

The Foundational Questions for Planners: What Do We Want Our Learners To Be, To Become?



RESPONSES TO THOSE QUESTIONS BY ACADEMICS AND ARCHITECTS INVOLVED IN THE 2016 - 2019 LSC SERIES OF ROUNDTABLES

- To be their best self; we want our students, through their experiences and in our spaces, to become truly human.
- A librarian. By this I mean we want our students to end up designing their own learning. We want to give them the experiences of learning that get them to a point that it is a journey and along that journey they understand that learning happens everywhere, and that they are learning through being engaged in authentic practice. We want learning to be a total experience for them. We want them to have the skills to be able to seek out problems and to then to apply those skills to solve the problems. We want them to be masters of their own learning—masters and leaders.
- In thinking about becoming and thinking about spaces, I want our students not to feel so hemmed in, cloistered in their learning spaces, but rather—through their collaborations with others their thoughts are expanding, they are beginning to think outside the box, outside of the box of what they usually think about what learning is, about how and where it happens. Sometimes, perhaps more often than we think, this means being outside the classroom and then moving back and forth, inside and out.
- My vision, as an architect, is that students become open, flexible, and curious. I think that the traditional labels that we have given ourselves and that students adapt—biologist, musician, chemist, librarian—are becoming obsolete and that we are becoming people who will not be labeled.

We—us and our students—need to be able to continue to transform and change and be and become different things as we move through life. I am curious about how—if we took the labels off the spaces that we are planning, on the structures of departments and disciplines when we began thinking about learning, what would our learning spaces begin to look like? Would the spaces be different, would our students become something different? Would we be designing a different curriculum? I don't know, but this is what I am curious about when I think about what we want our students to become.

- My idea is that learning can be described by a symbolic route, perhaps a journey. That we might start with a small learning experience that is fixed, relatively small. From that particular learning experience, new worlds begin to open up and my mind becomes enlarged and porosity is moving both ways—as I am changing the world as I go through this journey into and through the world.
- My thoughts are somewhat similar, as an architect—that it is not possible to separate the learning or academic environment from the world. That it is our responsibility to create an image and a structure of a space that gives students a boost when they go out into the world, to be a part of the ongoing march of life—and perhaps rise to the top.
- Our thoughts are quite in sync. For what we are about on our campus is that learning happens on the way—not for self-improvement—but to serve in the world, that learning is for the sake of purpose and the purpose is not just general. For our campus, it is about learning that is for students a way to find their calling, which means serving their neighbor. For us in our planning—for programs as well as spaces—this requires taking advantage in our planning to open up all kinds of process questions and rethinking them based on what higher education means today. I would like to put mortar boards on the heads of my students as they move from our campus out into the world. We want our students to graduate, to persist and succeed through their undergraduate journey.



- I am also thinking about what students become through their journey of learning on our campuses—through their whole continuum of higher education, which is a cyclical and iterative process of experiences that define what they want to be, what they need to realize what they want and need to realize that becoming, the motivation to gain the grit that they need to really succeed in life. Learning should be—in part—getting feedback about what you are becoming.
- I am really interested in how higher education and the students and faculty in higher education today are part of the society we live in and how we use this position both to strengthen society and our students. How do we prepare our students to work in the world and how does this all weave together when we think about the spaces and experiences of learning?
- I am not thinking so much about what the students are to become on our campuses, in our spaces, but about the spaces in which that becoming happens. I am thinking of a place that elevates the day-to-day life of the student, that quiets the noise of the outside world and provides a sanctuary for thought, where all thought is safe, accepted and stimulated.

I think of spaces that are memorable, spaces in which you can sense the totality of human thought that preceded you, without being literally displayed, but it is somehow in the air. Most often, when graduates return to their alma mater, the experiences they had as students resonate.

- As an architect, I am sitting in this room thinking about what will be memorable about this space. Would it be that it is flexible, that the chairs can be moved? This is becoming the “vanilla” space for many campuses. Why would these be memorable? How do we create spaces that are both flexible and memorable?

My conversations with faculty with whom I am working about “favorite” spaces is that the metaphor of “home” is often used—that it is a space/place... “where I can sit with a coffee cup in my hand, comfortable in working with students, enjoying them looking comfortable in these spaces for learning.”

It is the sense of being comfortable that is the experience that I desire for my students. How do we reconcile this in our planning?” Faculty (and I) think back on their educational experiences and it is not sitting in some boring classroom with rows of tables and chairs listening to a boring lecture. What I remember are the conversations I had with my professors.

When I think about what learners are to become—I think about how spaces enable the “becoming” that we aspire for them. Then I think about how spaces enable faculty with all sorts of teaching styles to use them, spaces that enable students to gain a sense of the character and distinctiveness of their faculty, as well as of their space.

- I also think about the potential of “generic” spaces to create that sense of becoming. On my campus we are wrestling now with the emphasis on interdisciplinarity (one we all fully embrace). What is a generic interdisciplinary space or building?

Our campus cannot afford unique, individual spaces for individual disciplines which was the common practice in the past. We are conflicted with our desire to have cross disciplinary spaces with the desire of one faculty member or a set of professors who really want for students to have that “living room” experience of learning (we are a small liberal arts college). They know students could really benefit from that. The challenge is to have something that is generic enough to fit many disciplines but unique enough to give students the sense of a single discipline. This is a tension for us.



I am always thinking more about purpose when thinking about spaces. I think liberal arts colleges focus on the sense of vocation, mostly reflecting their founding histories. Whether or not they are still formally connected to a religious community, I think vocational training—the preparation to go out into the world to serve—is still very important.

Since I am in IT, what I think about and am responsible for is integrating spaces physically and digitally and I am wrestling with how to do this effectively.

- As an architect, I am conscious that the increasing competition in the world of higher education is between broadening and narrowing—about narrowing the learning experience of the student so she or he graduates as an expert able to do something specific in the world. How can the spaces we are thinking about and those we are constructing help students broaden their sense of self, gain a broader sense of the world in which they will be living and working? If we graduate people who are “broader,” we will all have a better world in which to live.

When the talk is about multidisciplinary, one discipline has to certainly be civic engagement—and I certainly think that IT has a role to play in this. These are the kind of conversations that we need to have if we are to prepare our students to enter the world tomorrow.

- I am an architect with two pre-school children and when I think about planning spaces in higher education, I start thinking about my children who will most likely be working in careers that do not even exist today. How can I prepare my children for life and how can I design for students of today?
- The word that comes to mind is resiliency—of students and of spaces. It is about teaching learners, to adapt, to be flexible, but to really follow their passions and desire. What keeps me up at night is the excitement of being an architect who is challenged with defining things like emotions, experiences, and environments when responsible for spaces that will be resilient into the future.
- Also an architect, I am sitting here and thinking that there is nothing memorable about this room except the conversations we are having. This room is nothing like a living room. This room is not flexible. I ask if this is becoming the model of the “generic” space for 21st century learners. I ask if this room gets in the way of broadening the experience of learning.
- In my work, I have become increasingly fascinated by the notions of curiosity, and connectedness, about architecture and space. I try to put myself in the spaces we are designing, or talking about designing. Would this be a space in which I would learn to solve problems of the world, problems of life, to become a person who was prepared and willing to contribute to this whole thing we call life?
- I am a librarian and I would like to pick up on the conversations about networks and connectedness that my colleagues have been talking about. They sparked my thoughts about how weird it is for students when they come to learn and pick up stuff in the library and then to go some anonymous space to connect deeply with their faculty. That is not a very inspiring journey.

I would like to add something more to the discussion about IT, about how access to online spaces, about how the uniqueness of online spaces needs to be added to discussions about connectedness and communities. I think there should be a continuity and flow and connectedness of learning that happens in all kinds of spaces.



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- I would like to build on what was said about how faculty like to work in and experience different kinds of environments, in their offices and in all sorts of different spaces. I am intrigued to talk about this as flow, about this as the ways that people pass through different kinds of spaces throughout their day, their week. As I design spaces, I am thinking about how to blend and integrate the many different kinds of faculty workspaces. I want to be sure that these different spaces become part of the experience of individual students by the end of their academic career.

This has to do with spaces that are generic, spaces that are flexible, spaces that are designed for a specific use. But it also has to do with how students and faculty interact in each of these spaces—whether serendipitous or intentionally.

- I come at this discussion from quite a different perspective. Our firm has a significant healthcare practice. We were working with a large organization in California that was trying to reduce infections and reduce mistakes, and through research our industrial designers determined that the best thing to do was to leave the patient in the bed and bring the care there. That turned out best for the patient and thus better outcomes. What if we planned spaces so that the learning was brought to the student? I don't know if this is even possible, but it is just a thought.
- What keeps me up at night, at a major research university, is the notion of a liberal arts grounding and an education that opens the mind, gives students the capacity to go—as a learner—perhaps over the course of an academic career and perhaps in life.

I wonder how the spaces we design and in which our students learn permit for both these kinds of developments. I wonder about the interactions that are necessary for spaces to enable social contact, different kinds of interactions, the broadening of horizons when students engage in different disciplines.

How do spaces permit accidents to happen socially? This gets back to earlier discussions about “journeys.” We understand that it is not possible to entirely direct the journey of our learners, but we can think about the possibility of making happy accidents (serendipitous encounters) happen that are invaluable when students sort of have less control of their destiny and encounter things that surprise them.

I also thought about spaces that enable us to go deep in a variety of ways, of the tools that allow us to play, experiment, go deep in reflection, work in different kinds of groups to engage in deeper thinking.

- I would like to go deeper into the discussion about the evidence of what systematically creates the kind of “making of meaning” in a way that what students are learning in one space is transferable to other learning experiences and environments. I think this evidence could be of value as we are drawn into the contemporary tensions of the world and seek to give our students a moment of understanding, a sense of purpose, of mattering, of relevance. I would like to think of some kind of intentional encounters (can serendipitous encounters be intentional?) that would begin engaging them authentically and personally.

We are still building classrooms that we could have been (were) building ten years ago and then were not asking “what next?” These spaces are vanilla. They do not offer answers to a “what next” questions and, indeed, we had not been asking that then. I am confused; I don't know the answer to that question, but I know we are beginning to ask questions about how our spaces for teaching and learning are connected to our notion of civic engagement, our notion of deep learning.



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- I would like to go back a few threads in this discussion, about the “does and do not” ways that space helps or hinders learning. On my campus we are talking about active learning and came to the point of asking about active learning spaces and students with disabilities. This was a discussion about interactions in learning between the individual and the group.

At some level, it is the individual who is the student that we are focusing on, but in our conversations we are talking about community and interactions within the groups that are part of a community of learners. In this active learning classroom that we are in now, as with so many, the tables are fixed, a room to facilitates table small group discussions, but it is not easy here to have large group learning, or to easily mix things up with different groups.

- We are talking across campus about what creating a safe space means for different members of our community. There were comments about the architecture, about the physical spaces, none of which were designed in an era when inclusivity was an issue. Nor were they designed with the idea that they could be adapted, repurposed in the future in ways that respond to the need for inclusive communities that attract and are safe for a more diverse community—both in the professoriate and in the student body. We do not yet know how to ask questions about how to design a safe space.

WHAT KEEPS ME UP AT NIGHT

- How do we get diverse voices involved in planning and included in the process until we are using the spaces?
- How we can engage faculty colleagues to embrace the changes in teaching and learning that are becoming possible because of our new spaces for learning? Our students seem more enthusiastic about the new spaces, but our faculty seem to have built inertia that prevents them from taking a leap of faith. My question is: what should we have done in the planning to ensure that all faculty are willing to try new spaces and new pedagogies and do not just continue to teach as they taught in the former (old) building?
- Thinking about the future for our students.
- How can appropriately-designed and equipped spaces promote problem-oriented participatory learning for both undergraduates and graduate students—the same spaces at the same time. How can aging campuses, with buildings built in the 1950’s accommodate the high tech that is becoming integral to learning today, particularly in conjunction with new pedagogies. I start with spaces and end up with learning.
- I am thinking of learning through simulation from middle school to graduate school.
- What does a 21st century library look like? What do we do with aging facilities on our campus—not only for us, but for the communities that surround our campus in our very major city? How do we construct and reconstruct spaces so there is a two-way revolving door moving people back and forth between the urban community and our campus community?
- In renewing and repurposing our spaces, how can we be sure that technology does not become a hindrance? What is the balance of the highest tech active learning spaces with spaces with no technologies at all?



- How do we change the behavior of students as we change the spaces? This is particularly important in libraries, because people have a traditional image of what they should be doing in these spaces, particularly when they are as traditional as our spaces are. I think we need to be thinking about what we want the students to be doing in our new spaces?
- That at every stage of planning, of giving attention to spaces, we need to be asking the “why” question. When there is serious planning going on and each person wants to have his/her stake in the decisions being made without being able to explain the “why” that is the right decision. He/she just knows that that is the way that things have been done for 40 years and it has worked and he/she is not going to change.
- As a librarian, I am interested in thinking about changing the behavior of students from the experiences they have been having for years in traditional libraries. As we move toward and plan for transformative learning experiences in the libraries on our campuses for the future, we should be thinking about what makes an environment in which students feel engaged and energized.

I want them to understand these spaces as spaces in which they will be surrounded by knowledge—from the past and from today. These are spaces in which they will be able to shape knowledge for the future. The spaces we create need not only to look different, but to feel different. They need to be spaces in which they will hopefully behave differently.

- What keeps me up at night is the sometimes-misplaced idea of where students learn. Learning happens in the mind of the student. That means that the where of learning can happen in the home; it can happen anywhere, but it rarely takes place in a lecture, in a classroom designed for teaching and not for learning.

I think students can have a fantastic learning experience in an empty room with a pencil and piece of paper. I think students can have a useless learning experience in a high-tech, so-called “smart classroom.”

For me it is about culture. Certainly wonderful spaces can make it easier for a teacher to create a learning environment that makes students feel and become more engaged, but for me that is not the issue.

- As a staff member in the division, I recognize well how our spaces—built in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s—are now so very inadequate. This is on so many counts and just to mention one: those earlier spaces were designed mostly for classes of forty or fifty people, in an era of enrollments much smaller than we have now. Staff are fighting to be scheduled in one of the few large lecture halls we have on our campus. This difficulty is complicated by the desire of most of these faculty to begin to experiment new teaching approaches better suited for our students today. This is all compounded with the need for and lack of money. Right now we have some great ideas, but all seem to have a big dollar sign attached.
- Like my colleagues, I am concerned about lack of space for increased enrollments and to accommodate faculty who come to us with need for research space that we do not have. We have students sitting in hallways trying to study something. My question is, on a campus with these space limitations, how do we make better use of the space we have now?
- As an architect, I agree we should be talking about learning, then talking about where and how learning happens and then designing spaces that reflect those conversations and the decisions made during the process. That is really what I try to do in the process of crafting spaces for clients. My goal is that these spaces that begin opening up the minds of those learning in the spaces.



I am also challenged by the walls that I keep hitting, particularly with state universities, the wall of state standards, the wall of square footage, the wall of bureaucrats who cannot be convinced that there are new ways to think about how learning happens—and that there is research that documents the validity of such approaches.

But, one of the quiet issues woven through these discussions was about how long a building can be serviceable—perhaps more than 40 years. That is not possible now, if it ever was. We will be lucky if the spaces we are now planning are relevant for more than four years—the way that education is changing, technologies are changing, students are changing—and even the culture. I think the better question that we should be asking is how can we make the buildings we are now planning be flexible and adaptable as we move forward?

- I propose to disagree with the thrust of this discussion. We should right now be thinking of spaces that serve the students we have today. So I ask, how do we work right now to make this place serve the students that we now serve. This means, for a start, we should start gathering data and stories about what we do best now for the students we have now and celebrate that. We have important interactions taking place between and among faculty and students and staff.

We should also document who our students are, where they come from, where they go when they graduate. We have a remarkable record and some of it is happening in spite of quite inadequate, 50-year old spaces and some of it is happening in the spaces where modest changes have been made, precisely because we recognize what kind of spaces energize and engage students, shape collaborating teams. This is because we have been reflective about what it means to be student-centered.

- I am puzzled about the increasing push to have larger classes, given the increasing evidence about the value of students working in teams (evidence found in our data about persistence and success—as well as data from other campuses). Given our increasing enrollments, I guess the question has to be how to accommodate new pedagogies in classes with large enrollments by refitting current spaces—before somehow needed funds arrive.
- As an architect, like others here, I want to emphasize that we should be thinking about spaces that will be evolving (changing) every three, four, six, eight years—whatever. I like to think that everything that happens within a room below the ceiling is something that is flexible—this means even the walls. The building infrastructure needs to be adaptable to accommodate changes we cannot yet now imagine—changes in pedagogy, in personnel, in technologies and other instrumentation—over the life of the building. In the sciences we are now replacing or trying to revitalize Sputnik-era buildings so they have 21st century attributes. One question that should be on the table is: *What are those attributes?*
- The question that we ended with from our discussion is how, in our given attention to physical spaces, can we capitalize on our existing assets? By that we mean mostly our cultural assets—our learning culture—and our learning spaces and asking how they can define, inform, and be supportive of each other. We have a vibrant culture of learning, of teaching. We also have a vibrant student/faculty culture. This is all already in place and we have to pay attention to this as we plan for the future.
- We began with thinking what our campus would be like if we focused on the question of how learning might be transformed for our students if we gave comprehensive attention to all our spaces, including the inside and outside of buildings. We explored the power of informal spaces inside and outside of buildings. We explored the question of what might happen if all spaces for learning were created under the motto: *Learning Happens Everywhere Here.*



We focused on spaces that connect within and between buildings. We talked about spaces that were closed, that served as boundaries between disciplines and so many other things. We talked about spaces that enabled coming and going.

We thought that it took spaces like that to stimulate creativity and student imagination, important components of the kind of experiences that we hope our students' experience on our campus and take away with them when they leave the campus.

We looked at how these spaces for coming and going are important also for another "integration" reason—integrating attention to a healthy body, mind, and spirit. We are thinking about marked and unmarked pathways that wind through the campus and connect our campus community to communities beyond our boundaries. We thought about so many ways that our spaces—inside and out—could enhance the life of our learning community.

Sound is important. Sound can come from fountains inside and outside the buildings; they provide the white noise that can stimulate peaceful thinking. We could have tables sprinkled all around our campus, again welcoming to our students and to the broader community in our urban setting. Perhaps some sculptures? How about a labyrinth, modeling how medieval universities found their birth, through labyrinths which became seen as sacred spaces for meditating and reflecting? Again, learning happens everywhere—there are no boundaries.

- We talked about how epistemology—ways of knowing—enter into our curriculum, does or does not become visible in our spaces. This concept entered into our conversation because we began by talking about learning—about learning how to learn, about how faculty (professionals in their field) think about and do their work. We talked about how learning is about growing our students from being consumers of education to becoming partners in the creation of knowledge.

How can we create spaces that exalt the status of students as learners rather than demean them? Do our offices for student services resemble those public DMV offices, thus signaling to students they are not valued? Our administrative offices, such as the registrar, often have long, long lines, nothing that gives students a feeling of welcome.

Yes you can have welcoming spaces and yes, space matters. But what matters more is training faculty to become teacher-scholars, rather than teachers by default. What matters more is that faculty understand and take responsibility for engaging all students, to authentically engage all students.

It boils down to the question about our campuses wanting to participate in creating leadership from and for all American populations, rather than preparing students to be middle-managers for the neighborhood 7-11? When I speak about developing leaders, I am speaking about preparing individuals to have a positive impact on their society.

- We talked about our aspirations for active learning environments, that when we talk about them, we think they should be interdisciplinary and interconnected in ways that cross many different spectrums: students, faculty, librarians, and other people in other places across campus. It includes functionality issues; it includes the various disciplines—arts and letters, engineering, etc. Across undergraduate and graduate and across campus boundaries into the communities bordering our campus and into the communities of those who employ our students and all who are stakeholders in the future of our campus and of our students.



All of our discussions started with talking about the definition of learning, of some of the things that make for successful learning with respect to cognitive development and cognitive enhancement and the reduction of stress that actually allows for greater retention—facilitating memory.

We again asked—and ask us all—what is the kind of facility that can help eliminate or minimize stress in an academic setting?

- How do we create a learner-centered learning environment and educational experience that is inclusive, that reflects an understanding of the cognitive development of students? How do we address the issue of inclusivity by thinking about including all—students, faculty, staff, neighbors, and the regional community? How, from attending to the issue of inclusivity, can how learning happens on this campus prepare students for addressing and solving societal needs? How can all of this give our students a competitive advantage in the workplace?

SUMMARY THOUGHTS

- My take-away thought is the importance of identifying the assets of a campus in the early stages of thinking about the physical environment. Our campus has many: amazing human capital, substantive engagement with our broad community of stakeholders. A major asset is the diversity of cultures of our students and faculty. We need to focus on, define, and inform our learning culture to ensure we have a campus-wide learning culture.

What would it mean if we started all this with attention on learning: on student learning, faculty learning, and staff learning, everyone learning? What would it mean if we all spoke about integrated learning, authentic learning, etc? What would it mean if we gave attention to all kinds of spaces—campus-wide outdoor spaces, active-learning classrooms, maker spaces, social spaces—if we identify all the different kind of spaces that make up our ecosystem of learning spaces.

- I don't think we have ever sat down and made a list of all our assets. What do we say about ourselves when we prepare a proposal? What information is in the annual space analysis exercise? What other assets should we pay attention to?

Perhaps:

- We have annual inventory of faculty, who they are, where they were trained, the work that they do here.
- We have an asset of traditions that make us who we are, traditions that are changing given the changing culture. (We are also tossing out the “old junkers” of traditions that no longer reflect who we are.)
- We have some emerging work in sustainability, both for the physical plant itself, but also in faculty experience in this area.
- We have assets in community connections, not the least in the numbers of our graduates in the local workforce—at all levels. This means with schools, partnerships in community agencies, partnerships with business and industry.
- I think, after these conversations, that we have not taken advantage is our campus. There is not much that fosters a culture of collaboration or inclusivity; there is no visible intent for people from colleges across campus to be working together. Faculty by individual effort have tried to make this happen (faculty are our greatest asset), but mostly these efforts are kept as siloed secrets.

