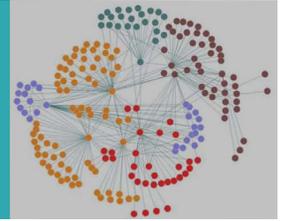


Informal Learning Space Ecosystem: Start Small and Think Big

The University of Illinois at Chicago



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At institutions of higher education we understand that learning doesn't stop at the classroom door and that we need to provide an ecosystem of spaces to support both formal and informal learning. Informal learning spaces are often thought of as "between spaces" that provide students with opportunities outside the classroom for individual reflection, community building, and peer-to-peer learning. To be successful, these spaces require the same thoughtful planning we devote to formal learning spaces.

How does one begin planning informal learning spaces?

First, identify an available space to develop. All of the enclosed rooms at institutions are typically assigned to different colleges, departments or units; so it is important to look for other opportunities:

- Tour campus buildings with your planning group and look at common spaces: entry vestibules, lobbies, corridors, and alcoves off corridors are all opportunities.
- Look for spaces where students are currently waiting and/or sitting on the floor between classes.
- Ask students to help by submitting photos of spaces they think could be converted into informal learning spaces.



Once you have identified the first space, you need to think about the goals and vision for the space:

- What are the students' needs?
- How can the space enable student success?
- What do you hope this space will become?

It's all about envisioning the potential of the space and how it fits into a larger ecosystem of spaces. Then work with architects who can develop and achieve the planning group's vision in their design.



Before



After



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Remember that starting small can be beneficial. It provides a low-cost, low-stakes proof of concept. Starting small also means that the development of the project is not reliant on a large budget allocation.

Take a micro-lending approach to spread the cost of the project among those units which will benefit, and build a sense of ownership in the development of these spaces. What do I mean?

- Members of your planning group can pitch the design to different campus leaders and solicit small monetary contributions from their budgets to buy things like paint, carpet, and lights.
- You can partner with Facility Management and ask them to donate the labor of the painters, carpenters, and electricians to install the material that you buy.
- If your budget is still tight, you can purchase gently used furniture from local furniture liquidators.

After you create the space, remember to assess how it performs in comparison to your original plan. Assessment methods can include observations, surveys and focus groups. Try to gather data like this:

- What is the frequency of use?
- Identify the types and frequency of behaviors/activities occurring in the space.

Every project is an opportunity for you to learn what went well, what did not go well and what could be improved upon the next time.

Once you create a few spaces and notch some quick wins, you can start to think big. Since learning happens everywhere, we need informal learning spaces everywhere.

- Create a plan for an ecosystem of these spaces that will complement the ecosystem of formal learning spaces.
- Implement a variety of different informal learning spaces in existing campus buildings.
- Advocate for these spaces to be programmed into all new buildings.
- Create outdoor spaces.
- The list goes on . . .

The most important thing is to start small, but to do something. Creating even the smallest informal learning space can make a difference to students.

Your first intervention is a pilot, an experiment that isn't meant to be perfect. Once your pilot project is up and running, assess it and identify successes and mistakes. Take those lessons learned and incorporate them into the next informal learning space project. It is an iterative process. And don't forget to involve students – they have wonderful ideas!

