

73% of Colleges Are Planning Active Learning Classrooms by 2020

Students are changing—which means courses must start changing too

BY VAWN HIMMELSBACH • JULY 17, 2019



An active learning classroom is exactly that—active. It prioritizes active learning techniques, such as group work and peer instruction, the things that are hard to do in a traditional lecture hall with rows of desks and a chalkboard at the front of the class. And the chances are that there are several probably already being developed at your institution.

Everything about active learning classrooms is purpose-built for active learning, from the design of the room to the technologies incorporated into that design, to the coursework that incorporates those technologies.

In its 2019 report, EDUCAUSE says active learning classrooms are one of its technologies to watch, with 73 percent of universities either planning or implementing active learning classrooms in 2020. This transition in higher education has “gained considerable momentum in recent years,” the authors write in the *EDUCAUSE Horizon Report: 2019 Higher Education Edition*¹. This requires investments to construct or renovate classrooms—definitely extending beyond buying a few new swivel chairs.

Why now?

The most important factor to consider with the trend towards active learning classrooms is the students themselves, and how they’re accustomed to being taught. Collaborative group projects and ongoing feedback is how many high school students define education, meaning the transition to a traditional chalk-and-talk environment is sudden and jarring for freshmen.

“The thinking about active learning, and the thinking about student engagement that started first in secondary and elementary ed, is now spreading to higher ed,” Sarah Rose Cavanaugh, author and psychology professor, [said in a recent interview with Top Hat](#).

“In their classrooms with younger students, they’re doing quizzing, they’re doing minute papers, they’re doing jigsaw techniques, and the students are also accustomed to technology being used in the classroom to facilitate all of these efforts. By the time they land in college classrooms, that’s going to be their model of what the classroom’s like, which I don’t think was always the case.”

Active learning classrooms are flexible spaces, typically with wide aisles, moveable tables (round or bean-shaped so students can face each other) and other kinds of flexible furniture. They’re also equipped with technology such as whiteboards, projection screens and microphones, and ideally feature good lighting, good acoustics and user-friendly AV options.

But it isn’t just about space—it’s about how that space is used. Swivel chairs and moveable tables can be configured (and reconfigured) to support group work, peer-to-peer learning and student-teacher interactions. This setup is also ideal for flipped classrooms where lectures take place online, on students’ own time, so a lecture hall is no longer necessary.

Active learning classrooms also take advantage of technologies that support collaboration, such as multiple projection screens for classroom presentations. Eventually, these classrooms could incorporate more advanced technologies, such as augmented and virtual reality displays.

More important than specific technology is that the pedagogical approach is redesigned along with the physical space. So far, higher-ed institutions that combine the two are seeing results.

Active learning classrooms in common practice

At the University of Minnesota, for example, the research and evaluation team at its Center for Educational Evaluation compared a chemistry course with 300-plus students taught in a traditional lecture-style classroom three times a week, to the same course, taught by the same instructor, in a smaller active learning classroom that met only once a week². There, students watched recorded lectures outside of class and worked on problem-solving in class.

“The students who met just one time a week in the active learning classroom performed as well or better on the same standardized exam as the students who spent three times as much time in the larger traditional lecture classroom,” the researchers report. This means the impact of an active learning classroom “can be multiplied at least threefold.”

In another example, the University of Central Florida (UCF) is providing its instructors with modular furniture and new technology to explore active learning classrooms. But UCF also launched a course redesign simultaneously with classroom redesign.

Thomas Cavanagh, UCF’s vice provost for digital learning, told EdSurge³ that the university is “trying to leverage the success that we’ve had in advancing blended learning to direct some additional resources over into the classroom.” So far, this approach seems to be working, and faculty are seeing improvements in learning outcomes through the use of active learning techniques.

One of the challenges faced by higher-ed institutions, however, isn’t technological or financial, according to a report⁴ by the European University Association: It’s cultural.

“Active learning casts the teacher in the role of facilitator and coach and invites the student to take responsibility for learning,” says the report. “Hence, they need to enter into a new contract and relationship and negotiate new ways of working and learning. There needs to be a cultural shift to accommodate an active learning stance and this shift is possible only in the context of nurturing and supporting learning communities for staff as well as students.”

If students are encouraged to use technology (including their own smart devices) in active learning classrooms, then professors need training and support to adapt their teaching methods to this new way of learning.

Finally, there’s a perception that active learning classrooms are more expensive than traditional classrooms—which includes more support for professors—but improved learning outcomes may outweigh any concern over cost, according to the European University Association report. “Active learning provides possibilities for both students and teachers to redefine learning in higher education and to move beyond comfort zones into collaborative learning and co-creation of knowledge.”

For an example of active learning in practice, look at Barbara White, assistant professor of nursing, who uses Top Hat as a key part of implementing active learning at Indiana University: “Top Hat flows seamlessly into my style of teaching, which is very interactive, multi-faceted and

uses many different active learning techniques.” [Read more about how she brings active learning to life here.](#)

https://tophat.com/blog/active-learning-classrooms/?utm_source=marketo&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=subscribers&utm_content=newsletter-33&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWIRBd016VmhPR1UzWWpZeCIsInQiOiJ5bWpxZnBscU1pcmx6dIBZZkNpTWhhbDJNeIBFYmduaUpuSEhxa2lcl3VrWDRNQ2JPNUN2Y0IBZzVtQnI3RFpNZlwwSk5VaGlyV2lyOGF2eGIXMVRmVjNBVTZJdzJzQWF1M0c1bUJHaFg3YkE4N3F2TGxNcnJ3ZUN6Qm1JVjBLSWFrIn0%3D