

a customer story

higher education

Innovative facility transforms firefighter training



Tarrant County College
Fire Service Training Center



Credits:
Ambia, Inc.

Seattle & Olympia, Washington

At most schools, a fire drill interrupts learning. At Tarrant County College's Fire Service Training Center, it's how learning happens. An innovative facility has transformed firefighter teaching and learning at this fast-growing institution, part of the Tarrant County community college system in Forth Worth, Texas.

Community colleges now educate almost half of all American undergraduates, and specialized workforce development courses are a big part of what's driving that growth.

Before the new training center opened, the Tarrant program shared a multi-story building with several other departments, classrooms were uninviting and uncomfortable, and there were no areas for practical training with real smoke, flames and water.

The project team wanted to create a technologically advanced complex that was designed around their unique program and the specialized needs of their students and

faculty. Working with Steelcase workplace consultants and the local Steelcase dealership, the Tarrant team gained insights into new possibilities.

"Steelcase helped us get clarity about what we were trying to accomplish and the types of interior spaces we wanted to create. They shared all their research and explained in detail the design of the Steelcase corporate learning center. They totally understood how learning can happen best," says Tommy L. Abercrombie, administrative coordinator, who led the new facility project. A key objective was attracting and retaining students. Tarrant's student body includes full- and part-time degree-seeking students, as well as firefighter professionals in continuing education programs. Many are juggling classes, jobs and family responsibilities.

One thing all firefighting students share in common: "By nature, they are physically active people who don't like to be cooped up in a room," says Abercrombie. In Tarrant's former facility, the classrooms had uncomfortable chairs and many had no

windows. "When students aren't comfortable, it puts the faculty behind the 8 ball right from the start," he notes.

Attracting and retaining faculty was another important goal. Most of the instructors at the fire service training center are adjuncts who spend only part of their time on campus. The project team wanted to build community among them and also support interactions with students so learning could extend before and after classes.

The new \$18 million, 48,000-square-foot Fire Service Training Center opened in October 2002. It doesn't take long for visitors to notice that it isn't typical. The campus looks like a futuristic movie set. Situated on 23 acres, there's a concrete-block "disaster city" that replicates a typical community – homes, businesses, apartments, hotels, warehouses, restaurants, etc. Real and computer-controlled simulated fires provide hands-on training. A waterway pumps 80,000 gallons per minute for practicing swift-water rescues, and there are training sites for fuel spills and rail accidents.



Left: Mobile tables and Jersey seating are used to create versatile computer labs.

Right: Metro Template wood Systems Furniture is used in faculty offices.



Tarrant's intensive approach is equally apparent inside the facility. It's furnished throughout with carefully selected products from Steelcase and the Steelcase family of companies. "A first-rate facility – inside and outside – builds the expectation of a first-rate education," Abercrombie notes.

The facility receives intense use all year. "Firefighters are physically strong and our furniture needs to stand up to heavy use," Abercrombie notes. "Less frequent replacements can actually end up costing less over time."

The Tarrant training center features classrooms of various sizes, so classes can be matched to the size of the room, resulting in a better student experience. Every classroom has windows.

Mobile Kart® seating and Train™ tables can be easily arranged and rearranged. There's also mobile furniture in the computer lab, so students can easily pull up a worksurface to switch between paper-based and computer work or huddle for a team project.

RoomWizard™ web-based signs for room scheduling throughout the building make it easy to know when a room is free for team projects or work between classes. The dean's office has zones for concentration and quick one-on-one collaboration, and there's an adjoining room for meetings and group work.

For faculty offices, Metro Template™ wood systems furniture helps communicate to

every instructor that they're a valuable member of the team.

A conference room, immediately adjacent to faculty offices, is equipped with portable Huddleboard™ whiteboards so instructors can share ideas quickly and often.

The library is a dramatic focal point. Glass walls and floor-to-ceiling windows provide abundant natural light. Leaving tradition behind, this space supports group work and socialization with Bix® booth seating and tables. There are also areas for heads-down individual work, with Rizzi Arc™ tables and Rover™ seating.

Like students at most community colleges, Tarrant learners multi-task throughout the day. Finding easy-to-access touchdown spots between classes for quick work or just-in-time interaction helps them successfully juggle their multiple roles. Archipelago™ chairs outside the library and in passageways meet needs comfortably, with tablet arms to support computers, books and papers and casters so they can be moved easily.

"Keeping students on campus longer is a big issue for community colleges, and we're making a lot of headway. Students who otherwise would come to classes and hit the road are now staying to get work done, and that builds community," says Abercrombie.

Enrollments are up since the facility opened and visitors are frequent – whether

it's students wandering over from other departments to study or educators from places as far away as Qatar, France and Taiwan who are coming to see how firefighter education is done at its best.

"Right from the start, we saw this as more than just a new building. It was a way to achieve our goals. We wanted everyone who worked with us on this project to be as passionate about it as we are, to care as much about the outcome. Steelcase was a partner for us in every sense of the word," says Abercrombie.



Products used:

Steelcase®: Montage® Systems Furniture; Context® lateral files and universal tables; Ally®, Leap®, Cachet® and Parade® seating; HuddleBoard™

Steelcase Wood: Gentry® and Deck™ seating

Brayton®: Enea™, Migrations® and Sidewalk™ seating

Metro®: Template™ Systems Furniture; Archipelago™, Bix®, Detour™ Lounge and Rover™ seating; TeamWork® tables and lecterns

Turnstone®: Jenny™ Lounge, Jersey® and Sonata seating; Payback™ and Smoke™ tables

Vecta®: Rizzi Arc™ and Train™ tables; Runner™ TR, Werndl® Communicator and Werndl Moby™ carts; Kart®, Lucy® and Stitz™ seating

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