

WHITE PAPER:

The Role of Furniture in Higher Education Collaborative Spaces

By Bretford Manufacturing, Inc.

The need for college educated students is considered critical for the U.S. to be competitive in the world long-term. In fact, President Obama's American Graduate Initiative issued in July 2009 focuses on producing an additional five million graduates by 2020 – giving the US the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.¹

This is a lofty goal, considering state and budget cuts are raising the cost of tuition, forcing classes to be larger, and challenging educators to find new way to keep students engaged. As a result, it is becoming even more competitive for a college to attract new students and to create an environment that retains them.

Space plays a critical role in the delivery of a top caliber education. Today's college environment requires the learning space to be adaptable to all kinds of instruction and comfortable enough to allow students the best opportunity to learn and focus. At the same time, it must be flexible enough to work in everything from lecture mode to group participation and capable of adapting to and working with technology.

Collaborative learning spaces have become an increasingly integral part of every higher education facility. A collaborative learning space is a **traditional** (i.e., classrooms) or **non-traditional** (i.e., cafes/lounges) area within a learning environment that allows students, faculty or a combination of both to work together.

Studies show that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Researchers report that regardless of the subject matter, students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats.¹

The most common types of collaborative groups include:

- **Informal.** Temporary clusterings of students within a single class, for example, to discuss a topic.
- **Formal.** Teams established to complete a specific task, such a project, report or experiment.
- **Study Teams.** Long-term groups with a stable membership that provide support and assistance to one another.²

Ultimately, a collaborative learning space can directly impact how students learn, instructors teach and schools operate. The most common collaborative spaces within a higher education facility include:

- **Libraries.** From open study areas to closed group rooms, libraries have always been a place for students to come together for group meetings and activities.
- **Hallways.** A hallway can be more than a path from one point to another – it can be transformed into a place where students can sit, interact and exchange information.

- **Fixed and Small Group Classrooms.** Every instructor delivers a different learning experience. Technology and furniture together expand the possibilities for classroom activities, new approaches and more inventive ways to engage.
- **Modern Classrooms.** Gone are the days of only individual student desks. Here are the days of comfortable soft seating and flexible tables that support laptops and other technology.
- **Computer Labs.** A hub shared by many users with diverse purposes where together they research, plan and complete group projects.
- **Informal Learning Spaces.** These are common zones outside the classroom environment, such as lobbies and reception areas where people meet, talk and wait.
- **Meeting Rooms.** A room used for multiple people to gather and share ideas.
- **Residence Halls.** For many students, studying at “home” adds calmness and comfort to their productivity. It gives them a sense of ownership and a place where they can be efficient on their own time.
- **Cafes.** A place where people come to eat, drink, work and socialize.

It's no surprise that technology use tends to foster collaboration among students in the classroom.³

In addition, research on learning theory, how the brain works, collaborative learning and student engagement has taught us that **people learn best in community.**⁴

For this reason, **the right furniture** is critical for collaborative environments and will largely dictate how the space is used. Here are the primary types of furniture used in higher education collaborative environments:

- **Training Tables:** Tables in various shapes and sizes that can be easily moved into different formations are a basic necessity. These tables allow the room to be changed on the fly. Many fold and nest together for easy changes, movement and storage. Also, some are available with power options to support technology.
- **Meeting Tables:** Round and oval meeting tables are the ideal compliment to a group discussion. Students can meet with a professor over coffee or groups of students can sit together and brainstorm for a project. Sitting and standing height tables ensure discussions aren't limited.
- **Mobile Boards and Easels:** These systems allow an idea to be created, shared and moved around as needed. Most schools benefit from both freestanding and mobile options as well as rail systems that affix to a wall.
- **Mobile Carts to Support Technology:** Wheeled carts allow new technologies like flat panels to be brought into collaborative environments to enhance the discussion. Mobile instructor workstations also support a variety of multimedia equipment at once making them ideal for front-of-the-room applications.
- **Soft Seating:** Collaborative spaces need modular seating that can be modified to support group work. Chairs, sofas, benches and lounge seating are needed for informal collaboration areas. Usually, the furniture comes with numerous finishing options to complement the space.
- **Mobile privacy screens:** These allow larger collaborative spaces to be broken down into smaller group environments then changed back as needed. Lightweight and mobile screens allow for easy movement and create more privacy for student activities. Like soft seating, many screens come with a variety of color, pattern and material options to enhance the look of the space.

Ideally, the furniture selected must be:

- **Flexible/Reconfigurable:** Simple to set up, rearrange, store and share.
- **Comfortable:** Easy to sit in for a period of time, especially when using electronics equipment.
- **Mobile:** Wheeled furniture is a must in spaces where the room and meetings are constantly changing. It must be able to be moved in, out and around quickly and without custodial support.
- **Dependable:** Long-lasting and made with high quality materials that resist damage from people and the environment, and are backed by a lengthy and complete warranty.
- **Technology-enabled:** Products that support the technology being used in the room, with space for equipment placement, power and storage.
- **Attractive:** It should enhance the tone of the collaborative space by providing a warm, inviting look that is also polished and professional.
- **Customizable:** Able to be changed or tweaked to meet the exact needs of the space, ranging from color, design, style or construction.
- **Able to work with other furniture:** It is ideal to have furniture that can work and fit together with other furniture in the space, preferably the same style and brand for consistency.

With careful planning and the right manufacturer, reseller partners and architect/designers on board, amazing collaborative spaces can be created within a college or university environment. Ultimately, these collaborative areas can make a difference in the way a school attracts and retains students, in the impact and creativity of the materials being taught by the instructor and in the quality of education a student receives.

Sources

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