



Evolving the Faculty Workplace

Meeting faculty needs with a smarter approach to space



Key Insights

- **Contingent faculty have become nomadic, disconnecting them from opportunities for interaction that create a sense of community with colleagues and students.**
- **The private office isn't the status symbol it once was; today's faculty have a new definition of status that hinges on positive reinforcement and recognition.**
- **Faculty transition in and out of multiple work activities, which requires more responsive spaces.**
- **The planning and funding of today's faculty workplaces must align with the profile and work activities of faculty.**

Faculty members, contingent and tenured, are the public face of the institutions for which they work. They are responsible for shaping the educational experiences of students and engage in multiple activities during a given day. While much in the education landscape has evolved, the faculty workplace is largely stuck in the past. At many institutions, offices look a lot like they did in the 1940s, with a traditional desk and bookcase-lined walls.

Herman Miller partnered with Kansas City-based Gould Evans Architects to look deeply at higher education institutions, specifically the current state of faculty activities, where they take place, and new ways to support them. As a result, we saw a need to rethink traditional approaches and introduce new ideas for faculty workplace design.



Our research included both contingent and tenured faculty. It also included a historical study of faculty offices, review of Gould Evans' case studies, analysis of the *National Survey of Student Engagement* and the *Faculty Survey of Student Engagement*, phone interviews with faculty, a literature review, and data collection from a digital application called dScout, which faculty members used to document daily experiences on campus.

Accommodating Contingent Faculty

In 2013, nearly 50 percent of college professors held adjunct, part-time, and non-tenured positions. That's according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The growth of contingent faculty is a permanent trend, not a temporary response to funding cuts and fluctuating student enrollment. At the same time, space exists at a premium. While some contingent faculty may occupy offices like their tenured counterparts, it's more likely they are relegated to windowless spaces, sometimes in a room that also houses a copy machine or office supplies. Other contingent faculty members are not offered an office at all.

Lacking an enabling space, contingent faculty have adopted a nomadic life on campus and are often disconnected from social and professional interaction with students, peers, and resident, full-time faculty.

“We're all here on different days, at different times, and we all have our own unique and busy schedules. Finding a time when we can get together is nearly impossible.”

– Contingent Faculty Member

Considering this reality on campus, settings that build community and foster important interactions become imperative. Public spaces must become extensions of the faculty workplace, offering contingent faculty, indeed all faculty, places for researching, advising students, and making impromptu connections.

The Reduced Role of the Private Office

Private offices were—and largely still are—status symbols. They represent prestige in a very tangible way. These closed-door spaces work well for focused work and holding sensitive meetings, but a large portion of the activities that once happened there are now happening across campus.

In documenting her day using the dScout app, this faculty member stated what has become essentially the consensus opinion about shared spaces over a larger private office.

“I would rather have a substantially smaller office and more shared space that I could use to meet with individuals or groups of students and colleagues.”

– Faculty Member

In addition, recognition matters more than ever, perhaps more than the status that comes with having a private office. This is true for all faculty, but especially important for today's contingent faculty, whose accomplishments often have limited exposure throughout the institution. Workplaces that promote productivity and inspiration are one way administrators can meaningfully recognize the value they place on the contributions of faculty.

Supporting Multiple Work Activities

Activities are changing, responsibilities are growing, and private offices are becoming less utilized, yet most faculty workplaces present more roadblocks than solutions. That's because faculty do so much more than teach or conduct research. In fact, it seems that the role of many professors and faculty looks much like that of a business professional—always on the go, often in meetings, engaging in a range of activities, dealing with the pressure to do more with less.

One example of an activity that has changed dramatically is advising. Advising once took place during faculty office hours in a formal fashion. Today, it happens in multiple places, both on and off campus, during all hours of the workday.

Given the changing dynamic, the places where work activities happen need to be “pluralistic,” as one faculty member stated:

“There is a strong interest on the part of faculty and students for an appropriate array of spaces where groups interact. This could include open spaces that don't require walls for privacy or spaces that are large and accommodate a variety of groups meeting simultaneously. Our college planners and faculty are trying to sort out the appropriate mixture of those different kinds of spaces.”

– Faculty Member



Solution Essay



What's needed are settings that fluidly support a variety of activities, while promoting meaningful interaction. Workplaces that promote productivity and inspiration provide something research shows faculty members value greatly: a campus that's both connecting and connected, that balances ways to socialize face to face with digital tools for doing their work.

Matching Activities with Settings

Related to the planning and design of faculty workplaces, our research points to a strong need to rethink traditional approaches and introduce new ideas. As new workplace solutions are helping businesses and offices worldwide, we aim to understand the ways faculty workplaces can help current faculty, keep them connected and efficient, attract and retain new faculty, and help them achieve success as the landscape of education continues to change.

One institution on this journey is Texas State. In 2015, they decided to redesign their faculty office suite. First, they met with about 30 faculty members to better understand how they teach, research, and conduct other work activities. Then, informed by the findings, they reconfigured the office suite to be more open and collaborative, with far fewer barriers.

How did Texas State satisfy a wide variety of roles, work modes, styles, and personal preferences? It came down to offering flexibility and choice, settings for private work, collaborative meetings, and other work-related activities. It took some faculty members longer than others to embrace the change, and



feedback is still being gathered, but Texas State saw a big increase in faculty engagement. "The reconfiguration allows for more meetings, collaboration, and has made our programs stronger," said Kendra Ordia, Assistant Professor, who was largely responsible for the change. As a key point, the reconfiguration was done with minimal capital investment, without any construction or demolition to the office suite.

Evolving Space with Smart Solutions

At Herman Miller, we address the challenges of faculty workplace design with solutions that support the activities and work habits of today's contingent and tenured faculty. By applying a new framework to these issues, institutions can foster connectivity, engagement, and belonging for faculty members—and ultimately achieve their goals.

This paper is part of our ongoing efforts to better understand how space can empower students and faculty. We're constantly adding to our understanding through research, experience, and monitoring outside sources. The more we learn, the more expertise, insights, and solutions we're able to share.

Discover the solutions we offer, and the research that informs them, at hermanmiller.com/education.

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