

CAMPUSES AS ECOSYSTEMS OF OFFICES, LABS, CLASSROOMS, AND SO MUCH MORE

Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons — Georgia Institute of Technology

For high school students aspiring a college education, making visits to multiple campuses has become a rite of passage. Here they encounter beautiful student centers—with all the bells and whistles. They might walk through the latest and greatest classroom building, with a newly renovated auditorium, maybe a really cool robotics lab. They explore a new venue for athletics. All this might occur while walking through a lush landscape filled with mature trees, works of art, places to sit and congregate, and paths on which to ride a bike or an e-Scooter.

Many campuses have attained arboretum status or have been recognized by the Arbor Day Foundation's Tree Campus USA program. Many campuses have LEED certified buildings where energy performance and environmental concerns are addressed and debated; others have historic buildings with rich histories that served previous generations of students. Some campuses have public art, while others are located in urban or rural communities.

What these students will probably not see are the insides of an office— either administrators, faculty, or staff. Even though there is more space dedicated to offices than to classrooms and research, it is highly unlikely that prospective students will ever see the inside of an office, either a faculty office or administrator office. And when they eventually enroll in a university, spending anytime in an office is highly unlikely for a majority of students.

Why is that? Why does it matter? How is this myriad of environments and resources being used to expand teaching and learning opportunities for faculty and students, regardless of the area of study?

Colleges and universities need to think differently about campuses; campuses should be considered as an ecosystem for learning. Although I am speaking from my experience at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), I am speaking to leaders and planners at institutions of all sizes, missions, and context.

We all need to think much more holistically about the ecosystems that currently exist and how they can be leveraged to a much greater degree than they are today. We need to think about this in the context of ever rising tuitions and costs of higher education.

For example, on two recent projects at Georgia Tech, we changed the way we plan and design office space. Instead of the traditional 80% enclosed offices and 20% open office work environment, we flipped the paradigm to be 80% open offices and only 20% enclosed offices. To make this work, we created various size meeting rooms for small, medium and large meetings, rather than having private meeting rooms in every enclosed office which are seldom occupied more than 10-20 hours/ week. By changing the paradigm, we were able to increase occupant density (less square feet/person) which increases opportunities for impromptu conversations and ideally, new academic and research interdisciplinary collaborations.

I am proposing that campus leaders need to examine their investment in creation, operations, and maintenance of buildings and landscapes – the entire campus ecosystem, together with transportation networks and utility infrastructures that support these investments. Giving attention to the campus as an ecosystem requires that we incorporate attention to the experience of administrators, staff, and faculty in the offices we plan for them, just as we give attention to the experience of learners in the spaces we plan for them.

I propose we give attention to an over-looked part of the ecosystem: what might be called academic and administrative spaces—those for senior administrators and staff serving students and campus operations, those for departmental and disciplinary faculty teachers, and researchers. We need to ask if we are tapping into the investments made and to be made in these kind of spaces that result in the best return over the long term.

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