

Higher Ed Harnesses the Power of Physical Space



Sara Armbruster, Vice President Strategy, Research and New Business Innovation at Steelcase, originally published this article on [LinkedIn](#). She discusses three key design principles being employed to improve how people feel, think and perform at work that can also be applied at institutions of higher education to empower the next generation of people in the workforce.

HIGHER EDUCATION HARNESSSES THE POWER OF PHYSICAL SPACE

Across the country, college students and professors will return to campus in 2017 for another year of learning and exploring new ideas. As these students get settled into their new curriculum, many are doing so in enhanced environments specifically designed to boost thinking.

At Steelcase, we've spent decades studying the way the physical space influences human behavior in education, healthcare and corporate settings. In recent years, we've seen increased interest from schools to invest in their buildings as a strategic move to foster deeper student and educator engagement. In fact, [The New York Times](#) recently wrote an article about the most interesting learning environments across colleges and universities. What struck me while reading about these universities was how many of the best practices for designing to improve worker performance and wellbeing at work can also be applied to the education setting. For example:

1.

PROVIDE CHOICE AND CONTROL

Workers are more engaged when they're given choices and control over how and where they work. Similarly, students find more energy and focus when they have a variety of options on where to learn, depending on the type of studying they need to do. Too often, education environments have been designed primarily around lecture-style teaching. Students also need places to collaborate and more private settings for focused work.

2.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Distractions from technology and other activity in our environment can make it harder for workers to focus. The same is true for students who face similar distractions in the classroom, libraries, and other study settings. Well-designed spaces can and should provide workers and students with spaces with greater privacy for when they need to do intense, focused work.

3.

DESIGN FOR SPONTANEOUS COLLABORATION

The best ideas often come at unexpected times, and chance meetings offer opportunities for bridging of ideas. This is as true on campus as it is in an office. Whether catching a few minutes with a professor after class or bumping into a peer working on a class assignment, these spur of the moment conversations can enable new and unique connections to be made to enhance existing ideas. Student workspaces should encourage opportunities for spontaneous collaboration.

More and more, universities are taking cues from what's been found to work in the corporate world and are applying it to educational settings. While developing Cornell Tech, designers looked at leading corporations known for their work environments including Pixar, Bloomberg, and Google to glean fresh ideas. At York University's Bergeron Centre, students presented their ideas to business leaders in a space intentionally designed to imitate a corporate lounge. And, at Wichita State University's Innovation Campus, businesses run their own spaces and laboratories to educate students. Wichita State also spoke with local businesses to see what they looked for from graduates and is using that feedback to create better prepared graduates.

Both the education and corporate worlds understand that space is important and can have a large impact on overall performance. By leveraging these best practices, institutions of higher education can continue to shape the next generation of workers empowering them to be the workforce's newest innovators and disruptors.



Sara Armbruster, Steelcase Vice President, Strategy, Research and New Business Innovation, oversees strategy creation and corporate business development, as well as Steelcase’s design research activity. She also oversees Steelcase Health, Steelcase Education and PolyVision. Her responsibilities include driving business growth in strategic markets, investments in internal and external growth opportunities, and creation of new business models.

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