



Informal learning spaces grow more formal

How to add comfort and technology to spots where students work

By: [Matt Zalaznick](#) | July 29, 2019



The Idea Garden at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, the crown jewel of the school's informal learning spaces that, lets students test cutting-edge technology.

Students today demand more from the random campus nooks and crannies where they go to work alone or in groups. While students might put all kinds of technology on their wish lists for these spaces, there is one feature that's essential: outlets, lots and lots of outlets.

“Power is never something you can have enough of,” says [Julie Johnston](#), director of learning spaces for Indiana University.

[Laura Lucas](#), the learning spaces manager at St. Edward's University in Austin, took advantage of restaurant-style booths installed in the hallways of a historic campus building as part of its renovation. While the booths were created for student collaboration, Lucas turned them into “immersive pods” by adding wireless projection screens.

“The students found them within days of the building being opened, and they have not vacated them since,” says Lucas, who presented on informal learning spaces at [UBTech® 2019](#).

Johnston and Lucas are among the educators who are scouting out the informal learning spaces on their campuses—and then redesigning and reequipping them with more enticing furniture and cutting-edge devices.

Scouting out informal learning spaces

Lucas and her team aren't creating informal learning spaces willy-nilly. They have gathered input from students and surveyed faculty about the types of technology students need to complete today's assignments.

The team also toured campus to map the spots where students—regardless of whether there's a comfortable place to sit—like to plug in their devices and get to work. “We looked for areas where chairs found their way into a hall, and you could tell the chair didn't belong there,” Lucas says. “We looked for places where there happened to be power outlets but no seating.”

She also wants to make sure that the spaces are evenly distributed. To that end, the team has resuscitated outmoded computer labs around campus. In one underused business school lab, they found run-down furniture and also realized that students were moving the computers out of the way to use their own laptops.



A monitor with wireless projection turned this informal learning space at St. Edwards University into an immersive pod.

Lucas' team injected the lab with a lounge feel by bringing in more comfortable and movable chairs. While they also removed many of the old desktop computers, they didn't eliminate the workstations. After the redesign, the lab saw more activity, both in student numbers and in time spent there.

The project has served as a case study that Lucas has used to win support for other projects. In 2019, for example, her team installed curved monitors in a residence hall computer lab.

"We found that over time, students were coming in and using the space but they didn't need the computers," she says. "To support the use of student devices, we brought in more power and more comfortable seating."

Inspiring innovation in the Idea Garden

At Indiana, Johnston and her team are taking spaces—such as a 45-seat computer lab in the school of education—and creating informal areas where

students have more opportunities to participate in different activities. Glass-walled breakout rooms and whiteboards now allow students to work in groups of various sizes. The number of computers was reduced from 45 to eight.

An old residence hall computer lab has been transformed into a tech hub with a gaming room, collaboration booths and breakout spaces. A wall of windows provides plenty of natural light.



Indiana University's informal learning spaces allow students to participate in a range of activities.

"We had something we weren't proud of, and we had to get all stakeholders involved to discuss why weren't proud of it and why it's not our campus standard," Johnston says.

The crown jewel of the institution's informal learning spaces can be found in the recently opened Idea Garden on the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis campus. The lab's tech goes way beyond student devices. It features augmented- and virtual-reality equipment, 3D printers, and interactive monitors, among other equipment.

"We wanted to have a space that encouraged students not just to collaborate, but also to learn emerging tech in a nonthreatening environment," Johnston says.

Johnston's team plans to open an Idea Garden on the Indiana University Bloomington campus in 2020. It will be three times the size of the original.

“We have a very extensive active learning initiative,” she says. “We have a responsibility to create more ways for students to meet—with digital tools that are easy to use so they can get up and running because it’s all intuitive.”

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