

A new learning center takes shape in the most unlikely space



Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Geneva, NY

Credits:

Merkel Donohue

Chaintreuil | Jensen | Stark Architects

Tucked into a corner of 120-year-old Demarest Hall, was a room with untapped potential; a space that had yet to join the 21st century.

“The room had so much possibility,” says Fred Damino, CIO at Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS), a liberal arts college in upstate New York, who proposed the space be developed into a new learning center where every person on campus could learn how to use the colleges’ new enterprise software system. The size of the space – 950 sq. ft.– was right, it was available, and no one else wanted it.

Dirk Schneider, principal at Chaintreuil Jensen Stark Architects, was up for the challenge. “If you always have a clean slate to do whatever you want, it would get boring. To work in a volume and a budget is more interesting.”

Damiano went to senior staff. “We said, ‘let us make an investment in this space and design a state of the art learning center. We’ll use it for this project, we’ll pilot some concepts for a new Learning Commons in the library that combines IT and library services, and when we’re done the colleges can decide how to repurpose the space.’”

The senior staff agreed and soon the project team travelled to Steelcase to visit the LearnLab™, a new, research-based environment that supports lecture, discussion and group work learning modes. A LearnLab approach works for practically any college classroom, new construction or renovation.

“We were all sitting in different parts of the LearnLab,” recalls Ann Miller-Michaels of Merkel Donohue in Rochester, NY, the college’s Steelcase dealer. “We had a presentation and discussion lead by an adjunct college professor, and the room worked in the same way Hobart and William Smith

wanted their room to work. It was interactive, everyone was part of the discussion, everyone was more involved.” The team unanimously chose the LearnLab approach.

Another discovery: the team came across Pathways Low-Profile Floor, a 2½-inch profile, moveable raised floor. It would eliminate having to dig trenches in their room’s concrete floor for routing power and cabling – if it was tough enough.

“Everyone jumped up and down on it to test it,” says Miller-Michaels. Satisfied it was solid, quiet, and durable, the team chose the floor as the easiest way to integrate technology throughout the space.

Technology, however, was not the driver for the classroom. “Our focus was people, not technology,” says Holly Morris-Kuentz, director of instructional and research technology. “It’s a hands-on learning environment where the technology is an enabler.”

The HWS learning center is based on research and design work conducted by Steelcase, and extensive feedback from students, faculty and administrators around the country. The LearnLab™ approach uses three principal design strategies:

- a geometric layout with three main projection/display surfaces
- a variety of tools to provide content immersion
- different spaces for different learning processes and styles

The geometry offers multiple stages that, along with the tools, create a synergy for creating content and sharing it in the classroom. Different spaces support each stage of the learning process, from information access and understanding to transfer and assessment.

The Colleges call this a learning center and not a training center for good reason, says Morris-Kuentz. “Learning center implies that you bring some knowledge and share that with the group. Training center implies that we’re filling you with knowledge. Our focus is on sharing and collaborating, and figuring out how the enterprise software can be used in daily work. People establish their own work flows as opposed to us telling them. It’s a totally collaborative approach.”

This approach is critical in light of the changes going on in higher education today. Research shows students spend nearly three-quarters of their time in discussion, and nearly a quarter of their time in group work. Classrooms are rarely used solely as lecture halls anymore. Learning is about collaboration, communication, content immersion.

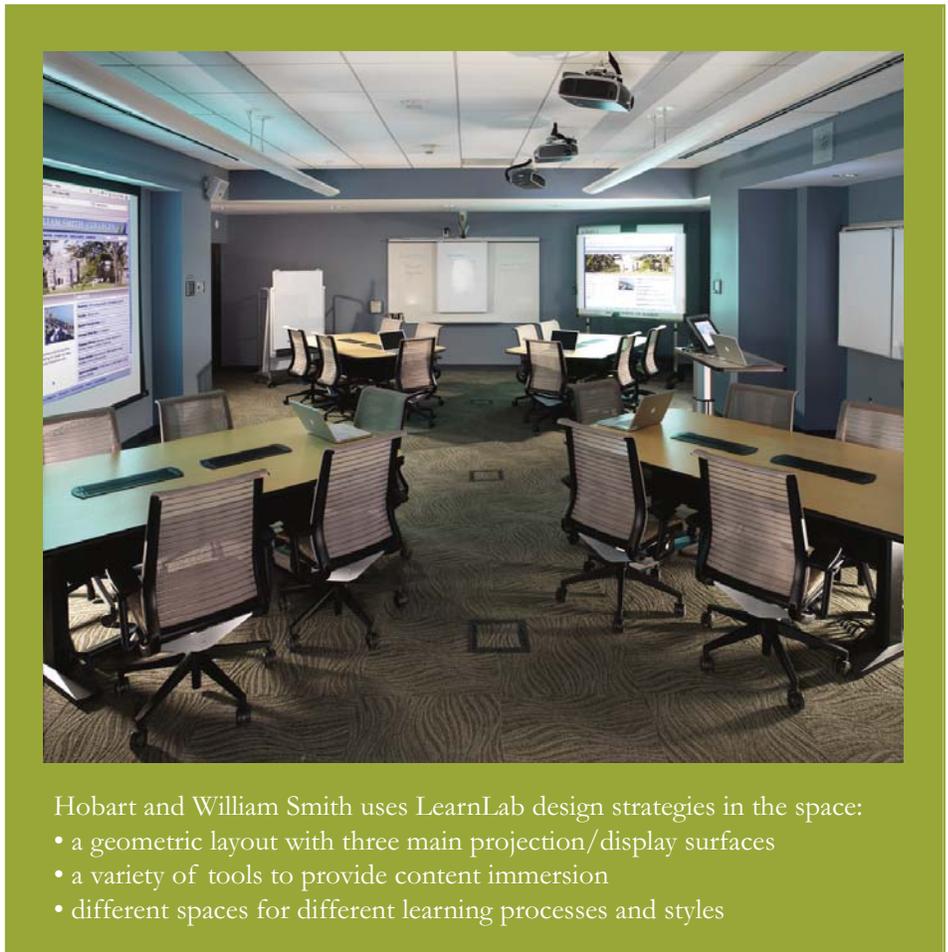
The HWS learning center features a whiteboard with CopyCam technology. Users simply press a button to save and share

meeting notes to a drive, online, or print in color on a wireless printer. A mobile Walk-and-Talk Cordless Lectern lets a presenter add interaction to the large screen projection. Additional projection on two more Walk-and-Talk boards adds even more flexibility and interaction.

“The triangular projection makes it easy for everyone to see,” says Morris-Kuentz.

tops for flexibility. The tables have built-in utility bays for easy access to power, voice and data.

“In five minutes,” says Damiano, “you can set up the room for 20 people, and people can share the space. The room, furniture, and technology work together to enable people to improve their learning process.”



“You can project all the same content or individual content.”

As Schneider puts it, “There’s no back of the room. You’re part of everything. There’s no hiding.”

Rather than a typical training room with desktop computers fixed rows of tables, HWS chose mobile Vecta E-Tables and lap-

“People can see others across from them and have a conversation,” says Morris-Kuentz. “It’s a much more engaging environment where people are actively involved in the process of learning.”

“They can use a laptop to work in a small group, then present to the whole group at large. The learning process becomes student-centered and group-centered in this space.”

Users also generate content using Huddleboards, ultra-light portable marker boards. The boards can hang on rails, on a free-standing tray, and under the CopyCam.

“People prefer them over other whiteboards because they can work at their tables and then use the CopyCam to save notes to a flash drive or online. That extends the learning back to the actual work environment,” notes Morris-Kuentz.

Seating was specified to work with multiple learning styles. Ergonomic, streamlined Think chairs support people for long stretches of time in small or large groups, or when a user is focused on the computer. Lounge seating offers another break-out space for small groups.

It didn't take long for people to respond to the new learning center. “The general reaction has been on the order of ‘Wow!’” says Damiano. “It's in one of the oldest buildings on campus, yet people walk in, they feel comfortable, and they're able to work collaboratively in a variety of ways.”

Usage of the classroom has quickly reached 75% of available hours –which wouldn't be surprising for a popular class, perhaps, but for a place where groups learn and test enterprise software, it's remarkable.

“This learning center has changed the whole dynamic of what it means to do training, and emphasized team learning,” says Morris-Kuentz.

The classroom has become a metaphor for the project, according to Damiano. “In our new enterprise software environment, everything is integrated: student records, human resources information, recruiting and admissions, registrations, grades, financial information, etc. When we planned this space, our strategy was to have the learn-

ing integrated, too. For the project to be successful, everyone had to work together. The room helps convey that message.”

“This is no longer ‘the sage on the stage,’ but rather ‘the guide on the side,’ says Morris-Kuentz. “It's how we work and learn today.”

Schneider is applying his LearnLab experience to other higher education spaces. “The experience and information from this project at HWS will inform other spaces I work on. It's a helpful learning experience, seeing what's possible, getting your mind away from the teacher goes here, the student goes here, and there's the board. Seeing the research, being in the LearnLab space, it's a very eye-opening experience.”

It's changing perspectives at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, too. The learning center will be used exclusively for learning the enterprise system for a couple of years and then HWS will decide how to repurpose it. Damiano has already had requests from others who want to use the space.

“It's a highly coveted space now, and a lot of people will want to use it.”



“In five minutes you can set up the room for 20 people, and people can share the space. The room, furniture, and technology work together to enable people to improve their learning process.”

Fred Damiano
CIO | Hobart and
William Smith Colleges



Products used:

Steelcase® Pathways® Low-Profile Floor, Think® task seating

Vecta® E-Tables, Werndl® Communicator carts, Airtouch™ table

Brayton® Thoughtful and Ripple™ lounge seating

DesignTex® and Steelcase surface materials

PolyVision® Huddleboards™, Walk-and-Talk™ mobile interactive boards and Cordless Lectern

Cover photo courtesy of Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Call 800.333.9939 or visit
steelcase.com