

## INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN AN ERA OF DISRUPTIONS

*Inclusive teaching involves cultivating awareness of the dynamics that shape classroom experiences and impact learning. It also involves being responsive to these dynamics and intentional about using strategies, or inclusive moves, that foster a productive learning environment.”*

—The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University

All individuals—students, faculty, staff—come to campus with expectations and norms that have been cultivated in a particular community and culture. What happens in a classroom is shaped by these many identities intersecting in a new community. To enable, motivate, and inspire students to develop and succeed, it is critical to imagine and realize spaces that are inclusive, spaces in which all students feel secure, embraced within a new community, inspired to learn.

As we think about shaping the built environment, both the process of design and the power of design has a profound effect on learning and must be considered. This is particularly important in the context of shaping classrooms designed to serve inclusive teaching and learning. Attention must be given to the questions and strategies that foster such a productive learning environment.

Inclusive design strategies must be purposeful. They call for focusing on the physical aspects of the space and on the expectations and norms that individuals—particularly students—bring into these spaces. The goal of such strategies must be to create spaces that nurture a feeling of *belonging* for all.

### Visibility

Visually connecting formal and informal learning spaces and activities stimulates awareness and participation. How a classroom is configured signals to students whether the environment promotes active involvement and collaboration with peers rather than “individual-heads-down” tasks and one-directional flow of information. Equally important is visual connection to spaces that contain specialized resources required for “participatory-hands-on” learning. An integral dimension of transparency through connectivity is that it invites curiosity, expanding interest and participation of a broader community of learners. Students feel welcome.



*The Health Sciences Building at the University of Cincinnati*

The driving vision for planning the Health Sciences Building at the University of Cincinnati was that learning does not happen only in a classroom and that creating visible connections throughout entire building was imperative. Emphasis on the total environment for learning—social, academic, cultural, mental and physical—is evident in every aspect of the plan of the building.

*Individuals feel as if they 'fit' here and the natural sunlight and open spaces create a sense of well-being.* – Dean and Professor, Tina F. Whalen

## Technologies

Technologies as a tool for online learning has become a primary focus of those responsible for ensuring robust learning of all undergraduates. The impact of these tools to enhance learning is well-documented. It is now critical to begin to document the potential of technologies to advance institutional goals of equity and inclusivity. As a start, we must come to understand how the capacity of technologies to enable learning that is self-paced is an opportunity to broaden participation by providing new kinds of support to all students, no matter their background, academic preparation, or career aspiration.



*The Watt Family Innovation Center at Clemson University*

The Watt Family Innovation Center at Clemson University, completed in 2015, is technology-intensive learning environment, designed to be a driving force for change, a center for collaboration and student engagement at the University. Identifying this facility as an *innovation* center signals attention to one dimension of inclusivity—the dissolving of boundaries. Through the presence of technologies that support interactive learning, teamwork across disciplines and interacting virtually, this happens here within communities on campus and across the world. Wireless connectivity to all displays and AV resources furthers its impact as an inclusive learning environment by untethering the ability to access and share information, translate that information into action.

## **Looking Forward: Learning Environments Serving Institutional Goals for Inclusivity**

Events over the past year emphasized the need for a commitment by all to address social equity. They also heightened awareness of the potential of intentionally designed educational experience to promote

social change. This includes a shift in focus on the performative measures of student achievement and creating learning experiences for all students, who come to campus with diverse identities, representing distinctive cultures, and welcome spaces in which that diversity is recognized and celebrated.

The new Horizon Hall at George Mason University celebrates inclusivity in many ways, including but going beyond attention to what happens in a formal classroom. Opening in February 2021, the design emphasizes inclusive teaching and improved learning outcomes, with classrooms designed to be participatory and adaptable to new circumstances, accommodating methodologies evolving to meet needs of a diverse student population.



Horizon Hall, George Mason University

Important to note are the visuals: the large-scale graphics that represent the University's widely diverse community. Through major site and precinct development, outdoor teaching and learning spaces were shaped. These are highlighted with a Memorial to the Enslaved People of George Mason. The Memorial was inspired by student research and provides a more thorough perspective on the contradictory life led by George Mason, the University's namesake. It is designed as a place to reflect, share, looking to the future while honoring the past.

The design phase for Bowie State University's new Communication Arts and Humanities is underway. This project reflects lessons learned in the planning of the University's Center for Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Nursing, designed to inspire, empower and increase minority success in fields of STEM and Nursing. Bowie State, one the nation's oldest HBCU's, celebrates its identity in the CNSMN through attention to *inclusive culture*—branding and story-telling, *welcoming and creating cultural unity* and *synergetic design*—transparency that enables compelling connections.

Attention to these key features is also evident in planning for this new CNSMN Building at Bowie State.

To realize these objectives, spaces in this new Center are to:

- Be comfortable, accessible, "safe."
- Enable a variety of student interactions, including reflections and fostering learning communities
- Enable participatory learning for students—engaging with content, peers, and instructors
- Be flexible to adapt to new circumstances and meet the needs of all students.



Bowie students regularly Instagram images of the CNSMN's environmental graphics which convey identity, instill pride, and evoke action.

*What are inclusive design strategies?*

*What do inclusive design strategies entail?*

*How is inclusiveness through connectivity enhanced within the built environment?*

*How can physical spaces and amenities impact the student's perceived experience of learning, nurture a community of learners?*

*How are campuses using the challenges of COVID-19 to incorporate attention to institutional goals for inclusivity in the process of planning?*

*How has the current pandemic accelerated technology's ability to advance equity in our classrooms and connected spaces?*

*What lessons have we learned about the potential of technologies to advance institutional goals for equity and inclusivity? How have these been adapted and advanced as academics and architects address the challenges of COVID-19?*

*Are there advantages in virtual learning to broaden participation, provide more support for less-assured groups, including first-generation students and those from underrepresented communities?*

## **Impact**

The impact of active-learning pedagogies and the value of highly flexible classrooms that permit easy adaptation of evolving pedagogical practices is well-documented. From experience over the past year of planning new and repurposed spaces in the time of COVID-19, the academy has also begun documenting the value of spaces that are easy to adapt to new and changing circumstances—spaces that are flexible, visible, connected. This is an opportunity to make more deliberate shifts to learning practices and places that respond to broader questions. The many issues to be dealt with in planning—cost, setting goals for learning, leveraging the best use of technologies, breaking down silos, building new partnerships and community connections—all influence decisions that address the issue of inclusivity.