

RESEARCH · CAMPUSES

The campus that runs at 45 percent

Higher education spends \$79 billion a year on space nobody uses. The measurement problem is older than the money.

BUILDING UTILIZATION	CLASSROOMS AT PEAK	FRIDAY VS MON-THU	ANNUAL SPEND ON UNUSED SPACE
45%	40%	-28%	\$79B

In Fall 2025, average utilization of campus building space fell to 45 percent, down from 53 percent a year earlier. Classrooms, the spaces a campus exists to provide, reached only 40 percent utilization at peak instruction hours. Friday usage ran 28 percent below the Monday-through-Thursday average.

Enrollment is not the explanation. Total US college enrollment rose 4.5 percent in Fall 2024, back above pre-pandemic levels. The students did not leave; usage moved, toward evenings, dining and recreation, while the buildings are still run on the schedule of a decade ago: heated, cooled, cleaned and staffed for occupancy that is not there, and strained where the crowds actually go.

The bill for the mismatch is large. Occuspace estimates \$79 billion a year is spent on unused space across higher education. On any one campus it shows up as energy in empty rooms, custodial routes through untouched floors, and capital plans drawn from utilization surveys conducted once a decade by a person with a clipboard.

There is a second problem underneath it. Districts report utilization from the timetable, which records what was scheduled rather than what was occupied. When an institution is carrying a nine-figure capital and deferred maintenance need and heading toward a bond, the difference between scheduled and actual is not a facilities metric. It is the evidence base for the ask.

The strange part is that campuses already own the measurement instrument. Safety obligations under the Clery Act built near-universal camera coverage; the feeds run to a security office and serve no other purpose. The obstacle to using them has been legitimate: a university cannot deploy technology that profiles students. Anything adjacent to FERPA or biometric identification dies in review, and it should.

WHAT A FIX HAS TO LOOK LIKE

Continuous	Or the data is stale the semester it is gathered.
No sensor retrofit	A capital ask across hundreds of buildings kills the project before it starts.

Identifies nobody	Occupancy is a count, not an identity. The privacy office has to be able to say yes.
Institutional storage	Or the general counsel says no, correctly.

WHERE SIGNALS FITS

Signals turns the existing camera estate into continuous utilization measurement: rooms and buildings by hour, HVAC aligned to real occupancy, cleaning routed to spaces that were used, after-hours anomalies flagged. No video is stored and no identity is tracked, by architecture, and everything lands in institutional storage. The facilities office gets the numbers; the privacy office gets a system that cannot do the thing it fears.

SOURCES

Occuspace Space Utilization Index for Higher Education, 2026.

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Fall 2024 enrollment estimates.

Clery Act campus safety reporting requirements, 20 U.S.C. 1092(f).