

RESEARCH SUMMARY

SPACES MEET STRATEGY FOR AMBITIOUS ACTIVE LEARNING CLASSROOM

University of Arizona TUCSON, ARIZONA

*Steelcase Education Active
Learning Grant Recipient,
Cycle 1*

**“I am trying new things
in this room that I have
never tried in my 10
years of teaching. The
classroom is a ‘partner’
in the learning process.”**

University of Arizona Instructor

The University of Arizona approached Steelcase Education with a classroom space set within its Cesar Chavez building, constructed in 1952. With its central location and use by students and faculty across many disciplines, the space plays an important role in shaping campus experience.

University leaders had carefully studied the literature and were convinced that student learning is significantly improved through collaborative, active learning strategies. “We had a lot of instructors who understood active learning pedagogy,” said Jane Hunter, associate professor of practice, office of instruction and assessment. “What we didn’t have before the grant were a lot of spaces that facilitated that type of teaching and learning.”

With an Active Learning Center (ALC) Grant, the University chose to develop a Verb classroom to support a large group of instructors teaching a wide variety of nearly 30 courses, each enrolling 25 to 30 students.

ENGAGING STUDENTS

University faculty and staff aimed to break down traditional barriers to

collaboration to engage students more deeply in learning and with each other.

Over the course of two years in the new classroom, observers noticed a difference. “Students are developing critical thinking skills, they’re developing a deeper understanding of the materials,” said Hunter. “So it’s not just about better learning, it’s about learning to be collaborative, working with your colleagues, working with your peers.”

One professor described new attitudes and expectations the classroom made possible. “In this kind of active learning environment, the point is to change the roles and change the expectations,” she said. “It’s not about the professor doing the work and the students passively observing, taking notes. Everyone is supposed to work.”

ACTIVE LEARNING CENTER GRANTS

The University administered student and faculty surveys, showing that students benefitted from the evidence-based teaching and learning strategies made possible in the new space.

Faculty and staff also received frequent student comments contextualizing these results. One student said, “I love that when you are sitting in the classroom, you don’t feel like there is a ‘front’ or a ‘back’ part... everyone is integrated and arranged in a way that encourages classroom discussion.”

Another described how new-found proximity to peers sparked collaboration naturally. “Usually [I] am too shy to initiate the collaboration. [In this space], it’s practically unavoidable to start comparing and working with people at my table group.”

The University is designing additional studies to better understand the complex interrelated factors and resulting impacts on student learning.

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS

While better student experiences and outcomes is central to space design at Steelcase Education, the University of Arizona ALC led to an additional benefit of note. Administrators recognized the

space as an asset to attract and retain teaching talent – and to bring out the best in these educators.

Faculty using the space found the experience more effective and satisfying. “It is great to be able to walk around in and among the students,” said a professor using the space. “One immediately sees what they are ‘getting’ – or not – and I can get a better sense of how their brains are taking in the information I just gave them.”

Another said, “I don’t know how I would have achieved my class goals without this space. It enables my students to collaborate, discuss in big and small groups, be visually stimulated, interact with me and each other more freely and through the different channels. I couldn’t be happier about this and wish all my large classes could be [in this type of classroom].”

BUILDING IN MORE ACTIVE LEARNING

The University of Arizona credits the ALC Grant with propelling culture change across the institution. According to a year 2 report on progress, “We learned first-hand that a well-designed classroom that facilitates active

collaborative learning encourages faculty members to incorporate evidence-based teaching practices into their courses and inspires students to become more actively engaged in their learning.”

Building on this success, the University has created 20 additional collaborative learning spaces inspired by its first ALC, with plans to create many more.

76%

**OF STUDENTS SURVEYED
PREFER TO TAKE CLASSES
IN THE ALC OVER OTHER
CLASSROOM OPTIONS**