

# Educational Equity and the Classroom: Designing Learning-Ready Spaces for All Students

The urgent and necessary US focus on student success in higher education calls for colleges and universities to close the opportunity gap for underrepresented minorities and to increase graduation rates for all students. Access to higher education may not be the problem, however. Enrollments have exponentially increased since the 1970s, but *graduation rates* have not kept up. Meanwhile state funding remains similar to its 1970s model despite the increases in student enrollments. At this pace, California in particular expects to fall short—by 1.1 million—of the number of college graduates needed to meet workforce demand in 2030.<sup>1</sup>

Campuses are implementing various strategies to address this challenge: faculty-development programs; improved course availability; strategic advising; quality first-year experiences; effective support services to achieve educational equity, directed specifically at first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students. We believe it is this last concept—*educational equity*—that needs to guide our decisions around resource allocations in support of student success, especially as they relate to capital investments such as learning spaces that will endure beyond the time these students have left the institution, either by graduation (as desired) or attrition (as feared).

We recently attended a conference focusing on next-generation learning spaces. It offered the usual visual gluttony for its participants, showcasing multi-tiered lecture halls with swivel seats and electronic displays, mosh-pits of collaborative tables surrounded by lively wheeled chairs, walls of tinted glass-writing surfaces that promised an endless canvas for creative musings, and ivy-covered buildings housing conference rooms with ceilings that would more likely be seen at MOMA or Hogwarts than a public institution of higher education. Admittedly, we were giddy.

When we probed further, however, we learned that the spaces showcased in these presentations were often representative of only 1–5 percent of their total classroom inventories. The presenters too had public-funding shortfalls and faced millions, if not billions, of dollars in deferred maintenance costs. They too wished for a more equitable educational experience for their students, in whichever learning space those students might be assigned.

Therein lies the dilemma for how best to assign scarce resources in support of student success and educational equity in an era of severe consequence. While *active learning spaces*,

with their gilded castors and high-potency panels, present the ultimate possibility for human engagement and extreme innovation, the disproportionate resources they claim can create a polarizing effect among the have-nots, who may never have the luck to be assigned to these spaces, and the want-nots, whose teaching identities or learning abilities may not align with the constructivist philosophy of learning.

To ensure equitable learning experiences, campuses can prioritize resource allocations to ensure general classrooms are *learning-ready* to support the multiple teaching identities and philosophies of faculty and the physiological, cultural, and cognitive needs of all students. We appeal to our industry partners to proactively meet universal design standards for accessibility and usability on all their products and to develop equitable pricing models to enable implementation at scale across all levels of society.

Learning-ready spaces meet a baseline set of requirements that pay particular attention to human comfort levels, enable multiple ways for instructors and students to engage with the content and express themselves, and ensure equal access to the environment for all individuals. The active learning spaces that have become so popular in recent years typically enact many of these characteristics as well; however, there is often a gap between the vast majority of general-purpose classrooms and the handful of innovative active learning spaces on most campuses. That gap can be bridged by fostering cross-campus collaboration to make pedagogically grounded, fiscally responsible decisions to ensure learning-ready spaces for all students.

## The Learning Space Rating System Framework

The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) Learning Space Rating System (LSRS) is a helpful lens for considering ways to meet students' needs, especially if we consider more deeply, and further expand, the two items that address cultural inclusiveness for all students (Section 4.7) and accessibility for people with disabilities (Section 4.8).

Section 4.7, titled *Environmental and Cultural Inclusiveness*, asks whether the “users perceive the physical environment to be welcoming, stimulating, engaging, and culturally inclusive as a setting conducive to learning.”<sup>22</sup> These conditions merit their own subcategories on the LSRS, since they contribute to a student's sense of belonging and success. To better understand students' perceptions of these terms, we surveyed a class of interior-design



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students engaged in a classroom-redesign project as part of their curriculum. They highlighted the role of natural light and colors to welcome students, textures and paint features to stimulate their senses, and ergonomic and flexible furniture to support engagement and community. Institutions can prioritize these humanistic elements to foster cultural inclusivity; as one student explained, “the aesthetic embodies the natural world, where all cultures can come together and do come together.”

If we acknowledge that in many institutions there is a need to close the gap between the majority of general-purpose classrooms and the high-end innovative active learning spaces, we can begin to be more inclusive of the whole student, including cultural backgrounds, by making the general-purpose classrooms learning-ready. Disrupting the traditional design of many general-purpose classrooms, the learning-ready classroom can provide more student agency and choice, both in terms of how students choose to be in the space and how the space supports a variety of activities. At the very least, this means including flexible furniture, chairs that roll and swivel, varying writing surfaces, calming wall colors, and access to natural light. Providing newer furniture and purposefully designed spaces shows students that they are respected and valued members of the campus community.

Section 4.8, entitled *Accessibility and Universal Design*, has the intent to “create an inclusive, safe, and accessible environment for diverse and differently abled participants.”<sup>3</sup> The benefits of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are well documented. Paul Baepler and his coauthors provide inclusive strategies for teaching in an active learning environment, and Frances Smith also offers several suggestions, such as engaging students’ prior knowledge and differing cultural orientations.<sup>4</sup> Before prior knowledge can be engaged, however, a space must be inclusive and meet the fundamental human needs of its users, as described by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. A student-centered furniture layout with seating that accommodates different body types and left- or right-handedness helps meet students’ physiological needs and contributes to a welcoming environment. Furniture that meets

ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements and is fully integrated into the classroom, rather than set apart at the side of the room or marked with a different color laminate or upholstery, helps meet students’ social needs, since it is inclusive for students with disabilities. Thoughtful design decisions and clear communication allow students with disabilities to confidently locate the accessible furniture and tools they need to experience the same sense of achievement in class activities as do their peers. For example, in a recent general-purpose classroom redesign at San Francisco State University, we included an ADA-compliant chair that had the same color upholstery as the other chairs in the room, with the active International Symbol of Accessibility on the front of the chair so that it is easily recognizable as a resource but is not singled out as different when a student is sitting in it. This low-cost decision represents a welcoming, inclusive way to build universal design into the space. Providing flexibility and choice for students within a more traditional environment is inclusive and also employs principles of UDL.

### Equitable Learning-Ready Spaces

As we look toward 2030, what will next-generation learning spaces look like? Some may resemble the tantalizing active learning spaces showcased by our colleagues, but we hope most will be spaces that meet the needs of all students, including the left-handed learners forced into right-handed desks and the wheelchair users assigned to an ADA table in the corner. For pedagogically informed teachers who use active learning techniques, learning-ready classrooms can support constructivist and connectivist pedagogies that emphasize student agency and choice, and these rooms *also* support more traditional seminar and lecture approaches to instruction. In our vision, the next generation of learning spaces will be *learning-ready* spaces that meet the basic human needs of all individuals, regardless of physiological, cultural, cognitive, pedagogical, or disciplinary difference. As the default norm, they will support educational equity for generations to come. ■

### Notes

1. Hans Johnson, Marisol Cuellar Mejia, and Sarah Bohn, “Will California Run Out of College Graduates?” *Public Policy Institute of California* (October 2015).
2. Malcolm Brown et al., *Learning Space Rating System*, version 2, EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, February 2017, p. 36.
3. Brown et al., *Learning Space Rating System*, p. 37.
4. Paul Baepler, J. D. Walker, D. Christopher Brooks, Kem Saichaie, and Christina I. Petersen, *A Guide to Teaching in the Active Learning Classroom: History, Research, and Practice* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2016); Frances G. Smith, “Analyzing a College Course That Adheres to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Framework,” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 12, no. 3 (2012).

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