



ADAPTIVE HIGHER ED

CREATING FLEXIBLE ENVIRONMENTS

by Mira Korber

In the COVID age, flexibility is not just a catchphrase for institutions of higher education, but an emergent philosophy. As universities consider their mission, budget, and student success in the semesters to come, a recurrent theme for administrators and educators is how important flexibility will be in shaping the interplay between physical space and intellectual pursuit.

The hybrid campus, mind-boggling a mere twelve months ago, is now here to stay. While the arrival of COVID brought on a sudden shock, after twenty-one months of pandemic learning, higher education administrators have had the opportunity to reflect on what has worked—and what has not. The birth of an adaptive workplace environment on university campuses is a positive development in the higher education landscape, and one that was tremendously accelerated by the pandemic.

So, what exactly does an adaptive university environment look like? In academia, “adaptive” as a term frequently refers to testing technologies with the potential to personalize learning experiences. Similarly, adaptive work environments reflect the flexibility that gives faculty, staff, and students the ability to be fully productive and engaged, in their research, teaching, and learning pursuits. Virtual collaboration tools, clear telework policies, and digital security are transforming how universities have traditionally operated. In the post-COVID world, the more nimbly universities model the hybrid nature of work, life, and learning, the more successful they will be in achieving their educational mission.



Texas A&M University, the second largest university in the United States, is striding towards the adaptive model for its nearly 70,000 students. Students, faculty, and staff are back on campus as the world of higher education forges the path forward with post-pandemic resilience strategies. The recently renovated Sterling C. Evans Library, a center for interdisciplinary in-person and hybrid learning, saw about 375,000 visitors from August to October 2021.

Bill Chollet, Director for Library IT Operations, and Stephanie Graves, Director of Learning and Outreach for the Texas A&M Libraries, offer insights into the recent library renovation project, COVID-19, and the future of active learning in a flexible future that encompasses both in-person and online activities.

The library system at Texas A&M is much more than a trove of books. Librarians and research specialists teach a robust offering of workshops related to information literacy and

research skills. Library educators collaborate with academic disciplines across the campus to bring in credit hour courses, co-curricular workshops, and symposiums. The library also offers recording spaces for professors who post asynchronous materials for their classes, as was the norm during peak COVID months.

Over the last year, it became evident that the main Texas A&M library, Sterling C. Evans Library, needed more classroom space. While the library system had recently renovated some of its learning environments, pain points around capacity and flexible, multi-use rooms still loomed large. To accommodate students and faculty, the Annex library building was set up as a temporary use space. However, with cables snaking across the floor, plastic chair mats, and tape, the stopgap classroom was hardly adaptive.

Aside from trip hazards, the room was set up as a rigid classroom, oriented in one direction, with no ability to move furniture or power supply. When it came time for renovation,

Chollet and Graves knew they had a great opportunity to address the trifecta of safety, appearance, and flexibility. SMARTdesks®, as industry leader in developing adaptive, multi-use spaces, collaborated with Texas A&M and the architect to build the flexible environment the university was looking for.

Texas A&M needed the Annex space for the new library to embody an adaptive classroom that would meet a diverse array of needs. The Annex is home to active learning, so having ergonomic, modular furniture was a core component of the project. Since active learning furniture is inherently mobile, the space also needed a flexible raised floor system to accommodate reconfiguration of the furniture elements. Raised access floors enable repositioning of power and data receptacles throughout any room without the need for electricians or core drilling. If instructors need pod arrangements for tables, outlets can be centrally grouped together, or spread across the room if tables are separated from each other.

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As Graves says, “Our learning spaces are programmed so that when we are not using them for teaching, they become computer labs open to students for study. It is a multi-use space—learning spaces plus study labs. Many of the classroom spaces on campus are locked when professors aren’t using them, but the Annex is open twenty-four hours a day, five days each week. Students might be in there at 4:00 a.m. working on group projects.”

As Chollet points out, “Previous renovations had led to inflexible system and that would require complete shutdown, bringing in electricians and carpet layers to change it. When we had the opportunity to renovate the Annex, we collectively insisted that the SMARTfloor® was what we wanted to go with.” By using configurable furniture, Texas A&M was well on its way to creating a truly adaptive space for forty-two students, relieving the capacity pain point, creating an instructional hub for research literacy skills, and supporting an improved physical environment for students to work on their assignments.

After the furniture arrived, the Texas A&M library teaching team put together a pinwheel, triangle, square, and circle. When Graves asked their preferences when thinking about active learning, they picked the triangle. The instructors preferred the triangle because there was an obvious pairing of groups of two for activities such as “think, pair, share,” and an obvious grouping of six which worked well for teaching activities. By canting the seven triangle groupings relative to each other, paths became clear for the instructors to move freely around without tripping over backpacks. The effect was a space that feels clean, natural, and adaptive to teaching and active learning.

Once the library teaching team settled on triangles for the room’s first active learning configuration, it became easy to move the floor to match. As Graves says, “We crawled around on our hands and knees and moved the flooring tiles ourselves. That was fantastic! It was so freeing to go, ‘hey, if I want it there, I can put it there and I don’t have to call anybody. I can just pick it up and move it myself.’ It’s

not something to do in between classes, but wonderful to think about that way.”

Texas A&M has not wasted any time in getting to use their new space. The IT group finished the setting up new library computers on a Monday afternoon in August, in time for the library hold an 8:00 a.m. class on Tuesday. In its first day of use, the Annex renovation was already adaptive to the university’s changing needs, even over the course of the day. In Stephanie’s words, “I went up there on Tuesday afternoon and students were all over. It’s a popular space for study.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mira Korber is a digital nomad and has served as the Chief Strategy Officer for SMARTdesks since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. SMARTdesks works hand in hand with clients to furnish safe learning spaces for in-person, hybrid, and remote learning. Mira is passionate about reforming the education system with the goal of improving learning and professional outcomes for all.



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