

# **Learning Spaces: A Critical Investment in the Future of St. Lawrence**

*Educational Technologies Committee 2015-2017  
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## **Introduction**

As the St. Lawrence community begins the invigorating work of a comprehensive campaign, much of the energy pouring into this process comes from a wave of recent success stories. We have received recognition in key places that aid in our recruiting, and our financial health has been affirmed by the rating agencies. Our student body has gotten larger without getting weaker academically. In recent faculty hiring, the best candidates have accepted our offer in the vast majority of cases. Things are good.

Like every other institution, we have felt the pinch of the Great Recession, and our ability to make capital investments has been severely hampered over many years. Operating budgets in the academic departments have been held flat or reduced over the same time. If there was any fat, it is gone now. Deferred maintenance that was daunting before is alarming now. As we work together on the comprehensive campaign, many of the challenges are quite clear.

St. Lawrence's reputation has been on the rise in recent years, and we all take pride in that fact. Resting on our laurels at this moment, however, might be the single biggest mistake we could make. As we move forward, St. Lawrence must invest—and ask our donors to invest—in learning spaces: the classrooms, labs, studios, and rehearsal rooms where our core mission plays out on a daily basis.

## **The Changing Classroom and the Learning Space**

The primary driver of changing needs in learning spaces is, appropriately, changes in pedagogy. Traditional lecture-style teaching is not going away entirely, but is increasingly being supplemented or replaced by pedagogies that place the student in a more active role: small group discussion, problem-based learning, and more hands-on activity. These changes in teaching and learning necessitate changes in classroom design, with an emphasis on flexible seating arrangements. This desire for flexibility is strongly expressed in faculty surveys over recent years.

These changes affect not only how classrooms are best configured, but also how other kinds of spaces are used in teaching and learning. For example, less lecturing and more hands-on work means an increased use of lab spaces and other learning spaces beyond traditional classrooms. Many of the technologies that we used to call “classroom technology” are now regularly needed in labs, studios, rehearsal rooms, group study spaces, etc.

As we think about these issues, therefore, it is very important to talk about the broad category of “learning spaces” rather than the narrower “classrooms.” The interconnections are so extensive that a narrower approach is counterproductive. Changing this approach means both a change in the way we think about these spaces and a change in the processes by which we fund these spaces.

### **The Current Learning Space Environment at St. Lawrence**

The Educational Technologies Committee (ETC) sponsored a walking tour of campus learning spaces in May 2016. A group of about a dozen faculty, staff, students, and administrators walked through twelve academic buildings, visiting as many learning spaces as possible in a six-hour period. Most of the spaces were classrooms, but we also visited labs, rehearsal rooms, art studios, the Brush Gallery, and computer labs.

This tour was eye-opening, and the challenges the institution faces in improving learning spaces became clear. We also see a great opportunity in the current moment to start the process of reinvigorating these spaces, and we are enthusiastic about that prospect.

In the past, responsibility for various elements of our learning spaces has been compartmentalized in unfortunate ways. Information Technology (with input from ETC) has been responsible for classroom technology, while Facilities Operations has been responsible for other aspects of the classroom environment. Individual departments or faculty members have been responsible for labs and studios, and sometimes faculty start-up funds have been the only significant source of funding for equipping those spaces.

In the last few years, staff in LIT have been looking at classrooms in a more holistic way, and working closely with Facilities to improve our classrooms more strategically. While this partnership has been a success, the results are limited by the lack of adequate capital funds. We hope that the comprehensive campaign can help alleviate this problem, but we also believe that a holistic approach must be extended from classrooms to cover learning spaces more broadly. Faculty members must be more directly involved to make that work.

On our tour of learning spaces, we observed the following issues in almost every corner of campus:

#### *Environmental Factors*

- Many spaces have significant issues with heating, cooling, and air flow. Some spaces are very hot or cold; some spaces have banging radiators or blowers that are so loud people cannot hear one another speak; many buildings have leaky windows that exacerbate these problems.

- There are huge differences between learning spaces with and without windows. Some windowless spaces could be dramatically improved with better lighting; many spaces with wonderful natural light lack the appropriate window treatments to manage it.
- The quality of flooring has a dramatic impact. Many spaces with tile floors could be improved dramatically with the addition of carpet; some spaces would also benefit greatly from the acoustical changes carpet would make; many, many spaces have asbestos tile that will be costly to abate.
- Poor sound separation means that different groups are often disrupting one another. Sometimes thin walls are the culprit; sometimes noise is carried by the ventilation system; in other cases, the air handling is so poor that doors must be left open, and unwanted sound simply carries down the corridors.
- Unusable spaces are widespread; especially in the arts and sciences. In most cases, renovation of these spaces is hampered by costly abatements. Other spaces remain unfinished because of abandoned construction or renovation projects.
- Paint and artwork make a huge difference. Some spaces could be transformed by the simple addition of a new coat of paint; rooms with accent walls (and art on the walls!) come to life, even if the furniture is dated.
- Not even the newest spaces on campus are free of problems. Some of our “flagship” learning spaces from a few years ago, notably in Johnson Hall of Science and Griffiths Arts Center/EJ Noble Center, have major design flaws that were either introduced or not corrected in construction projects a decade ago. These spaces now have the oldest technology on campus.

### *Technology*

- The generic technology setup for learning spaces is expressed in infinite variety. While the basic idea of an instructor podium with a computer, sound system, and either projector or LCD screen remains fairly consistent, there are many variables. The ideal solution for a particular space, if it exists, will depend on room size, types of use, and any number of other factors. Some rooms work very well as they are today, and some are highly problematic.
- The need for flexibility is coupled with a need for more standardization. This may seem counterintuitive, but varied technology needs do not necessitate a constant reinventing of the wheel, nor preclude the possibility of standardizing many components and many ways of doing things. More standardization would be beneficial to users moving from room to room. It would also make these spaces easier (and possibly cheaper) to maintain, fix, and replace.
- Technology that is working well today will need to be not only replaced, but also reconceived, in a few years. Agility and flexibility are the only things that will allow St. Lawrence to adequately meet technology needs in learning spaces in the future. It is very important that technology decisions be made in response to pedagogical need, and not vice versa.

### *Furnishings*

- Many rooms have furniture that is broken, mismatched, dated, or not suited to the variety of pedagogies the faculty members wish to employ. Some spaces fail to accommodate left-handed students, larger students, or students in wheelchairs. Many spaces have furniture that is too heavy to move, making some learning activities difficult or impossible.
- Many rooms have too much furniture to be used comfortably. Class sizes, rather than room sizes, sometimes dictate how many desks and/or chairs a room will have. While it will be a challenge, the only real solution to this problem is to furnish the rooms based on their size, and then do a better job of scheduling classes into the right spaces. This provides a clear example of why these issues cannot be addressed on a department or building level; we need a campus-wide strategy to use spaces more effectively.
- In limited space, we must strike the right balance between specialized spaces (with unique equipment needs) and general spaces that offer maximum flexibility. Like the previous item, this one points to the need for a comprehensive strategy for our learning spaces.

### **Planning for Replacement in the Comprehensive Campaign**

One of the places where the campaign can help us is in better planning for future replacement of both technology and furnishings. Currently we have approximately 130 learning spaces with technology installed. To replace just this existing technology on an eight-year cycle, St. Lawrence would need to earmark approximately \$250k per year in capital for this purpose. Recently that figure has been much lower, so we can be sure that things will get worse before they get better.

There are approximately 3,500 chairs in learning spaces across campus. Many are old, mismatched, uncomfortable, and not conducive to the kinds of teaching and learning we need. We need a strategic plan to replace furnishings on a rotating basis. Our students sometimes tell us that their high schools were better furnished. When we hear these comments, we believe the students are speaking about learning rather than looks. There *is* a cosmetic aspect to all of this (and it matters, both for affect and for recruiting), but underneath we need our learning spaces to be truly functional.

The impact of new furniture on a learning space is striking, and it can be transformative. There are great learning spaces around campus that have been reinvigorated by new furnishings, such as Carnegie 18, Brown 141-142, and Bewkes 302-303. Some of the most expensive furniture on campus, in Johnson Hall and in the Newell Center for Arts Technology, is 10 years old and looks new. Such investments can bring returns for a long time.

One idea that keeps coming up in our conversations has to do with named learning spaces. A learning space can be a wonderful naming opportunity for donors who want to have a direct impact on student learning. We hope that gifts to name learning spaces will be sought in the campaign, and that part of each such gift can be set aside to create an endowed fund for ongoing replacement.

### **Imagining a Named Learning Space**

What would a renovated, named learning space look like? There are many potential answers to this question, since we need many different kinds of classrooms and also many specialized learning spaces on campus. The basic ingredients, as we see them, look like this:

- The space is light and full of energy. Fresh paint in bright colors, art on the walls, good lighting, and fresh air are critical to success. Infrastructure is not easy to get excited about, but adequate lighting fixtures and proper air handling are simply too important to ignore.
- The furniture is comfortable, durable, and can support the range of pedagogies that faculty members wish to use. There is no single answer for furnishings, but flexibility must be a top priority (especially in general-purpose spaces).
- Technology is part of the design of the entire space rather than a separate consideration. Technology in learning spaces should work seamlessly with the space and furnishings. Projection surfaces and writing surfaces can be used side by side. Bulky podiums can be easily rolled into a corner when they are not in use, and are not installed in spaces where they are not needed. Instructors are not tied to a particular spot, unable to move around freely. Lights are banked correctly, so that the area around the projection surface can be darkened easily. Window treatments allow for simple control of natural light. Ceilings and floors improve the sound characteristics of the space. Power receptacles are located conveniently for instructors and students to use their own devices.
- An endowment assures that the University has the resources to keep up learning spaces and refurbish them when needed. A part of each gift for a named learning space could be set aside for this fund, so that a pool grows to defray the cost of upkeep for these spaces. A seminar room full of tables and chairs might require nothing more than a fresh coat of paint and a technology upgrade every few years. A lab full of computers or specialized equipment may have much more substantial needs in this regard.

### **Top Concerns from the Faculty**

In our 2016 faculty learning spaces survey, respondents expressed a variety of concerns, and we continue to glean new insights from that data. The respondents also expressed appreciation for the work that our colleagues in LIT and Facilities

have been doing over the last few years to improve our classrooms with very limited funds.

The three issues that rose to the top in our survey are reflected above, but we highlight them again here. First, the faculty pointed to a need for larger spaces. The student body has grown while our learning spaces have stayed the same size! In many cases, what we see is that classes are being scheduled in rooms that are the wrong size. While some spaces are indeed overcrowded, others may be hosting classes that are far below their capacity. We need to fix this not only by reconceiving some of our spaces, but also by changing the way we schedule.

Second, the faculty asked for increased flexibility in learning spaces, expressing a desire to reconfigure the space quickly whenever that might be advantageous. As we work on a strategy to replace our furnishings, this item should be on our minds.

Third, many faculty members pointed to environmental factors as an unfortunate distraction in our learning spaces: HVAC issues (including dead air), flooring, paint, furniture, and sound bleed between rooms all contributed to making learning spaces uncomfortable and less effective.

### **Next Steps**

The task of renovating our campus learning spaces is daunting. We are optimistic; this is the right moment to start planning strategically for new spaces that will help us be better at the thing we care about most.

Members of the Educational Technologies Committee, together with our colleagues in LIT, will continue to study the feedback we received from the faculty in our 2016 survey. We will work together (as is our charge) to prioritize potential renovation projects as funding allows. Taking a longer view, we would like to do everything we can to position learning spaces as a part of the comprehensive campaign. We welcome feedback on this document, and will happily meet with other groups who share an interest in learning spaces and the campaign.