANSI/ASHRAE Standard 62.1-2022: Ventilation and Acceptable Indoor Air Quality (2022), https://www.ashrae.org/technical-resources/bookstore/standards-62-1-62-2.

Temperature Control

The lack of climate control is a persistent issue, especially during summer, when rising temperatures deter both students and teachers from attending. Climate change has made it increasingly important to ensure that classrooms maintain a consistent, comfortable temperature year-round.

Upgraded Windows
Replacing outdated windows with energy-efficient models can have a substantial impact on temperature regulation within classrooms. Low-emissivity windows, for instance, reduce heat transfer and reflect infrared light, keeping rooms cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Window assemblies can also include insulated frames and weatherstripping to prevent drafts and heat loss, reducing the need for extensive heating or cooling.

Ceiling Fans With Reverse Cycle
Ceiling fans equipped with reverse cycling can be used to keep rooms cool in summer and help distribute warm air in winter. With proper airflow control, ceiling fans can complement HVAC systems, reducing energy demand while maintaining comfortable temperatures.

Mini-Split Systems
Ductless mini-split systems offer an efficient way to add heating and cooling to classrooms without requiring extensive ductwork. These units are relatively easy to install in retrofitted spaces and allow for temperature control at the room level so that each classroom can be adjusted to suit the comfort needs of its occupants.

High-Efficiency Portable AC Units
For classrooms that cannot accommodate fixed HVAC systems, portable high-efficiency air conditioners provide an adaptable solution. These units can be deployed seasonally to address peak temperatures without the cost or permanence of central systems. Portable units should be rated for quiet operation to minimize excessive background noise, which can interfere with learning.

LIGHTING

Lighting plays a critical role in the functionality and comfort of classrooms, directly impacting students' learning experience and faculty's teaching methods.[1] In many prison settings, lighting is maintained at a constant level for security purposes, and neither students nor instructors have control over the fixtures. This lighting level is often too bright, leading to difficulties with visibility, especially for projector screens. Conversely, dim lighting in some classrooms can make it difficult to read, write, and perform close-up tasks, especially for students with impaired vision. Dim lighting also contributes to eye strain, reducing comfort and focus during class sessions. Illumination is best designed to maintain 40 footcandles (400 lux) at the desk surface. Additionally, a lack of natural lighting can make classrooms feel overly confined and disconnected from the time of day. Addressing these issues thoughtfully can create an environment that supports both learning and security compliance.

Daylighting

Windows in prison classrooms are often limited or small, restricting natural light and creating a sense of confinement. Without exposure to daylight, students lose track of time, which can negatively impact alertness and focus. Natural light can improve mood and enhance the overall atmosphere of the classroom, making it feel less institutional.

Installing Glass Block or Frosted Glass Windows
Where adding clear windows is not possible for security reasons, glass block or frosted glass can allow natural light to enter without compromising privacy. This type of glazing diffuses light, reducing glare while giving the room a soft, even illumination.

Transom Windows
Where feasible, adding small transom windows near the ceiling with frosted glass can introduce natural light at exterior walls and borrow light at interior corridors without providing undesired visibility. These solutions are especially effective when positioned to allow indirect light, avoiding direct sun exposure that might create glare.

Using Louvers for Light Diffusion
While natural daylight is a critical element of a comfortable educational space, it also can create distracting glare depending on the orientation of the classroom and time of day. While interior shades are often not permitted in carceral settings, exterior or interior louvers installed over windows or designed into new openings can allow daylight into classrooms while minimizing glare. Their angle and depth can be adjusted to control how much light enters the room. Louvers are also a secure alternative to bars, as they offer a similar level of security but create a more inviting, non-institutional appearance.

Adding Exterior Canopies
Similar to the louvers discussed in the previous item, installing a sunshade or overhang above windows can diffuse direct sunlight entering the classroom. This can prevent glare while still letting in a steady flow of natural light. For maximum benefit, sunshades should be designed to align with the sun's position at various times of the day.

Operable Shades or Blinds
Although security concerns may limit the use of traditional shades, fixed or limited-control blinds can allow for some modulation of natural light. Horizontal blinds, for instance, could be designed to only partially open, giving instructors a way to control brightness without fully obstructing views needed for monitoring. Use of double-glazed units with integral blinds would ensure protection of the blinds within the sealed window cavity.

1. Zheng Yang, Burcin Becerik-Gerber, and Laura Mino, "A Study on Student Perceptions of Higher Education Classrooms: Impact of Classroom Attributes on Student Satisfaction and Performance," *Building and Environment* 70 (2013): 171-188; Mark Winterbottom and Arnold Wilkins, "Lighting and Discomfort in the Classroom," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 29, no. 1 (2009): 63-75; Rostam Golmohammadi, Hanieh Yousefi, Negar Safarpour Khotbesara, Abbas Nasrolahi, and Nematullah Kurd, "Effects of Light on Attention and Reaction Time: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Research in Health Sciences* 21, no. 4 (2021): e00529.

Light Fixtures

Bright, un-adjustable lighting levels make it difficult to see projection screens clearly, as the contrast needed for legibility is diminished. For instructors, this means restricted use of multimedia tools, which limits engagement and learning opportunities for students.

Zoned Lighting Control
Faculty should ideally have some control over different lighting zones within the classroom. Zoned lighting allows instructors to adjust the light levels in specific areas without compromising overall security requirements. For instance:

1. **Projector Zone:** Dimmable lighting or recessed fixtures above the projector screen area could be separately controlled. This way, instructors can reduce brightness over the screen while maintaining adequate lighting in the rest of the classroom.
2. **Classroom Zone:** The main classroom area can remain brightly lit to meet visibility needs for security monitoring, even when the screen area is dimmed. This configuration enables faculty to work through various teaching methods without compromising either visibility or security protocols.

3. **Light Baffles for Glare Reduction:** A physical light baffle, such as a ceiling-mounted panel or small divider, could be installed between the projector screen and the rest of the classroom to block stray light from the main lighting fixtures. This setup creates a darker zone near the screen for improved contrast without sacrificing the ambient light level needed for visibility across the rest of the room. Such baffles can also direct light downward, reducing glare on whiteboards or other reflective surfaces.

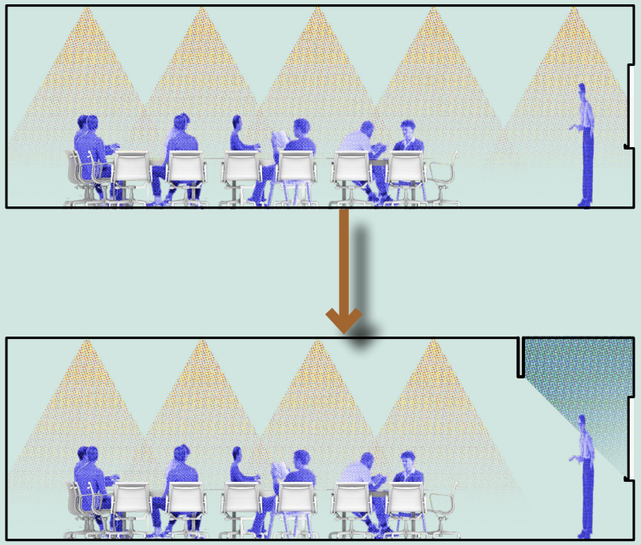
Non-Reflective Surfaces
When light sources are bright, glare off surfaces can be an issue, especially when using projector screens. Choosing matte or textured finishes on floors, desks, walls, and other surfaces can help reduce unintended reflections that distract students or interfere with projection visibility.

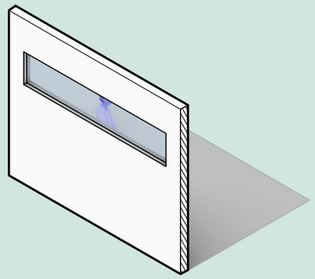
Light Fixture Selection
Selecting lighting fixtures with a high color rendering index (CRI) can improve color accuracy and reduce eye strain. High CRI lights reveal more natural colors, improving visibility and making materials easier to read. Additionally, choosing low-glare fixtures or diffused lighting covers can prevent uncomfortable glare that impacts reading and concentration. This is especially important in confined spaces, where harsh lighting can be disorienting.

Wall Color & Projection Contrast
The color and finish of walls can also play a role in controlling light levels and optimizing visibility, particularly for projection-based instruction. Strategic use of contrast can help define focal areas within the classroom. Leaving a dedicated white or light-colored section of the wall for projection—surrounded by darker tones—creates a visual frame that makes content easier to see. Darker adjacent walls minimize light scatter to improve legibility in classrooms where full light control isn't possible.

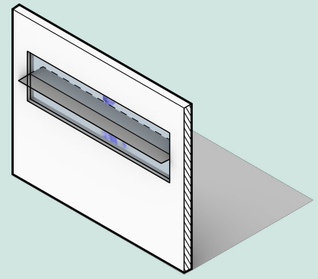
(*Top*)
By zoning lights with separate controls and introducing architectural elements such as light-blocking soffits, spaces can be improved to better adapt to different lighting needs while still maintaining minimum light levels for security requirements. As a general rule, light zones should match the components of a classroom described at the start of this chapter.

(*Bottom*)
A selection of daylighting strategies which balance security, views, and comfort.

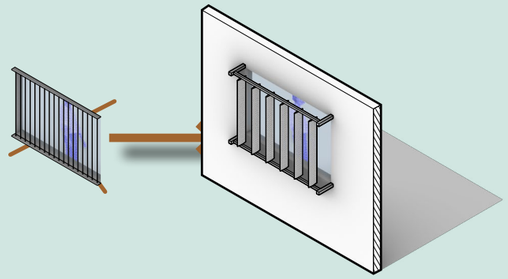




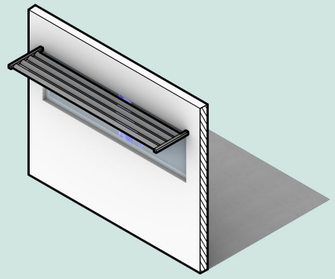
Transom Windows



Light Shelves



Replace Bars With Louvers



Exterior Canopies

> **“Sound is always a concern, especially when I’m trying to make sure students can have quiet for their tests. It’s the tile floor, cement walls, cement ceilings, metal doors, they don’t help. The metal door has a four-inch gap so they can throw canisters of tear gas in there if they need to.”**

B.M., *HEP instructor*

ACOUSTICS

Effective acoustical design is essential for supporting speech intelligibility in classrooms, where clear communication can dramatically enhance learning outcomes. In retrofitted classrooms, careful attention to minimizing echo, reverberation, and background noise helps create a space where voices can be clearly heard and understood across the room, despite the limitations of the existing infrastructure. Per the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) S12.60 standard, a good target for maximum background noise level in a classroom is 35 decibels.

The key to speech intelligibility is maximizing the signal-to-noise ratio—either by increasing the clarity of desired sounds or reducing background noise. Increasing good reflections and reducing undesirable late reflections optimizes the “signal,” while using sound-absorbing materials in key areas lowers ambient noise. Addressing both the signal and the noise components is essential in an existing classroom, where acoustical challenges may be more pronounced due to structural limitations.

Reverberation

In retrofitted spaces with hard surfaces and structural limitations, adding sound-absorbing materials and adjusting layouts can effectively reduce excessive echoes and enhance overall speech clarity. For optimal classroom acoustics, achieving the right balance of reverberation time (RT) is key. Ideally, a classroom's RT should be about 0.6 seconds. An RT lower than this can make softer sounds hard to hear and allow minor background noises to mask important parts of speech. However, excessive sound absorption, or "over-dampening," can dull speech clarity, creating a "muffled" effect that reduces comprehension.

Acoustical Panels
Sound absorption materials, like acoustic wall panels and ceilings, are valuable for reducing reverberation by limiting sound reflections off hard surfaces. These surface finishes can easily be added in retrofitted classrooms. Decorative acoustic panels can also serve a dual purpose in prison classrooms by both absorbing sound and enhancing the visual atmosphere. Wall-mounted fabric-covered panels with subtle designs or colors can reduce reverberation while creating a space that feels more focused and less institutional, fostering a welcoming environment that supports concentration.

Strategic Furniture Placement
Furniture arrangements play a valuable role in controlling sound reflections without the need for additional materials. Placing desks and tables away from walls can prevent direct sound reflections, enhancing clarity and reducing echo. However, layouts must retain clear sight lines between students and instructors, as visual cues complement auditory information, especially in rooms where acoustic challenges are greater.

Background Noise

In retrofitted classrooms, preventing noise intrusion from adjacent spaces or the outdoors is essential for creating a focused learning environment. Soundproofing solutions targeted at walls, ceilings, and windows can help isolate classroom acoustics from external sounds.

Acoustic Ceiling Panels with High CAC Ratings
To minimize sound transmission through the ceiling plenum, installing ceiling panels with a high Ceiling Attenuation Class (CAC) rating can block noise from adjacent rooms or hallways. This solution is especially effective in retrofits where ceiling materials can be easily upgraded.

Insulation Above Ceiling Tiles
Adding a layer of insulation above the ceiling tiles helps absorb sound and reduce transmission from other spaces. This solution also works as a secondary sound barrier within the plenum, which is particularly useful in classrooms that share ceilings with other active rooms.

Plenum Barriers with Gypsum Board
For classrooms with high noise transmission through shared ceilings, installing a gypsum board plenum barrier can create a dedicated soundproofed layer. This solution works by reinforcing sound isolation in shared ceilings, limiting the passage of noise through the plenum and into adjacent spaces.

Soundproof Windows for External Noise
In classrooms exposed to external noise from outdoor areas, upgrading to double-glazed or laminated soundproof windows can help block sounds from traffic, yard areas, or other outdoor activities. This solution is particularly effective in classrooms close to exterior walls or open spaces where external noise may impact concentration and speech intelligibility.

Carpeting
Carpeting can help reduce impact noise from foot traffic and chair movement, minimizing background noise from these sources. It also reduces impact noise transmission to rooms below. The addition of carpet can also reduce reflected sound, though it typically is not sufficient alone.

HVAC System Noise

HVAC systems are a common source of background noise in classrooms, often due to equipment vibrations, fan operation, or sound traveling through ductwork. For optimal acoustics, centralized systems are generally preferable to window or room units, which generate more noise and are harder to soundproof. Positioning HVAC units above non-critical areas like hallways and running ducts to classrooms can help reduce noise levels. Minimizing HVAC noise creates a more comfortable learning environment, particularly in prison classrooms where other distractions may already be present.

Duct Lining & Insulation
Adding insulation to ductwork can reduce noise from air movement and vibrations. Liners made from sound-absorbing materials can be installed within ducts to muffle the noise as air travels through the system, creating a quieter classroom environment.

Sound-Dampening Enclosures for HVAC Units
If HVAC systems are located in or near the classroom, sound-dampening enclosures can help reduce equipment noise. These enclosures use acoustic materials to contain noise from compressors, fans, and other moving parts.

Low-Velocity Fans & Variable Speed Blowers
Low-velocity fans and variable speed blowers reduce the noise produced by high-speed airflow, particularly at air outlets and return grilles. These fans allow for smoother airflow without turbulent noise and can adjust speed based on room temperature, making them ideal for retrofitted spaces requiring low-noise solutions.

> **“A/C units are so loud that we often can’t hear each other, especially if I have students who have hearing impairment of any kind, they can’t hear a thing when the units are on. So, we use them until we get started, and then we turn them off, and it gets very hot.”**
>
> B.M., *HEP instructor*

FINISHES & FIXTURES

The finishes and fixtures in many prison classrooms often feel institutional: walls are bare, floors are cold, and metal furnishings dominate the space. These design choices not only affect appearance but also impact comfort, acoustics, and the overall learning experience. Small, thoughtful changes in finishes, materials, and fixtures can shift the classroom atmosphere toward one that feels more welcoming and focused on education.

Character

The physical environment of a prison classroom should feel distinct from the rest of the facility. Any shift in atmosphere—however subtle—can reinforce the idea that students are entering a space dedicated to learning rather than confinement. Even within the constraints of a prison setting, design choices that differentiate classrooms from housing units help establish a sense of purpose and belonging.

Wall Personalization

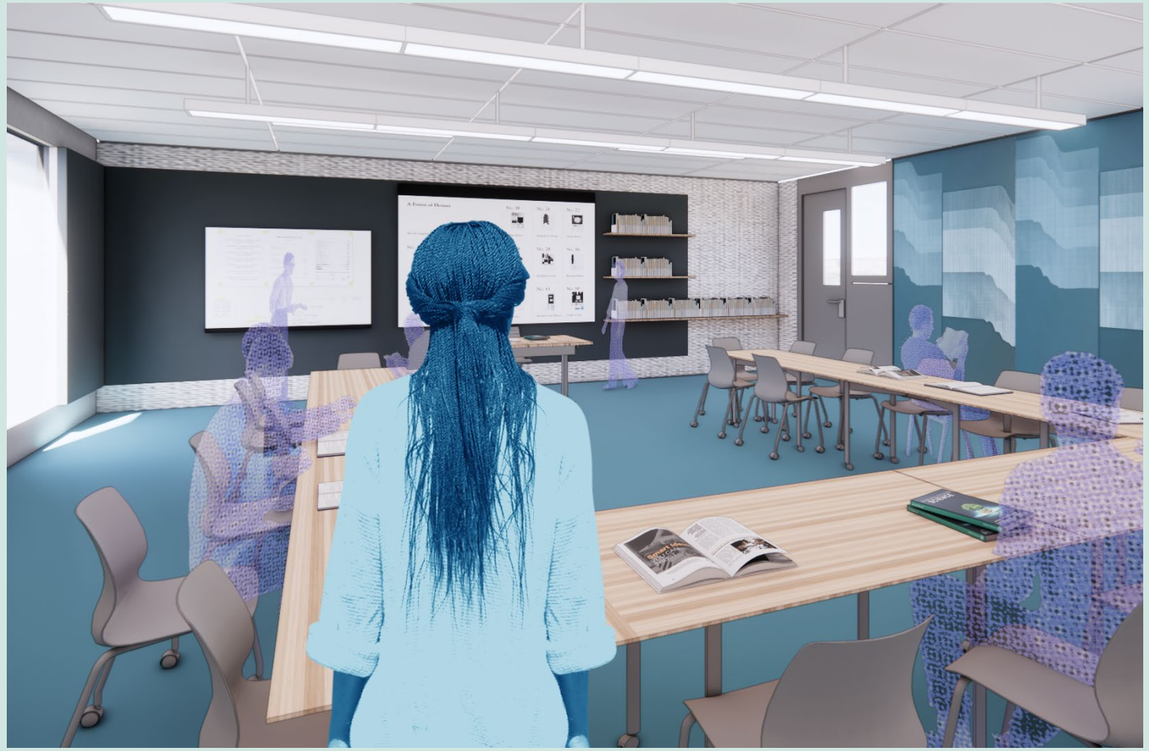
Displaying educational materials, students' past work, inspirational quotes, or even simple murals can give the classroom a sense of life and provide supportive stimulation. This doesn't have to be elaborate; posters or student projects can make the space feel less like an extension of the prison and more like a genuine place of learning. **CASE STUDY #1** provides a pertinent example of how important these elements can be.

Trauma Informed Finishes

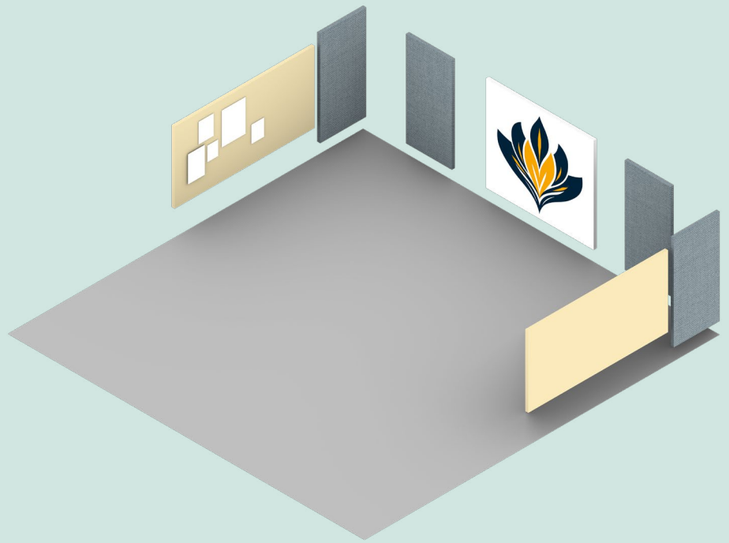
A classroom designed with trauma-informed principles takes into account the emotional well-being of its occupants. Using softer materials and warmer tones can help students feel safer and more relaxed, allowing them to focus on learning. Replacing cold, reflective surfaces with textured, sound-absorbing finishes reduces harsh echoes and contributes to a calmer atmosphere. Subtle color schemes, gentle lighting, and comfortable textures also help lessen the institutional feel of the space, encouraging focus and a sense of security.

Fixtures That Signal Classroom Legitimacy

Fixed whiteboards, corkboards, and similar teaching fixtures send a clear message: this is a classroom, not just a repurposed space. Permanent boards give instructors enough room to write out full problems, display ongoing projects, or leave important notes up for multiple sessions. Additional touches like proper lecterns or shelves for books reinforce the sense that education is a priority.



> Many types of finishes can serve double duty. Acoustic panels can be selected in the university's colors or printed with images from the offering college's campus. Tackable boards can provide both an acoustic benefit and an area to pin-up student work to review or display.



Furnishings

Many prison classrooms contain a mismatched assortment of worn desks and chairs. Discomfort is distracting, and fixed desk-chair combinations can fail to accommodate different body shapes or mobility needs. This makes the space feel improvised and undermines the sense that the room is a serious academic setting.

Coordinated Yet Varied Furniture

A more uniform selection of desks and chairs can give the classroom a cohesive, academic feel, but it's important to include variations in size and type. Having a few free-standing desks, larger chairs, or adjustable options ensures comfort and accessibility for everyone. Offering multiple seating styles—a mix of chairs, stools, or cushioned seats—gives students a degree of choice, promoting engagement and respect for individual needs. This balanced approach signals that the classroom is both thoughtfully designed and responsive to the diversity of learners.

Movable Furniture

Prison facilities often favor fixed or bolted furniture for security reasons. Wherever possible, in spaces designated for educational use, such furniture should be replaced. Molded plastic or softer-finish furniture can provide a secure alternative while maintaining flexibility for learning.

Writing Boards

Writable surfaces are key classroom tools, but in prison classrooms they may be nonexistent. When they are available, they're often too small and worn. Students struggle to see the instructor's writing, and teachers lack space to demonstrate more complex or lengthy material. Meanwhile, shared classrooms often mean everything must be erased at the end of each session, disrupting continuity for longer-term projects or lessons.

Larger, More Accessible Boards

Installing bigger whiteboards or modern blackboards helps instructors cover full lessons without running out of space. To support students with varying visual needs, these boards should be placed at a comfortable height and angle, with adequate lighting and low-glare surfaces.

Flexible Board Options for Multiple Classes

Two-sided, mobile boards or sliding, multi-board systems allow several classes to share the same space. One group's notes can remain on one side while another group uses the other, preserving material from session to session.

A sliding multi-board system can accommodate multiple different courses without requiring faculty to erase notes between sessions.

CASE STUDY #1

Students in this program spoke with a strong sense of honor and privilege about their participation. This attitude was deeply influenced by the environment curated within the facility's dedicated educational building. The physical and social atmosphere of this space reinforced the value of the program, setting it apart from the rest of the prison.

Upon entering the educational building, students are greeted with visual cues that distinguish the space from the rest of the facility. The security desk was modest in scale, and the overall atmosphere lacked the pervasive sense of surveillance found elsewhere in the prison. Adjacent to the desk, a mural painted by a former participant depicted the main quad of the college. Students spoke about the mural with pride, referring to the campus it represented not as a distant institution but as their campus. Nearby, images of past graduating cohorts were pinned to the walls, offering a visible reminder of achievement and providing motivation for current students.

Inside the classrooms, the connection to the college was reinforced through color and branding. The walls were painted in the school's colors, and at least one room prominently displayed the school's logo. Each classroom had at least one window to the outdoors, providing some natural light. However, larger windows and additional plantings in the outdoor space between the educational wing and adjacent buildings could improve the setting. Furniture was movable and comfortable, though the rooms were somewhat narrow, limiting layout flexibility. One significant drawback was the absence of research and support spaces; additionally, the library was notably small, restricting access to essential academic resources.

Beyond the physical environment, the commitment to education was reflected in the good relationships that students reported having with the warden and staff, all of whom were invested in the success of the program. This sense of connection extended beyond the prison walls—some former and current incarcerated students also served as editors for the college's newspaper, which was distributed both to students inside the prison and to those on the main campus.

While improvements could be made, this case study highlights the fundamental role that space and institutional attitudes play in shaping the success of prison education programs. The trust and value instilled through both the built environment and stakeholder engagement were central to the positive experiences reported by students.

MEN'S FACILITY

MEDIUM SECURITY

SOUTHEASTERN REGION

ASSOCIATES & BACHELOR'S

7% PARTICIPATION

(*Top Left*)
The educational building's library is shared between the associates and bachelor's programs. It primarily offers reference books.

(*Top Right*)
A typical classroom within the educational building—one of approximately four—features movable furniture, comfortable seating, an LCD screen, and a faculty desk (not shown). The southern wall, pictured here, prominently displays one of the school's logos set against a graphic background.

(*Middle Left*)
Photos of graduating cohorts are pinned along the corridor wall, celebrating students who have successfully completed the program.

(*Bottom*)
This mural was painted by a former participant of the program, who was permitted to visit the college's main campus to prepare a sketch in advance. It measures approximately 6 feet by 4 feet and is prominently displayed at the entrance to the educational building.

TEMPORARY STRUCTURES

In facilities where existing spaces cannot be adapted for classrooms—whether due to a lack of available rooms or the inability to improve poor conditions—temporary structures may serve as a short-term solution to expand educational opportunities. However, it's critical to design these spaces with clear boundaries to ensure they're used solely for educational purposes. Expanding prison infrastructure, even for classrooms, can inadvertently communicate institutional growth, which may detract from other priorities.

Economical & Impermanent Solutions

If retrofitting existing spaces is unfeasible, new classrooms should prioritize appropriate size, configuration, and technology for a typical classroom without significant capital improvement. Modular, movable classrooms, like trailer units, have been used in schools for decades and could work well in prison settings. These flexible, leased units provide a sustainable, reusable option that conserves resources and avoids expanding the prison's infrastructure footprint. When no longer needed, they can be moved to other educational sites.

Modular classrooms offer several design advantages for education:

- **Adaptable Size & Layout:** Modular units come in a variety of configurations that can be customized for different class sizes and types, providing flexibility within a restrictive setting.
- **Ease of Installation and Removal:** Designed for quick transport, setup, and take-down, modular classrooms can be installed with minimal disruption and relocated when no longer needed.
- **Sustainability & Environmental Impact:** By using recyclable and reusable materials, these classrooms support sustainable building practices and reduce environmental impact.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Leasing modular classrooms is typically more affordable than permanent construction. This allows funds to be directed toward education programs rather than physical expansion.
- **Specialized Equipment:** As programs expand, there may be an interest in offering courses that require specialized equipment, particularly in fields like fine arts or applied sciences, such as biology and chemistry. These subjects demand specific tools and enhanced mechanical ventilation. Modular classrooms can provide a flexible solution when retrofitting older buildings is impractical.

> Courses that require equipment-intensive labs are often of great interest to incarcerated students but can be difficult to accommodate within existing prison educational spaces. Modular, standalone temporary structures offer a practical solution for making these programs possible.

Ownership

It is recommended that educational institutions or providers own the modular classrooms under "parking" agreements with the facility. This setup would restrict the classrooms to educational use and preserve their intended purpose. Alternatively, local government education departments or nonprofits could fund or lease these spaces, providing even broader access to prison-based educational programs from multiple universities without expanding prison facilities permanently.

Clear guidelines and agreements, such as facility contracts or memoranda of understanding, can further solidify the educational purpose of these spaces. These agreements should specify that non-educational staff and programs are restricted from using the classrooms to prevent gradual reallocation. Such policies not only protect the space's purpose but also reinforce a commitment to the educational mission. The temporary mobile structures can be reallocated back to the school when no longer needed within the prison facility.

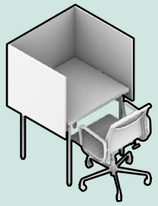
> **“There was no place to gather your thoughts and study.”**
>
> P.P., *formerly incarcerated student*

ACCESSORY SPACES

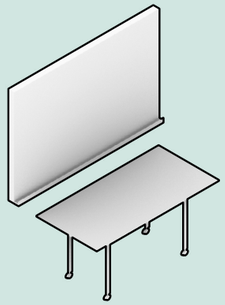
While classrooms are central to higher education, a significant portion of learning takes place outside scheduled class time. College campuses provide students with a variety of spaces dedicated to this learning, such as libraries, student lounges, and personal dorm-room desks. Subject matter specific learning is supported through specialized facilities, such as labs, maker spaces, and computer rooms. Students also work in less traditional locations, such as dining halls, outdoor spaces, and informal gathering spots.

These accessory spaces allow students to refine their understanding of course material beyond the classroom through independent study, group collaboration, and one-on-one discussions with faculty. For incarcerated students, this type of learning is just as critical. Well-structured, well-equipped accessory spaces provide the time, resources, and flexibility necessary to fully engage with coursework, supporting a learning experience that maintains the academic rigor of higher education. Unlike standard classrooms, accessory spaces serve a wide range of functions, varying in scale, purpose, and design.

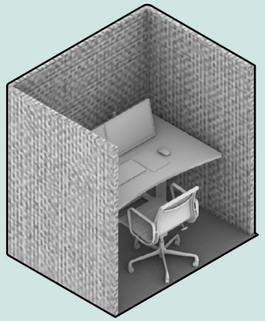
INDIVIDUAL STUDY SPACES



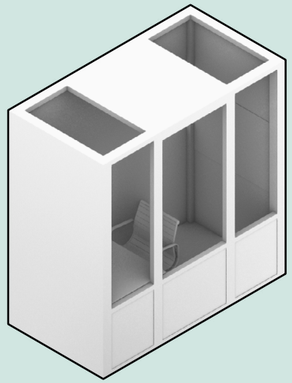
Study Carrel



Work Station—Table & Board



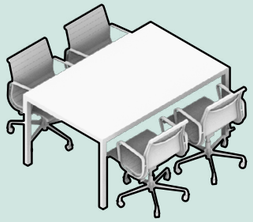
Cubicle



Enclosed Study Pods

GROUP STUDY SPACES

Study Table—Round

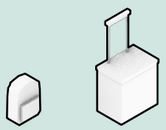


Study Table—Square

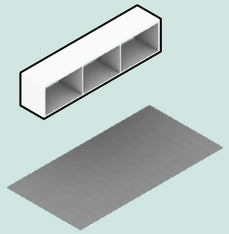
Study Table—End

Large Group Meeting

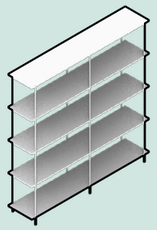
STORAGE



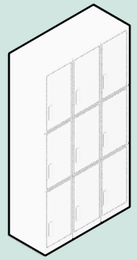
Mobile Personal Storage



Wall-Mounted Shelves



Open Shelves



Lockers

An array of furniture and equipment solutions can help define and strengthen accessory spaces for academic use. Depending on space availability and program needs, facilities can implement a mix of individual and group areas, supported by appropriate, program-specific storage. A balanced educational environment includes all three—individual, group, and storage—distributed across multiple locations to maximize access and accommodate student preferences.

STUDY SPACES

Incarcerated students need study spaces that support both independent work and peer collaboration outside of class, yet these spaces are often limited or poorly suited for academic use.

Within Individual Cells

The first and most immediate study space for incarcerated students is within their personal cells. However, most prison housing was not designed with academic use in mind and often lacks adequate space, lighting, and privacy for focused study. To support effective learning, each student should have access to a dedicated desk, and other environmental factors—such as proper lighting, acoustics, and storage—should be addressed to create a functional study space.

Single-Occupancy Cells
In shared cells, limited space may make it impossible to accommodate multiple desks, and conflicting schedules between cellmates may lead to disputes over noise levels and study times. Housing students individually, even in units designed for multiple occupants, is the most effective way to ensure dedicated study space within their living quarters and gives students greater control over their study environment and schedule.

Foldable Desks
If space is limited, foldable desks—either freestanding or wall-mounted—allow students to create a dedicated study area without permanently occupying floor space. Freestanding foldable desks provide flexibility, while wall-mounted fold-down desks offer a compact solution that can be stowed away when not in use.

Task Lighting
Overhead lighting in prison cells is often harsh, difficult to control, and not optimized for reading or focused study. Without adequate lighting, students may experience visual strain, making it harder to engage with course materials for extended periods. Providing individual task lights with adjustable brightness allows students to study comfortably without over-illuminating the entire cell or disrupting a cellmate's rest.

Noise-Reducing Materials
While full acoustic treatments may not be feasible, adding noise-dampening materials such as fabric wall panels or sound-absorbing desk dividers, can reduce echo and aid focus within a confined space.

Within Housing Units

Even with improved in-cell study conditions, students need alternative spaces where they can focus outside their living quarters. Within housing wings, designated study areas provide opportunities for independent work and group collaboration.

Repurposing Existing Rooms & Cells
Unused or underutilized spaces—such as resource rooms, storage areas, or empty cells—can be converted into dedicated study spaces. Smaller spaces, like empty cells, can be designated as reservable study areas, allowing students to sign up for quiet, distraction-free work time. These areas should be equipped with desks, proper lighting, and, where feasible, sound-absorbing materials. Additional details about implementing these spaces can be found in **CHAPTER 03: SHIFTING THE BALANCE.**

Modular Study Carrels
Installing modular study carrels—such as those used in university libraries—within common areas or dayrooms provides students with semi-private study zones. These carrels can be fixed in place for permanent use or designed to fold and store easily, allowing for flexible room configurations as needed.

Enclosed Study Pods
Enclosed study pods, commonly used in office and library settings, offer a compact, sound-dampened workspace that could provide incarcerated students with a distraction-free study environment. These pods are self-contained units designed to reduce noise and visual distractions, typically featuring built-in desks, lighting, and ventilation. While security concerns may limit their implementation in some facilities, models with transparent walls or open designs could be adapted to meet institutional requirements while still offering privacy and focus. Their modular nature would also allow for flexible placement and potential relocation as facility needs change.

Designated Study Hours in Common Areas
Where creating dedicated study rooms is not possible, existing communal spaces—such as dayrooms or shared lounges—can be designated as study areas during specific hours. Institutional support is necessary to establish a structured schedule, enforce noise reductions, and maintain a balance between study and recreational use. All affected populations, including students and non-students, should be consulted when determining quiet hour schedules.

Within Educational Wings

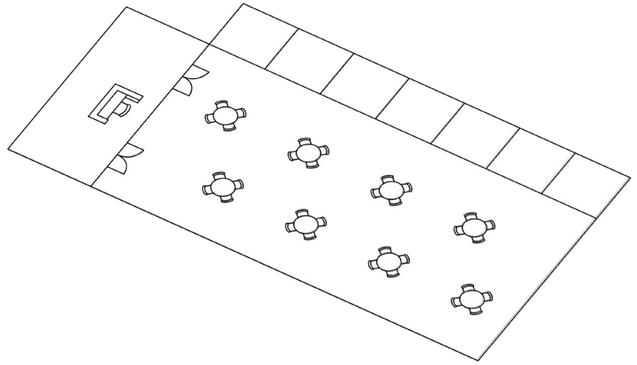
Facilities with dedicated educational wings should incorporate study spaces where students can work independently or collaborate outside of class hours. These spaces are particularly valuable for students with unstructured time between lessons or those required to remain in the educational wing before transitioning to another secure area.

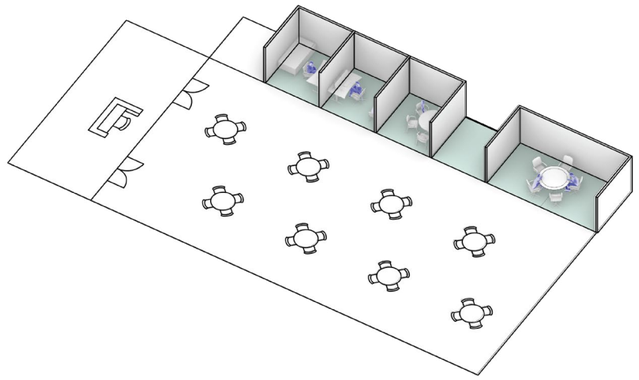
Beyond individual study, educational wings offer key opportunities for faculty-student meetings and peer collaboration between students from different housing units. Dedicated spaces for tutoring, faculty consultations, and group study can help replicate the broader academic experience found on traditional college campuses, reinforcing the legitimacy of higher education within the facility.

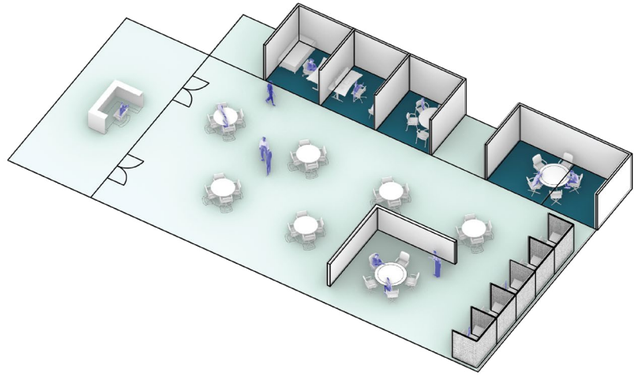
Many of the study space solutions proposed for housing units—such as reservable study rooms, modular carrels, and designated quiet zones—are equally relevant in educational wings. However, their effectiveness relies on institutional policies that allow for consistent, reliable access. Scheduling and operational protocols should prioritize meaningful use of these spaces, rather than restricting availability to brief or unpredictable windows of time.

Outdoors

Outdoor study spaces provide an additional alternative for students seeking a change of environment, allowing them to review materials in a more open setting with access to fresh air and natural light. Shaded tables, benches, or designated study zones can create comfortable spaces for reading, writing, or small group discussions.







RESOURCE STORAGE & ACCESS

Higher education relies on access to a diverse array of academic materials, from textbooks and research sources to specialized equipment and technology. On traditional college campuses, students do not carry every resource they need at all times; instead, they rely on lending libraries, dedicated program storage, and specially equipped lab spaces. Within prison settings, where students face heightened restrictions on transporting and retaining materials, institutional resource storage becomes even more critical. Without structured systems for storing and accessing learning materials, students may struggle to engage fully in coursework or face delays in completing assignments due to limited access to necessary tools.

Providing localized, program-specific storage helps offset these restrictions and creates a more functional academic environment. This applies not only to student-accessible materials but also to faculty resources. As discussed in **CHAPTER 01: OPERATIONS & RESOURCES**, instructors sometimes face challenges bringing materials into prison classrooms due to security screening processes, inconsistent enforcement of entry policies, and long travel distances within facilities. Without on-site storage, faculty must either transport materials daily—risking delays, loss, or confiscation—or limit their use of supplemental educational tools.

Student Lending Libraries & Course-Specific Resource Centers
Instead of requiring students to personally store and transport all course materials, prison education programs can establish lending libraries or designated resource centers. These spaces can house textbooks, reference materials, and field-specific tools, allowing students to check out what they need on a short-term or semester-long basis.

Student Storage in Housing
Students need dedicated storage within their housing units to keep academic materials accessible for independent study. In facilities with limited access to educational wings, this storage should be available in cells or common areas and must be supplemental to personal storage so that students don't have to choose between coursework and belongings. It should accommodate both permanent supplies—laptops, notebooks, and writing materials—and temporary items like research materials, semester-long projects, and completed coursework to be retained for future reference.

Classroom-Based Resource Storage
Lockable cabinets or secured shelving within classrooms can house commonly used materials such as whiteboard markers, graphing calculators, and instructional aids. This prevents faculty from having to bring these resources in and out of the facility each day while keeping them readily available for lessons.

Program-Specific Equipment Storage
Certain courses—particularly those in STEM or the arts—require access to specialized equipment that may not be used in every class session but must remain accessible. Creating secure, program-specific storage areas within educational wings or shared classroom spaces ensures that these materials are available when needed without requiring students or faculty to transport them daily.

Secure Faculty Storage
Faculty storage should be sufficient, dedicated to educational programs, and not shared with other facility departments unless abundantly sized. It should also be designed to ensure that staffing changes or administrative decisions do not arbitrarily restrict faculty access. A system in which faculty can securely store and retrieve materials without relying on security personnel to unlock storage areas would help mitigate disruptions and inconsistencies.

Locker Systems for Students
Individual lockers in educational wings or designated study spaces would allow students to store books, notes, and ongoing coursework between classes. These lockers should be designed to meet security protocols while also providing students with reliable access to their materials, reducing the need to carry everything at all times.

CASE STUDY #2

The education program at this Midwestern facility was highly regarded by its students, many of whom had progressed from the GED program to associates and bachelor's degrees. Students were supportive of each other and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in higher education. They also spoke positively about their relationships with faculty and facility staff, noting particularly their appreciation of the responsibilities they were given to steward the spaces, which helped them feel greater investment in the program.

At the maximum-security level, students were provided with storage cages in the library for their materials, and those enrolled in the program were given backpacks to transport books and supplies between their housing units and classrooms. However, the clear plastic backpacks were poorly made and broke down quickly. Additionally, the library—where the storage cages were located—was in the basement, making it difficult for students to access their materials efficiently. Ideally, resource storage would be located adjacent to classrooms or on the same floor to better integrate study and instructional spaces.

At the medium-security level, all educational spaces were consolidated within a wing of the main common building. These classrooms and the library were well-lit and inviting, providing an excellent learning environment for incarcerated students.

However, space was limited, even for a relatively small program, and the absence of accessory spaces further constrained its potential. One incarcerated student, who had earned a college degree prior to her incarceration, was active in tutoring fellow students but often struggled to find available space to conduct tutoring sessions. The issue was compounded by the educational building's separation from housing, which frequently restricted student access.

During a tour of one housing unit, it was clear that additional educational spaces could be created within the housing areas to supplement formal classroom instruction. Smaller common areas could be designated for study, and several accessory spaces—currently used inefficiently for storage—could be repurposed to create dedicated study spaces. Reconfiguring these spaces would allow students more opportunities for academic engagement throughout the day, strengthening an already promising program.

WOMEN'S FACILITY

MINIMUM, MEDIUM, & MAXIMUM SECURITY

MIDWESTERN REGION

IPT CERTIFICATE, ASSOCIATES, & BACHELOR'S

13% PARTICIPATION

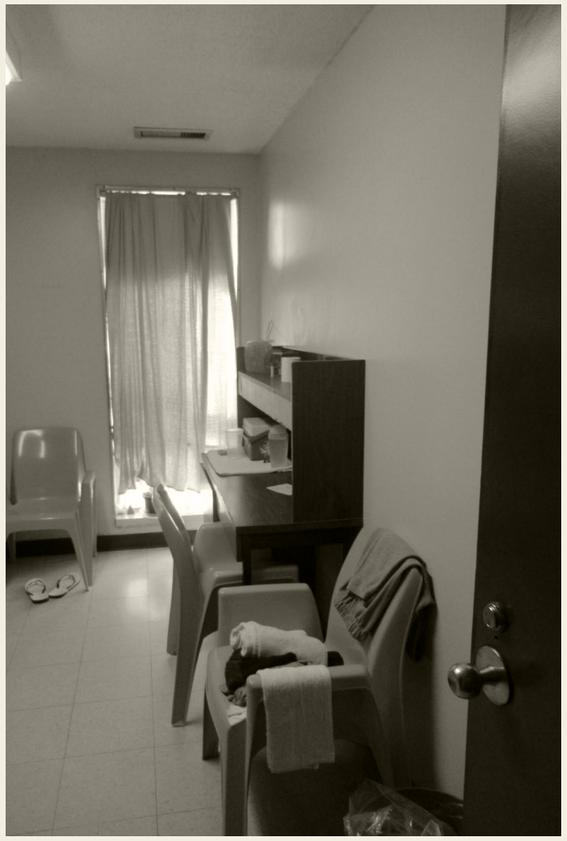
(*Top Left*)
Program storage provided within the 24-hour staffed library allows students and faculty to access course materials as needed. While adjacency to classrooms would be ideal, the consistent availability makes this a functional and acceptable solution.

(*Middle Left*)
Participating students are provided with backpacks and storage containers to hold and transport class materials.

(*Top Right*)
Several underutilized rooms within the housing unit could be converted into group or private study spaces. The room shown, though currently inaccessible to students, is an appropriate setting for group study due to its size and relative separation from sleeping areas.

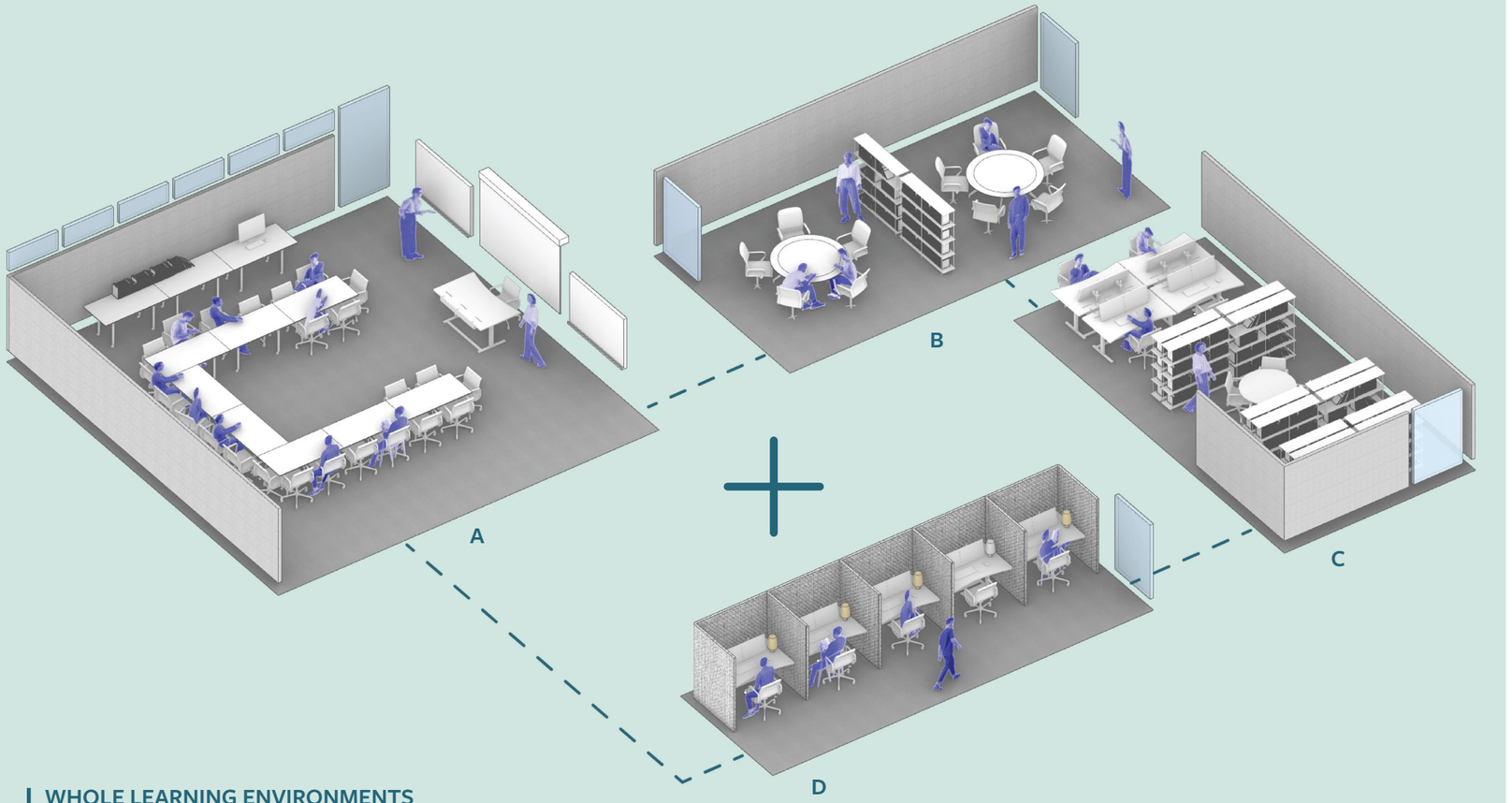
(*Bottom Left*)
The tables shown here are located in satellite common areas, separate from the main dayroom. These areas tend to be much quieter, and if the surrounding cells were assigned to participating students, the tables could be replaced with private study carrels or other furniture solutions to better support focused academic work.

(*Bottom Right*)
Cells contain only a single desk for shared use by both occupants, highlighting the need for work spaces located elsewhere.



> **“If you could potentially create a space that offered that separation from what is the prison mindset, where people can focus on secondary education and not have all of the outside distractions, it gives an opportunity for those walls to come down, for vulnerability to come down.”**
>
> D.T., *formerly incarcerated student*

03
SHIFTING THE BALANCE



WHOLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

A | Instruction
Classroom with flexible desk and seating arrangements, acoustic control, effective technology, and daylight

B | Collaboration
Work space for team projects and group study

C | Resources
Access to computers and library resources

D | Focused Study
Work space with acoustic privacy, access to computers, and flexible lighting

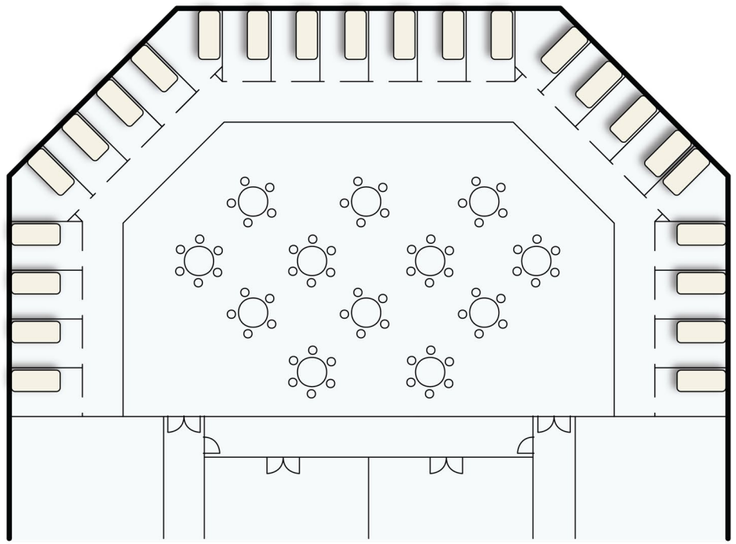
Expanding access to prison education requires a larger-scale shift in how space is allocated—one that moves beyond improving scattered classrooms and instead establishes dedicated academic zones within the facility. One of the challenges to implementing college education in prisons is the lack of available and adequate classroom space. While previous sections of this portfolio have addressed strategies to improve existing educational spaces and accessory spaces within the facility, the long term objective is an environment structured to support the whole student. This chapter introduces strategies for reconfiguring carceral spaces, balancing security requirements with the need for an educational environment that is supportive and conducive to learning.

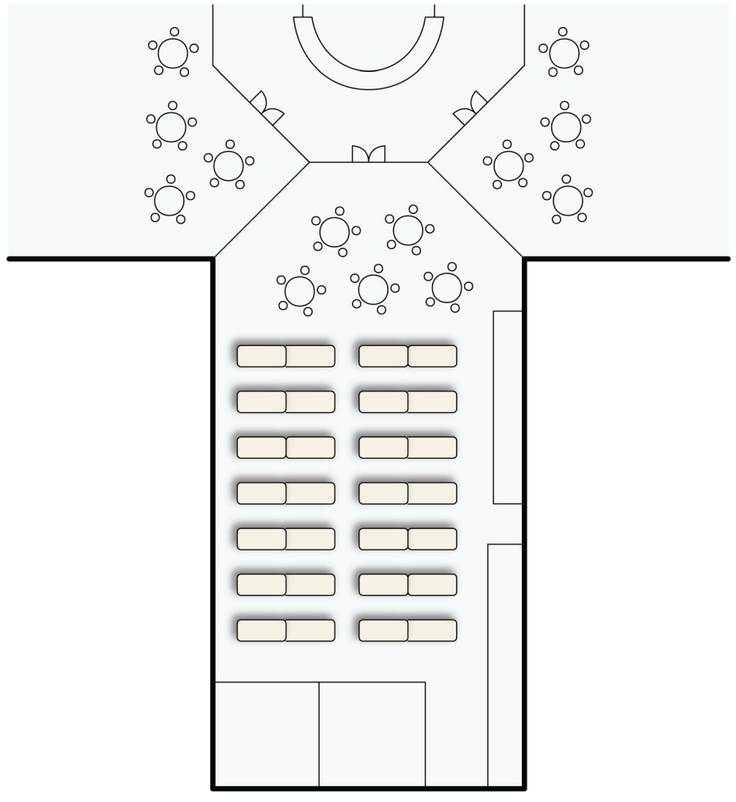
This chapter presents two primary approaches to creating classroom space without constructing new permanent buildings:

1. **Converting portions of housing units into academic zones** by converting underutilized spaces, such as empty cells, into classrooms and study spaces.

2. **Converting entire housing units into educational wings**, repurposing living spaces into fully integrated academic hubs.

While it may seem logical to propose constructing new education buildings within prison facilities in instances where existing classrooms are entirely non-existent or non-functional, this approach presents several risks. Permanent infrastructure investments can inadvertently contribute to the overall expansion of correctional facilities, and there is a risk that newly built spaces could be repurposed for non-educational functions if institutional priorities shift over time. Instead, the recommendations in this chapter focus on reallocating existing spaces to create a supportive academic environment.





HOUSING TYPOLOGIES

Individual Cells (*Above*)
Separate sleeping areas provide opportunities for student privacy and focus. Incremental reconfiguration for classrooms can be challenging due to associated construction type.

Dormitory (*Below*)
Shared sleeping areas have limited acoustic, lighting and physical support for student focus. Uninterrupted open spaces can be opportunities for large and medium classrooms.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Subsequent sections of this chapter will examine strategies for converting housing spaces into education-supportive environments, whether through mixed-use adaptations that integrate classrooms into existing housing units or full-scale transformations that repurpose entire wings or buildings for academic use. The feasibility of these changes depends on several factors, including population size, spatial dimensions, circulation patterns, relationships between living and security spaces, access points, and natural light availability.

Because the recommendations provided in this chapter are designed for broad applicability rather than specific sites, they focus on flexible strategies that can be adapted across different facility layouts and security levels. However, understanding some of the common existing conditions is the first step in determining how these spaces can be reclaimed for educational use.

Housing Typologies

Because housing is the dominant building type for incarcerated students, the housing typology has a significant impact on the strategy for building out dedicated academic zones and providing personal space for the work that happens outside of the classroom. There is no single “typical” layout for prison housing units. The design of these spaces is shaped by location, year of construction, security level, and facility-specific regulations. However, despite these variations, most housing units share common structural and spatial characteristics.

Prison housing is generally built with load-bearing, non-combustible materials such as brick, concrete masonry units (CMU), and poured concrete. The *Jail Design Guidelines* identify two key components of residential housing units: cells (or sleeping areas) and dayrooms (or communal spaces).[1] Beyond these, housing units typically include a range of accessory spaces, such as showers, storage rooms, custodial spaces, security staff posts, and occasionally other program or visitation areas.

While housing layouts vary widely—ranging from rectangular and radial designs to branching or cross-shaped configurations—their primary distinctions lie in the relationship between beds, dayrooms, and security partitions. Factors such as the number of individuals housed within each secure zone, access to communal areas, integration of outdoor space, and staffing required for supervision all influence the functionality of these spaces. At the most fundamental level, prison housing units fall into two main typologies: individual cells and dormitories.

1. Dennis A. Kimme, Gary M. Bowker, and Robert G. Deichman, *Jail Design Guide*, 3rd ed. Kimme & Associates, 2011. https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/024806.pdf. This project was supported by grant number 94J04GHZ8 from the National Institute of Corrections, US Department of Justice.

Individual Cells
Individual cell layouts separate sleeping areas from common spaces. These units typically contain a bed and often include a sink and toilet within the cell. They are designed to house one or two individuals, though overcrowding has led to some single-occupant rooms being converted to double-bunked cells. This arrangement is not an ideal starting point for education-focused housing, as it limits workspace availability and does not accommodate the scheduling needs of students.

Individual cell housing generally features a larger shared dayroom, which serves as a communal space for activities. Movement within these units can be structured and highly regulated, with access to common areas regulated to specific time periods or overseen by security staff.

A subcategory of individual cells, pod-style housing consists of small groupings of cells arranged around a semi-private common area. These pods typically house two to four individuals, though some are designed for larger groups. Unlike standard cell housing, pod layouts often include furniture, shared storage, and, in some cases, separated bathrooms. Pod-style housing units may feature smaller dayrooms compared to traditional individual cell designs. This layout is relatively uncommon and more likely to be seen in minimum-security facilities.

Dormitories
Unlike individual cells, dormitory-style housing does not provide enclosed sleeping spaces. Instead, multiple beds are arranged in an open-plan common area, often using bunk beds to maximize capacity. These units can accommodate anywhere from 50 to 200 individuals, with each person typically assigned a small storage space, such as a locker or a cabinet at the foot of their bed.

Some dormitories include a separate, partitioned dayroom, but in many cases, communal areas are integrated directly into the sleeping space. Instead of a distinct room, a designated section of the dorm may function as a shared area, furnished with tables and seating rather than beds. This absence of physical barriers results in minimal privacy and constant exposure to noise and activity. Dormitory residents typically have fewer restrictions on movement within their living space, allowing for more informal use of communal areas. However, access to other parts of the facility remains regulated, with movement outside the dormitory controlled by staff. It is especially important to provide individual study spaces with flexible access for these students.

Dedicated Student Housing

One defining question when designing education-focused housing is whether students should be housed together in a dedicated unit or integrated with the non-student population. Perspectives on this issue are divided, with strong arguments on both sides. The feasibility of either approach also depends on the scale of the educational program and the available housing units within the facility.

ADVANTAGES OF STUDENT HOUSING
A unit restricted to actively enrolled students creates an environment where academic engagement is prioritized.

On-Site Classrooms
Classes may be offered within the housing unit, reducing the need for movement across the facility and minimizing staffing burdens.

Flexible Operations
Modified routines and policies can be implemented, such as adjusted lights-out hours for studying or alternative scheduling for meals and counts to coordinate with class sessions.

Peer Support & Study Groups
Students have direct access to each other for tutoring, group study, and academic collaboration.

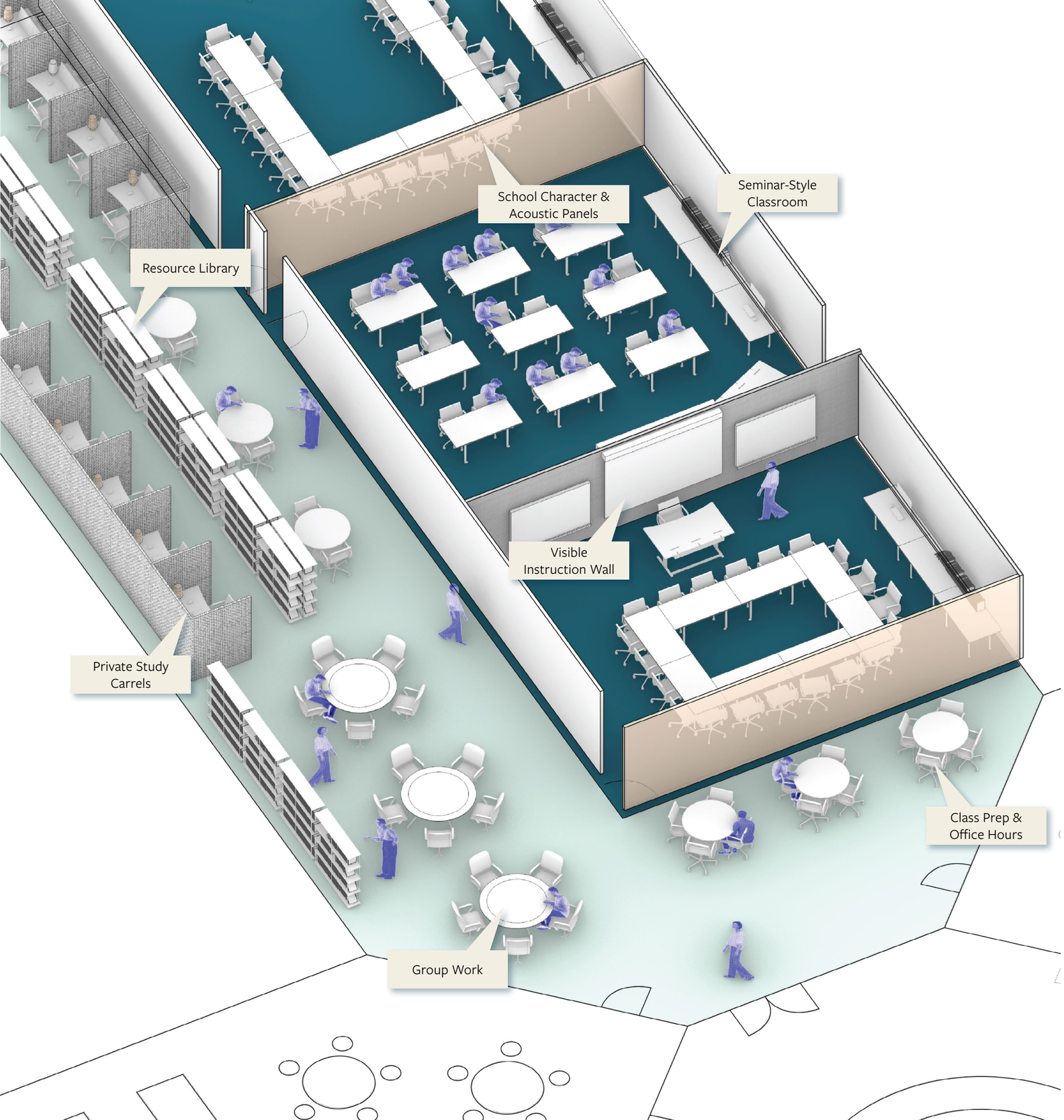
Reduced Conflict Over Study Needs
Students within the unit are more likely to share an understanding of quiet time and academic commitments.

ADVANTAGES OF MIXED HOUSING
Housing students mixed within the general population can have broader impacts on the facility environment.

Security Considerations
In facilities with mixed security levels, it may not be feasible to consolidate all students into a single unit while adhering to classification requirements.

Visibility & Outreach
Many students first learn about educational programs through peer conversations. When students are integrated into the general population, awareness of these opportunities spreads more organically, encouraging broader participation.

Social Balance
While classrooms function as neutral spaces where facility politics and conflicts are often set aside, students may not always want to live exclusively with classmates. Mixed housing allows them to maintain personal friendships and support networks outside of their academic life.



DEDICATED ACADEMIC ZONES

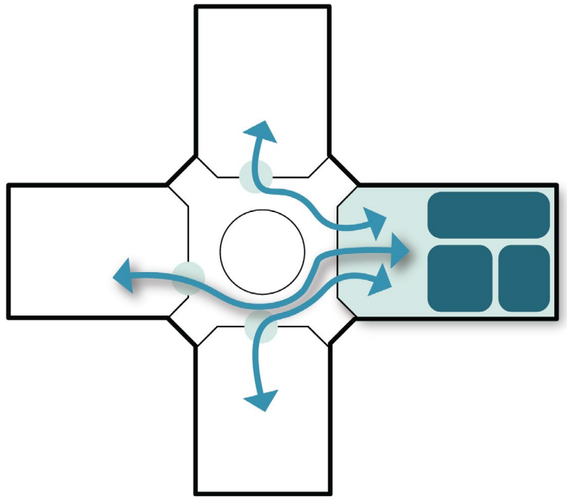
Adapting housing units to accommodate the full breadth of educational programming requires moving beyond the establishment of small-scale study spaces discussed in the previous chapter, and instead developing functionally distinct classrooms. While minor improvements—such as adding study desks or reservable rooms—enhance individual learning, they do not address the larger need for dedicated instructional spaces.

Identifying & Repurposing Larger Spaces

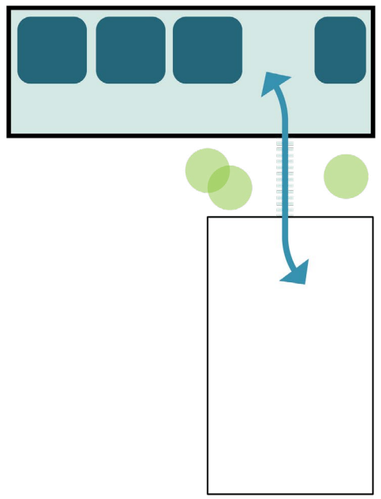
In many housing units, vestigial rooms, underutilized storage areas, or defunct program spaces exist but are not formally allocated for learning. These often overlooked spaces can be reclassified as classrooms, faculty consultation rooms, or resource centers.

In cases where existing enclosed rooms are unavailable, dayrooms or multipurpose spaces can be strategically reconfigured to create classrooms. This requires more than simply placing desks in an open area—it necessitates clear spatial and operational distinctions between instructional space and recreational functions. Even in units housing only students, maintaining a separation between study and daily life is important, as not all students will be engaged in coursework at all times.

In settings where fixed partitions are not feasible, alternatives such as retractable walls, movable enclosures, or modular classroom dividers allow spaces to convert between classroom and communal use while maintaining a sense of separation. However, creating effective learning environments requires more than just visual distinctions—acoustical separation is equally critical to prevent noise from adjacent spaces from disrupting instruction. See **CHAPTER 02: EDUCATIONAL SPACES** for further information about environmental qualities for successful classrooms.



Converting Housing Wings



Repurposing Entire Buildings

Converting Cells Into Instructional Spaces

As discussed in **ACCESSORY SPACES**, a single empty cell can be repurposed as a tutoring space, resource room, or quiet study area for small group work outside of class time. This does not address the need for formal instructional rooms in instances where no existing spaces are available or viable.

A more ambitious approach involves reconfiguring clusters of empty cells into dedicated classrooms. However, many prison housing units are constructed with load-bearing concrete or CMU (concrete masonry unit) partitions, making major demolition difficult. Before any modifications are attempted, a structural assessment should be conducted to determine which walls—if any—can be safely removed or altered.

Rather than attempting full-scale demolition, it may be more feasible to design classroom layouts around structural constraints by identifying specific walls that can be partially removed to create larger, more flexible learning spaces. If structural limitations prevent extensive modifications, institutions may consider using smaller spaces as micro-classrooms.

For facilities that can support more ambitious changes, housing units can be modified at a larger scale, ranging from converting entire wings into educational spaces to repurposing full buildings for academic use.

EDUCATIONAL WINGS

Converting Housing Wings

In radial and cross-style prison layouts, where housing units are divided into separate wings, repurposing a single wing for education can be a viable solution. This approach consolidates student housing with classrooms, study areas, and tutoring spaces within the same structure, reducing the need for frequent movement across the facility. While security checkpoints and operational procedures may require adjustment, this method minimizes logistical challenges compared to relocating students between buildings several times per day.

Repurposing Entire Buildings

Where facility layouts allow, an even more comprehensive approach is to designate an entire building for conversion from housing to education. If security protocols permit unrestricted movement between this academic space and student housing, the converted structure can be fully optimized for learning, with classrooms, faculty offices, study lounges, and resource storage. This model provides students with a distinct “school” environment, reinforcing the separation between their academic and residential spaces.

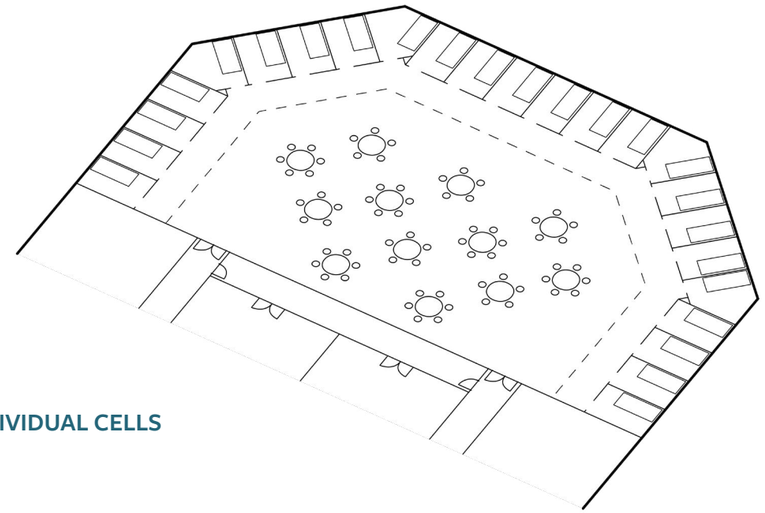
Reimagining

A full-scale conversion presents the opportunity to move beyond simple room repurposing and reconsider the design of the space holistically:

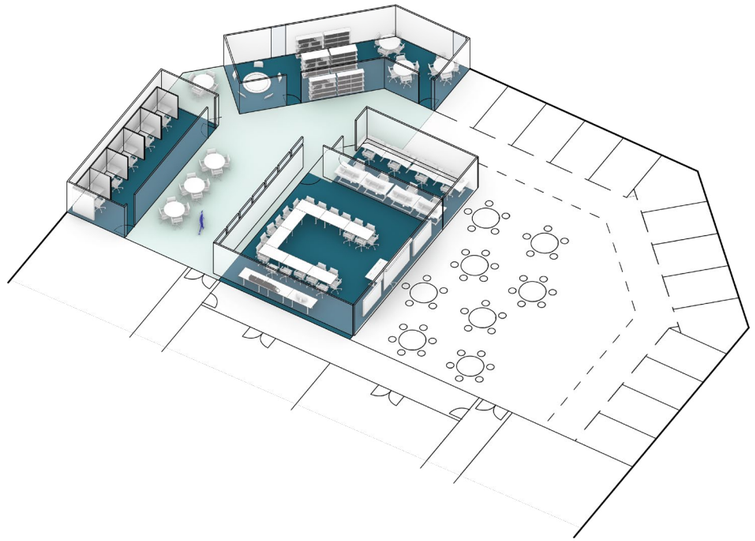
- **Structural Reconfiguration:** Without the constraints of housing requirements, interior partitions can be removed or adjusted to create larger, more flexible learning environments, including classrooms of varied sizes, small-group study areas, and faculty offices.
- **Environmental Upgrades:** A full conversion allows for improvements such as additional natural lighting and more student-oriented design. Windows can be uncovered or new openings introduced, and institutional materials can be replaced with softer finishes and better acoustics to enhance focus.

While a full conversion may not be possible immediately, initial upgrades can be made within the framework of a larger renovation over time. An educational master plan with sequential and phased approaches working toward a larger goal will help each effort build upon the previous toward a unified learning environment.

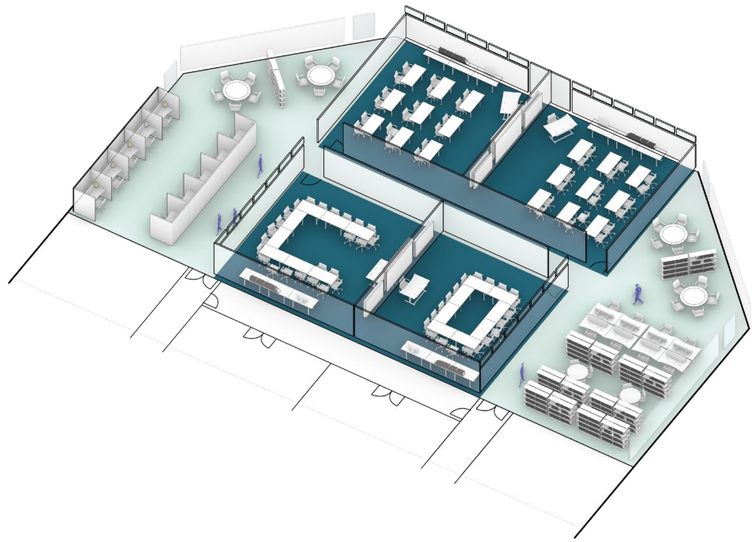
INDIVIDUAL CELLS



Phase 1 | Housing
Baseline housing conditions before intervention—minimal academic support, with limited or no dedicated learning spaces

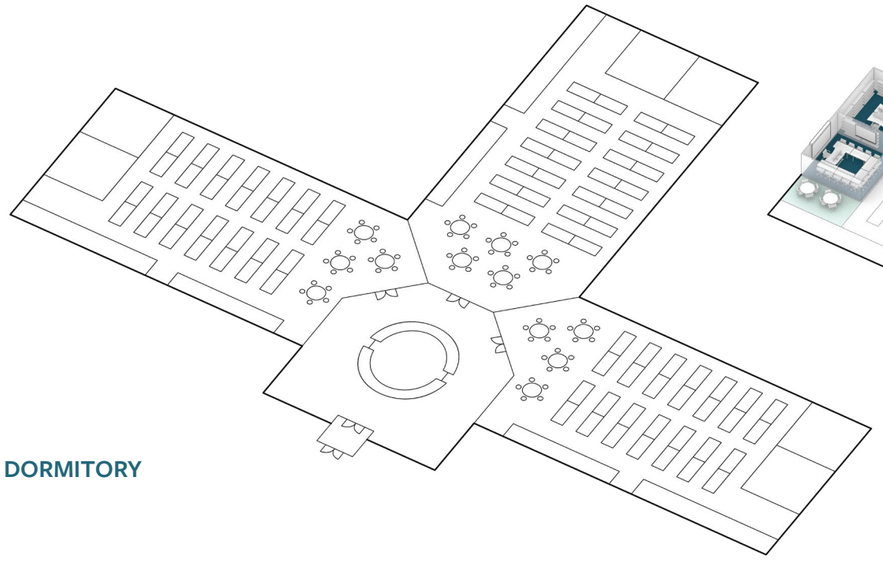


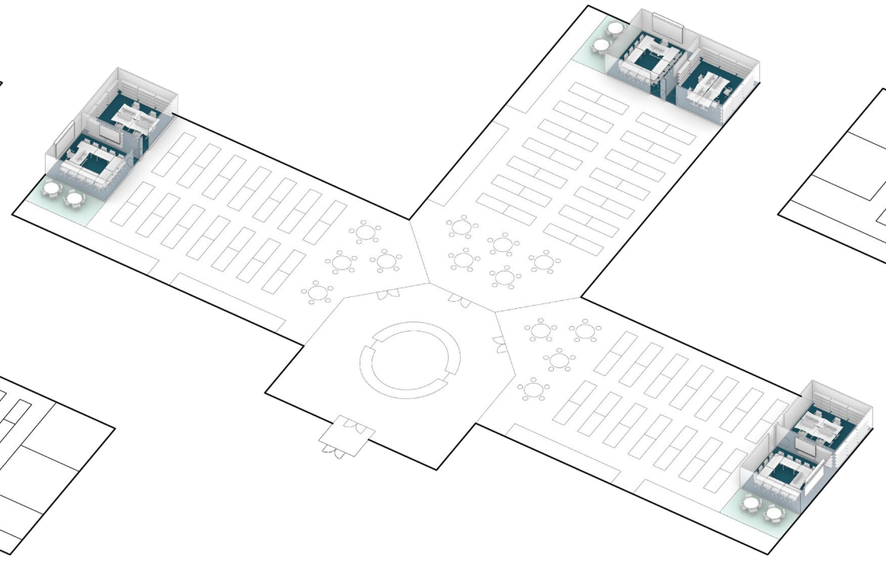
Phase 2 | Housing + Academic Zones
Selective adaptation of housing units by converting underused spaces into classrooms, study areas, or resource rooms within existing residential context

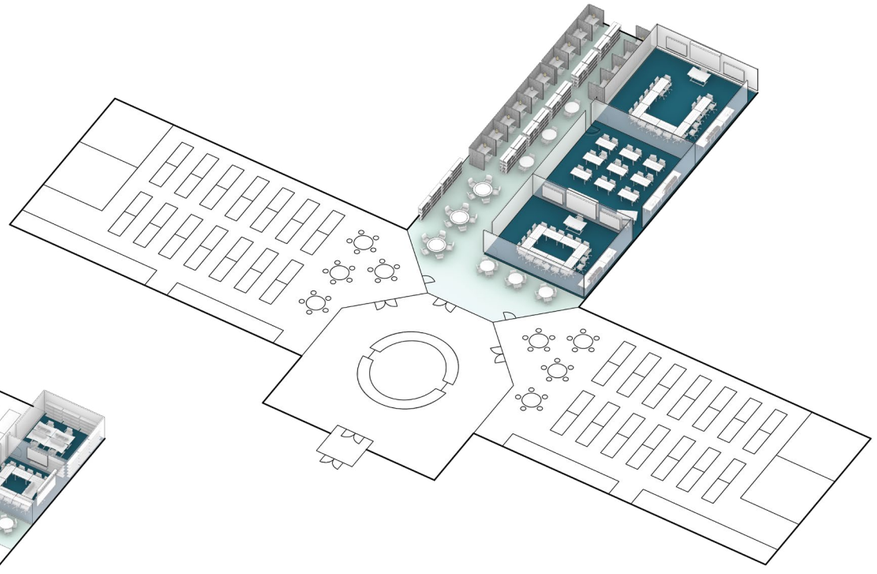


Phase 3 | Educational Wings
Full transformation of housing units into dedicated educational wings, shifting their primary function from residential to academic use

DORMITORY







CASE STUDY #3

This facility has taken strides to create a more education-friendly environment within its prison with a thoughtful approach to spatial planning and program integration. Uniquely, this facility houses a mixed-gender population, and the educational wing serves both male and female students simultaneously. The design balances a consolidated educational hub with additional support spaces located in the housing units, reinforcing access to learning beyond the classroom setting.

The educational center is organized within a dedicated building that contains multiple wings. One entire wing is designated for higher education programs, while some shared spaces, such as the library, serve a broader range of facility programs. Perimeter rooms within the college wing contain classrooms and specialized activity spaces, including art and music rooms that remain open for student use. Each of these perimeter spaces has windows, providing natural light to enhance the learning environment. At the core of the wing, a centralized computer lab and study space offer additional academic resources. The arrangement of spaces accommodates modest staffing requirements, maintaining required security while reducing the burden on personnel and fostering a more comfortable atmosphere for students.

Beyond the educational wing, efforts are underway to make housing units more conducive to learning. Skylights provide consistent natural light throughout the day. The facility has also been intentional in selecting furniture that supports both individual and group study, separating study areas from recreational zones while offering students options in seating styles to accommodate personal preferences. Notably, perimeter spaces are not exclusively dedicated to cells but also include multi-purpose educational areas within the housing units so that students have study spaces available outside of structured class hours. Though these renovations are still new, early feedback suggests an optimistic outlook on their long-term impact on student experience.

While physical improvements have significantly enhanced the learning environment throughout the facility, operational policies have not yet fully adapted to maximize the benefits of these changes. Students reported that they are still required to leave the educational wing for meals and routine facility activities such as midday counts, leading to unnecessary disruptions in their academic schedules. Allowing students the option to remain in the educational wing for these activities would help maintain the continuity of classes and study sessions, further strengthening the effectiveness of the program.

CO-ED FACILITY

MEDIUM SECURITY

NORTHEASTERN REGION

ASSOCIATES & BACHELOR'S

9% PARTICIPATION

(*Top*)
The dayroom within the hybrid housing unit includes a variety of furniture styles, arranged in groupings that support different uses—including group study, informal discussions, and typical recreational activities.

(*Middle Left*)
A multi-purpose room located directly off the dayroom allows classes to be held within the housing unit and offers a quieter environment for group study sessions. Above the entrance, acoustic panels printed with nature scenes help reduce reverberation while also contributing to a more calming and inviting atmosphere.

(*Middle Right*)
The music room is one of several activity-specific spaces located within the education building. Its walls are lined with acoustic panels.

(*Bottom Left*)
A typical classroom within the educational building features flexible furniture and zoned activity areas, with a view to the corridors beyond. Acoustic ceiling tiles and painted walls distinguish the room from other prison spaces.

(*Bottom Right*)
The educational building features a computer room in the center of the higher education wing.

> **“So, when I was teaching my class, I told my students, ‘I’m not a CO. I’m not gonna treat you like a CO. You have to follow the rules here, but I’m your professor. So, you’re a student. I’m gonna treat you like a student. That’s it.’ So, I think there has to be some mutual respect there. I think that humanizing people who are dehumanized all day long, I think that makes a big difference. So, just, I think, treating them like students, and treating it like, this is college, and not a prison, I think that’s where the biggest difference comes in. But I think it definitely does play a role in how they feel, and if they feel like college students, definitely.”**
>
> A.C., *HEP director*

04
POLICY FRAMEWORK

As part of this project—and in addition to the qualitative research described earlier—Ithaka S+R conducted a systematic review of department of corrections policies and state administrative codes across all 50 states to identify existing regulations concerning educational spaces in prisons. We found that few correctional departments have explicit policies governing these spaces, including guidelines on allocation, design considerations, and decision-making processes. While education policies typically define who is responsible for setting program goals, curriculum, and evaluation, they rarely address the management of the physical spaces where learning takes place. Even when policies exist, they are often too vague to provide clear guidance on how educational spaces should be designated and maintained. For instance, DOC policies and state codes frequently use terms like "adequate" to describe the characteristics and resources required for educational spaces. However, without clear definitions or benchmarks, this term remains subjective, resulting in inconsistent implementation and oversight.

This lack of clarity creates a significant gap in accountability and transparency. Without well-defined criteria for allocating, equipping, and managing educational spaces, it becomes difficult to establish enforceable standards—or even to determine who within the department of corrections is responsible for overseeing and upholding them. As a result, policies and guidelines are often interpreted and applied inconsistently, not only across different departments but even among facilities within the same system. This lack of uniformity undermines the creation of quality learning environments and limits the ability to assess whether educational standards are being met. For educators, this presents a particular challenge, as they have no clear standards to reference and no clear authority to whom they can appeal when seeking improvements to educational spaces.

Establishing clear policies is essential for improving educational spaces and advancing the broader goals outlined in this portfolio. A well-designed policy on educational spaces would clarify decision-making authority and establish measurable standards for accountability. It would also provide critical guidelines for the design, structure, and operation of these spaces, ensuring they are safe, functional, and accessible. By aligning education staff, facility operations, and correctional officers around a shared vision, such a policy would foster collaboration between designers, educators, and correctional leaders, ultimately supporting more effective learning environments.

Drawing on our review of existing policies and insights from students, instructors, and correctional officials regarding current practices and necessary improvements, the framework below is designed to spark conversations among educators, designers, and correctional leaders. It provides a foundation for those seeking to establish a more comprehensive, evidence-based policy for managing educational spaces within correctional facilities. The rationale for such a policy is clear, as demonstrated throughout this portfolio: better learning environments benefit everyone, contributing to improved rehabilitative outcomes and fostering a safer environment for both incarcerated students and correctional staff. The framework presented here serves as a template—a starting point that integrates our research findings to support the development of clear and effective policies.

How To Use This Tool

Because our scan of the field revealed a lack of comprehensive policies addressing educational spaces in prison, it would have been imprudent for us to prescribe a one-size-fits-all model policy. Instead, we present a policy framework that outlines key considerations and essential categories necessary for addressing the design, structure, and requirements of educational spaces within correctional facilities. For each category, we provide guiding considerations to support policymakers in drafting evidence-based, well-informed policies. This framework serves as a starting point for department of corrections leaders seeking to create or refine policies that enhance learning environments within their systems.

> **Note:** It is important to note that the policy considerations outlined here can be applied broadly to all types of educational programs, including adult basic education, GED/high school equivalency programs, vocational training, and career development programs. While the needs of different programs may vary, the core principles of creating an effective physical learning space should remain the same.

1. Define the Purpose of the Policy

Purpose: To ensure alignment across all stakeholder groups—including physical plant staff, operations, security, and education leaders—we recommend explicitly defining the purpose of the policy on educational spaces. For example, a policy's purpose might be to establish clear guidelines for creating accessible, functional, and effective educational spaces for incarcerated individuals. This would serve to 1) promote engagement, focus, and effective learning, and 2) ensure safety while fostering a positive learning environment.

Definitions: After establishing its goals, the policy should clearly define key terms related to education programs, decision-making authority, and spatial designations. This includes a precise definition of educational spaces, which may extend beyond classrooms to include libraries and

other designated areas where incarcerated individuals can study and complete assignments.

Where Should the Policy Live? Given that both educational program staff and facility operations teams share responsibility for the design and management of educational spaces, the policy should be integrated into both the educational program and physical plant sections of the corrections policy manual. This will ensure alignment across departments and facilitate coordinated oversight.

2. Establish Design & Physical Space Guidelines

This section of the policy should directly address the spatial design, structure, and necessary resources to support effective educational delivery. We recommend covering the following categories:

Classroom Design & Layout: The policy should establish clear principles and standards to ensure that classrooms are designed to effectively support learning. For example, we recommend specifying that classrooms be structured to accommodate a variety of educational activities, including lectures, group discussions, and independent study. Additionally, the policy should consider prescribing multiple, separate classroom spaces to reduce noise and distractions, as well as to accommodate different subject areas. It should also address whether classrooms and other educational spaces should be distinct from other facility areas to minimize disruptions and enhance safety.

Furniture & Equipment: The policy should specify that classrooms be furnished with furniture that supports learning, such as adjustable desks and chairs that accommodate students of different sizes and abilities. Based on our research, we recommend prescribing flexible seating arrangements to foster collaborative learning. The policy could also outline criteria for selecting furniture, emphasizing comfort, durability, and ease of maintenance. Additionally, it should encourage the use of seminar-style tables or movable desks to create adaptable learning environments that support a variety of instructional methods.

Class Size & Safe Occupancy: The policy should establish guidelines for class size and safe occupancy to ensure that educational spaces align with best practices for teaching and learning, as discussed in previous sections of this portfolio. These guidelines should take into account space limitations, staffing capacity, and instructional needs to create a safe and effective learning environment.

> **Note:** Our research highlights the critical role of non-classroom learning spaces in supporting the student learning experience. These spaces enhance formal instruction, facilitate independent learning, and encourage collaboration. Therefore, we strongly recommend including them as an integral part of educational space planning.

> **Note:** Whatever provisions are included, the policy should allow for enough flexibility to accommodate specialized programmatic needs, as furniture and equipment requirements vary widely across courses and programs. For example, welding courses, architecture and design programs, and high school education classes each require distinct furnishings tailored to their instructional needs. The policy should ensure that program-specific furniture and equipment can be incorporated without unintentionally limiting or hindering access to essential resources.

> **Note:** We recognize that implementing provisions related to class size and safe occupancy can be challenging in facilities where space is limited or where scheduling flexibility is constrained by staffing and operational needs. In such cases, programming often takes place whenever feasible. This policy should outline ideal scheduling and space usage practices while remaining flexible enough to avoid unintentionally restricting educational opportunities. As always, the goal is to maximize student access to educational programming in environments that best support learning.

> **Note:** Individual institutions may have unique opportunities to create dedicated study spaces based on factors such as architecture, design, supervision model, and security level. The policy should encourage flexible and creative solutions to provide quiet study areas, including but not limited to shared rooms, modular study carrels, and noise mitigation design features in residential units.

Class Scheduling: The policy should also address when classes can be held. We recommend ensuring that classes, whenever possible, are scheduled at times that maximize participation from students, including after-hours classes for those with work assignments, and flexible scheduling for individualized learning needs.

Dedicated Study Spaces: When feasible, the policy should recommend that facilities designate quiet, accessible study areas separate from living units and classrooms. These spaces should provide a distraction-free environment for students to focus and should be available outside of regular class hours to support independent learning.

Resources & Storage: The policy should also prescribe that facilities need to provide secure storage for students' educational materials and supplies.

Environmental Conditions: The policy should require that classrooms and other educational spaces (e.g., libraries, study areas) maintain appropriate lighting, temperature, ventilation, and noise levels to support effective learning. Heating and cooling systems should be regulated to ensure a comfortable environment, and disruptive noises should be minimized during study and class hours whenever possible. Additionally, the policy should call for regular maintenance and monitoring to uphold these standards and ensure optimal learning conditions.

Teaching Tools: The policy should ensure that essential teaching tools are permitted in educational spaces and that these spaces are equipped with reliable and secure technologies to enhance learning opportunities, including remote learning when necessary. This may include: analog devices like typewriters, blackboards, whiteboards, projectors; digital tools like computers or tablets; secure internet access; video conferencing tools; printers; and instructional technologies (e.g., digital libraries, multimedia content). Additionally, this section should address the availability of electrical and network outlets to support these educational technologies.

3. Detail Accessibility

ADA, IDEA, & Section 504 Compliance: This section of the policy should ensure that educational spaces and tools are fully accessible to all incarcerated individuals, including those with disabilities. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and related laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, departments of correction are required to

assess and ensure the accessibility of educational spaces. This includes accommodations for individuals who require assistive technologies, physical modifications, or other accessibility supports to fully participate in educational programming.

4. Clarify Staffing, Supervision, & Program Support Structures

We recommend including a section that clearly defines and designates the roles and responsibilities of staff managing educational spaces. Establishing these roles helps eliminate ambiguity, streamline decision-making processes, and ensure accountability. Key areas for consideration may include:

Education Program Coordination: The policy should stipulate what measures are in place to ensure that programs are implemented in collaboration with educators, facility coordinators, and other correctional staff. Staff responsible for education coordination should ensure that educational spaces are in alignment with program and student needs, and that educational spaces are properly maintained and resourced.

Education & Instruction: The policy should indicate how educators and instructors should collaborate with correctional and facility staff to maintain a productive physical learning environment. This should include a process for education program staff and instructors to consult on the design and use of space with correctional staff responsible for operations and the physical plan. The policy should also document a process for educators and instructors to provide routine feedback on any issues that arise regarding educational spaces (e.g., lack of space, needed additions to classrooms, environmental conditions).

Facility Coordination: The policy should also describe the administrative and logistical support that needs to be provided by facility coordinators. This should include language on how the utilization of educational spaces are determined, apportioned, and scheduled, processes for distributing and upgrading educational materials and equipment, and how technical support for technology may be requested and is prioritized.

Security & Operations: The policy should indicate how correctional officers will ensure security and safety inside educational spaces, while minimally disrupting learning activities and environments. The policy could define the level of correctional staff presence needed during

> **Note:** We recommend that this section of the policy be developed in collaboration with correctional ADA coordinators, as well as leaders from physical plant, operations, and education. When educational spaces do not meet standard accessibility requirements, accommodation plans should be implemented to ensure that students with disabilities can fully access and succeed in educational programming.

educational activities and whether there are any procedural workarounds to ensure programming continues to operate (e.g. how faculty or volunteers may be trained or given clearance to allow for minimum staffing levels or other state- or facility-specific solutions).

Communication: The policy should also discuss how staff will communicate to coordinate regarding educational spaces. This may include regular meetings across stakeholders to discuss program challenges and improvements related to physical educational spaces. It should discuss clear lines of communication for reporting issues and providing information about changes in policy or practice.

5. Implement Monitoring & Evaluation Procedures

Regular Evaluations: The policy should indicate that the capacity and layout of educational spaces will be evaluated regularly to meet program demand, space utilization, and facility constraints. The policy should also indicate that the facility and operations, education and programming, and other correctional staff will conduct assessments on a regular interval (e.g., quarterly, bimonthly) to identify areas for improvement.

Feedback Mechanisms: The policy should also include mechanisms for receiving feedback from educators, students, and correctional staff to ensure that the physical environment remains conducive to learning and meets evolving needs.

6. Cite Relevant Legal & Regulatory Frameworks

The department of corrections should research and apply legal standards, state regulations, and national guidelines that correspond to educational spaces in prisons. It is essential to be familiar with these standards and cite them in policy to ensure that all educational spaces comply with applicable local, state, and federal regulations. This includes adherence to the Americans with Disabilities Act, safety standards, and health codes, to ensure that the spaces meet legal requirements and provide a safe, accessible environment for all individuals.

7. Feedback & Revisions

Once the draft policy is created, it is important to get feedback from key stakeholders, including correctional officers, educators, and legal advisors. Revisions based on their input can strengthen the policy and ensure it aligns with operational realities.

> **“Being a college student outside and being an incarcerated college student, they’re quite two different worlds. You know, being a student outside, you have your spaces, you have your time schedule, and you have to choose whatever you want to do as a student and you have your life to live. But being an incarcerated person, you are limited. You are structured and most times you don’t actually make your own personal decisions. You just have to follow the decisions of the facility where you have yourself under. So, I think it was quite two different experiences being expressive while outside and being restricted while you’re in the facility.”**
>
> J.K., *formerly incarcerated student*

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CONCLUSION

Prisons are not college campuses. Their facilities were not built for that purpose, nor do their operational goals align with higher education's mission of effective teaching, intellectual engagement, academic inquiry, and expanding pathways to knowledge.

Yet, prisons have increasingly become spaces where students take college-level courses and earn degrees—degrees that are equivalent to those awarded to students on traditional campuses. For many incarcerated students, like for their peers on the outside, college is a transformative experience, enabling them to lead enriched and productive lives. But the educational environments in which they pursue these degrees are anything but equal. Many facilities, constrained by outdated infrastructure, provide classrooms for higher education in prison programs, but few offer spaces designed to support deep learning, collaboration, and academic growth.

This report has outlined multiple interventions—both incremental and more ambitious—to address this inequity. Adapting spaces to function more like college classrooms, creating quiet study areas that foster independent academic work, establishing non-instructional spaces for discussion and collaboration, and adjusting operational priorities to support college-level study are all essential steps toward ensuring students can truly thrive. Often, small operational adjustments and thoughtful modifications to existing spaces can have a significant impact.

We believe these recommendations should serve as a resource for designers and architects working in this space, as well as for educational leaders and corrections officials overseeing higher education programs in prison. By unlocking talent and skills behind bars, higher education in prison provides clear social benefits—not only for students but also for the communities they return to. Ensuring that learning environments inside correctional facilities reflect the transformative power of education is a crucial step toward maximizing its impact.

> **"It's really moving in some ways to just witness. We're all sitting in these…chairs that seem more in place in an elementary school art classroom than in a college classroom but we're still managing in some ways to make some real learning and education happen."**
>
> S.K., *formerly incarcerated student*