

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

# SPARKING NEW BEHAVIORS WITH STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

**The University  
of West Alabama**  
LIVINGSTON, ALABAMA

*Steelcase Education Active  
Learning Grant Recipient,  
Cycle 1*

**“I have always been a hands-on, inquiry-based teacher. My subject areas, science and technology, demand it. The [ALC] furnishings allowed me to easily transition from one configuration to another based upon need during class... [allowing me to use] research-based best practices.”**

*University of West Alabama Instructor*

The University of West Alabama proposed an Active Learning Center to replace a traditional classroom serving a range of students and courses, from freshmen to graduate level. After two years in the ALC, the University reported positive results for teachers and teaching, as well as students and learning.

### STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING

Classroom observations, student surveys and faculty interviews indicated a shift toward a more student-centered approach to teaching, where students explore, communicate and elaborate on the content being taught.

Comparing courses taught in a traditional classroom to those taught in the ALC by the same instructor, the ALC experience was observed to differ in key ways. Instructor-student knowledge exchange was more like a conversation with both parties equally engaged and encouraged to express ideas freely. Instructors were very mobile, constantly changing their location in the room to engage and motivate more students. Additionally, instructors encouraged the use of many different types of technology, helping students learn to explore and think creatively and critically.

Professors using the space said that the diversity of seating options and varying classroom configurations seemed to

increase student engagement, faculty-to-student interaction, class activities, student learning and class instruction.

They also noted that students needed to be taught how to transition from one configuration to another in order to do so efficiently. In response, faculty provided an orientation to various classroom configurations, explaining the purpose of moving between them and having students practice making these shifts before actually doing so during regular instruction.

### ALERT, FOCUSED, CONFIDENT STUDENTS

Faculty fellows reported that the ALC facilitated learning by keeping students more alert and focused. They reported better learning outcomes and faster processing of concepts and techniques among their students.

Accordingly, post-occupancy student scores on participation and focused attention were significantly higher than

## Percentages of Classes Demonstrating Seven Active Learning Components, Year 1

Criteria	Active Learning Classroom	Traditional Classroom
There are learning activities that attract and motivate students	92%	71.4%
Students are actively involved in learning activities	92.3%	71.4%
Instructor encourages students to think critically and/or creatively	100%	71.4%
Instructor encourages students to express ideas freely	92.3%	100%
Instructor gives students opportunity to perform exploration	76.9%	28.6%
Instructor creates an atmosphere conducive to doing learning activities	92.3%	57.1%
There is collaborative learning (group learning) and each student contributes actively to the group	92.3%	57.1%

**“I had more participation than... ever in over 20 years in the classroom. When all students could look at each other face-to-face, it seemed a natural discussion (sometimes heated) occurred. During most discussions, I had 100% participation.”**

*University of West Alabama Instructor*

pre-occupancy scores. Interactions were more supportive and confident. Students working in groups seemed to gain confidence and were eager to participate and share their ideas and conclusions with the class using personal whiteboards.

Instructors also noticed that students and professors working in the ALC seem to develop closer relationships with each other – building important foundations for quality dialogue and collaboration.

### UNEXPECTED PREFERENCES

Given that students today are highly engaged with technology, University faculty were surprised to observe how eagerly students adopted the Verb individual whiteboards. The whiteboards were preferred to notebook and oversized paper – and often chosen over higher-tech options for information capture and display.

Students taking night courses also expressed an unexpected preference – this time for seating. Many said that they preferred hard seating over softer seating options. They believed hard seating helped them stay alert, focused and engaged in night courses, which are held from 5:45 to 8:15 p.m.

### MULTIPLE PURPOSES

Over time, the ALC was viewed by members of the campus community as a versatile asset with the potential for multiple uses in addition to the primary purpose of holding classes.

When the room schedule permitted, various groups from across West Alabama’s campus would seek to reserve the ALC. Outside of regular courses, those most frequently using the space included residence life/housing, athletic training, the nursing department and admissions. Additionally, the room was reserved by members of Greek life and for a meeting for undergraduate teacher preparation student interns. It was also used for College of Education faculty meetings, including Assessment Day events.

### THE EXPLORATION CONTINUES

The University of West Alabama ALC research team continues to analyze data gathered during the second academic year in the new space. Through a mix of longitudinal survey data, open-ended survey data and classroom observation, they will explore a range of questions, including: Does students’ learning engagement change over time in the ALC? Are there individual differences in change trajectories? If so, what variables are associated with different trajectories?