

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

# CLEAR PREFERENCE FOR SPACE MADE FOR ACTIVE LEARNING

**Furman University**  
**GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA**

*Steelcase Education Active Learning Grant Recipient, Cycle 2*

When research by two of its health science professors showed that students engaged in active learning practices master more content and skills vital to future studies and work, Furman University devoted two classrooms to active, team-based learning – and applied for a Steelcase Education Active Learning Center (ALC) Grant. Awarded the grant for one of the two near-identical classrooms, Furman was ready to test the impact of the physical environment on the active learning experience by fall 2016.

# 78%

**OF FACULTY SAID THE ALC FACILITATED TEAM-BASED LEARNING**

### EXPANDING EXPECTATIONS

Prior to installation of the ALC, faculty were surveyed to understand how well they thought space design would facilitate team-based learning. Only 39% agreed – and none strongly so – that the room would make a positive contribution. Two semesters after the renovation was completed, 78% of faculty respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the ALC was making a difference. Some noted that the room promotes discussion among students, creates a comfortable learning environment and enables students to communicate effectively.

### A MOVING EXPERIENCE

Students and instructors alike valued the mobility of furniture and tools in the ALC. Students described how the ability to move in class left them feeling more alert, attentive and connected in their interactions with one another. “The classroom allowed us to work together in a less structured way than with the nonmobile desks typical in other classrooms,” said one student.

“It allowed us to get to know each other better.”

Additionally, students and instructors voiced that mobile chairs, desks and tools helped them see who was speaking from anywhere in the classroom, release nervous energy and to transition between learning modes with less disruption than in a conventional space.

As a downside to so much mobility, some instructors and students observed that at times the space felt disordered, although some reported improvement in this area as the semester progressed. Some professors expressed frustration that when they arrived to teach, furniture and Thread portable power access units were often in disarray from the prior session – and recommended a protocol for room setup at the end of each session.

Beyond their thoughts on mobility, students and faculty appreciated that Node seating provided storage space

**ACTIVE LEARNING CENTER GRANTS**

for backpacks. Some offered suggestions: to increase the size of the workspace and add cupholders. Faculty found that personal Verb whiteboards became an “indispensable” tool for group work and sharing.

**PEERS BECOME MORE IMPORTANT**

Examining student survey results, Furman educators noticed something interesting and unexpected. Students began to report that instructor lectures were not in themselves sufficient to learn all they needed to know in a given course. The

Furman team viewed this result very positively, noting in a year-two report that “team-based learning deliberately depends upon peer collaboration between students.”

**COMPARING SPACES**

Furman University studied students and faculty using two similarly sized and situated spaces where active learning pedagogies were practiced. One was the ALC and the other a traditional classroom. While they did not observe a difference in teaching practice prompted by the ALC, they did notice a marked difference in

**100%**

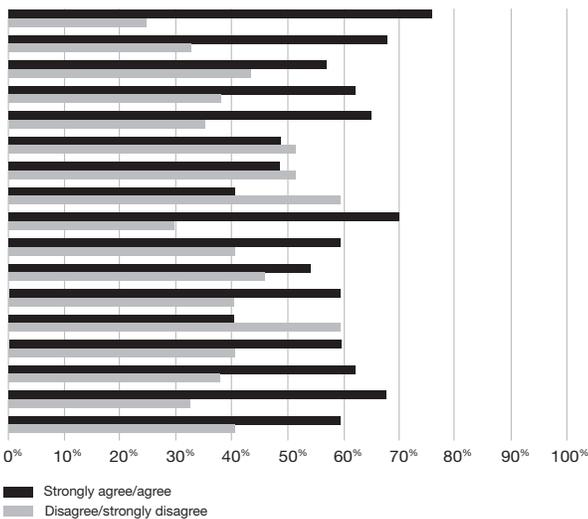
**OF STUDENTS REPORTED A POSITIVE COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE ALC**

**TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM**

Faculty said: “This room works well for traditional lecture courses without much interaction... we were able to achieve [active learning goals] despite the room, not because of it.”

Students said: “The desks are all in the way and make it hard to navigate during team activities.”

Student assessment of how well the traditional classroom facilitated collaboration across multiple dimensions:

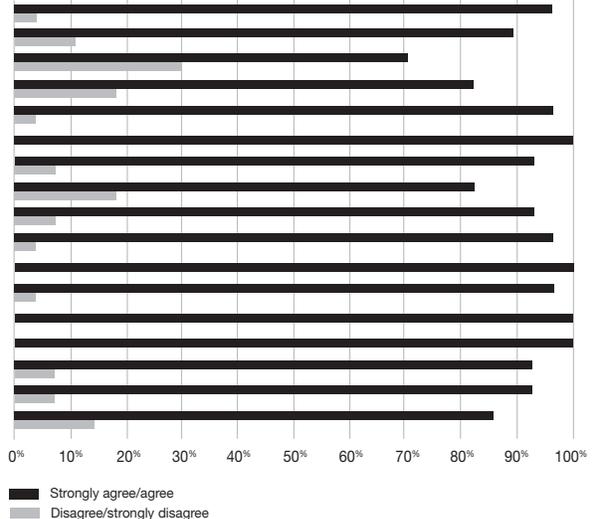


**ACTIVE LEARNING CENTER**

Faculty said: “I absolutely love this room... allows me to respond to the energy in the room and make adjustments to my lesson plans with ease.”

Students said: “This room helped with our team dynamic. It allowed us to be close, move when necessary and facilitate team activities like writing on a whiteboard.”

Student assessment of how well the ALC facilitated collaboration across multiple dimensions:



**“Being able to move around and talk with a team helps me work through ideas, organize my thoughts, get feedback from peers and come to conclusions more quickly.”**

*Student, Furman University*

experience and perceptions. Students said that the ALC facilitated collaboration, peer teaching and learning, and seamless transitions to and from team work, individual work and lecture. They also said they were more likely to participate and ask questions in the renovated space.

#### **SHARING AN ASSET**

While Furman found that its instructors practicing active learning could achieve it in an ordinary classroom, they found

the quality and ease of that experience greatly improved by the purpose-built ALC. Since the renovation, the ALC has become one of the most sought-after spaces on campus. Health sciences faculty, particularly those who employ the team-based learning approach, are given preference because the room is “ideally suited” to their needs.