

Re-Imagining and Revitalizing Physical Learning Environments

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The success in achieving Smith College's goal of promoting a "culture of research, inquiry, and discovery" depends, in part, on the availability of campus space designed for collaboration and interaction. Using existing and emerging technologies and applying current learning theory and research, we propose an initiative to re-imagine and revitalize physical learning environments across the campus in order to foster the development of the fundamental liberal arts capacities, that support multiple pedagogies, that are responsive to a diversity of instructional and learning styles, and that prepare students to flourish in their lives beyond Smith.

Learning occurs in formal (classroom), informal (library, museum, campus center, residences, social spaces) and virtual (Moodle, interactive software, instant messenger, message boards) environments. Students learn as individuals and they learn working together. Smith needs to serve the broad multitude of learning styles and modes by providing a wide variety of learning environments that respond to current needs, anticipate emerging needs and foster innovation for both the instructor and the student.

Current Environment

Smith now has numerous formal and informal learning spaces that have developed out of historical modes of teaching and learning but do not allow for the flexibility and adaptability that both faculty and students want and need. Classrooms are well suited for traditional lecture and seminar teaching modes, but do not uniformly allow for creative and innovative approaches to instruction. Too often the introduction of new technologies has reinforced the traditional modes of instruction and learning: the chalkboard or overhead transparency is supplemented by a screen and computer to permit PowerPoint. The classroom as a whole, however, has not been rethought and then appropriately furnished to facilitate an instructor's planned or spontaneous alternative approaches to teaching nor do they allow for student collaborative learning.

Computer labs generally reflect a time when few students had their own computers. Computers were arranged in rows with the goal to fit as many computers into the space as possible. As such they do not reflect the reality of how students work. If the student is working alone, they do not allow them to spread their reference materials about them while they do their reflection, their research and their writing. If working with others, the students have few places where they can work collaboratively in small or large groups. Similarly in the Libraries the public spaces are primarily designed for individual study.

Recent efforts to redesign computer labs and the library spaces as reflected in the Technology Learning Commons and the Information Commons reflect a significant beginning towards providing innovative learning spaces responsive to student needs. There remain many unmet needs. Students have no place to easily go to practice giving a presentation or giving a speech, seeing herself on video so that she can improve herself. Students need places to work to go work on group projects, with a collaborative workstation, a white board and the quiet provided by a closed door. Students need space for peer tutoring and social learning.

Initiative

- We propose the College initiate a comprehensive study of the configuration of learning spaces that encourage faculty-student and student-student interaction and collaboration.
- We propose an initial investment to create classrooms that are responsive to current teaching and learning and incorporate a flexibility of design that permit future innovation and change.
- We propose developing “incubator spaces” where the relationship between space, furniture and technology can be evaluated in order to determine how Smith College students and faculty use and arrange furniture and technology to best meet their needs. These incubator spaces will then be used as a model for other learning spaces on campus.
- We also propose ongoing resources be identified to fund the continuous refurbishing of learning spaces.

Resources

We envision a substantial initial one-time investment of funds to realize learning spaces that are flexible, adaptable and responsive to instructional and learning needs. We envision a one-time investment to create the initial incubator spaces. We envision ongoing funds needed to continuously upgrade the incubator spaces and the learning spaces. We envision the need of 1 FTE to lead, manage and assess the effort.

Champions and Potential Partners

The co-lead for this project will be Tom Laughner, Director of Educational Technology Services and Chris Loring, Director of Libraries. Educational Technology Services is positioning itself to be at the forefront of design and support of learning spaces that integrate technology with other variables such as lighting, furniture, and aesthetics. The University Libraries is undergoing a renovation that begins the process of rethinking how a library might be best utilized in the 21st century. The Science Center; the Jacobsen Center, the quantitative skills center, the Imaging Center, and the Museum will all benefit from participating in and making use of the work done to enhance Smith’s learning spaces.

Outcome

Revitalizing the physical learning spaces is critical to the process of research, inquiry and discovery and the development of the fundamental capacities. This initiative would provide both instructors and students with the physical environments to fully realize their goals. Faculty would have flexible classrooms that would facilitate rather than constrain their instruction and pedagogy. Re-imagined learning spaces would support collaboration by providing faculty with the facilities that allow them to incorporate group projects both in and outside the classroom. Similarly students would have facilities that encourage and allow them to develop the modes of working, e.g., collaboration, teamwork, presentation skills, etc., that they will need in their life beyond Smith. The incubator spaces would allow the college to remain at the forefront of providing modern, innovative, technology rich learning environments.

In five years, Smith will have led the way in a wholesale approach to thinking how education is done within the context of formal and informal learning spaces. Smith will be unique in its approach to a systematic renewal of its learning spaces and its engagement of faculty and students in its learning spaces.