



SPACE *and* POWER *in the* Ivory Tower

Effective Space Management and
Decision Making

BY SANDRA BLANCHETTE, ED.D.

“In academics, space is everything,” remarked a research professor reflecting on a 37-year career in higher education. Many institutions of higher education are confronted with campus-wide complaints of lack of space or inadequate space for classrooms, research, laboratories, offices, social interaction, and innovation. Further study indicates that many of the problems associated with space are related to inefficient use of space and cultural perceptions related to the meaning of space.

At a time when there are enormous economic pressures on campuses to use resources effectively, space being one of these resources, the academic culture of shared governance, with its fragmented roles for decision making, presents additional challenges. These roles are fragmented due to independent faculty and administrative action. They are ambiguous due to the unclear lines of authority of the various bodies that constitute the shared governance system, including faculty senates, faculty unions, administrative-faculty committees, and administrative committees.

Based on the author’s study of three institutions driven by the research question—How are decisions made about space management issues in public higher education, and how are they related to changing values and priorities, educational effectiveness, and institutional mission fulfillment?—the purpose of this article is to show how public higher education institutions address space management issues related to the allocation, utilization, and renovation of existing campus space.

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

The individual case studies revealed different primary space management challenges on each campus. One campus had a *quality* of space problem that resulted in space that was not functionally adequate for its intended use. Another had a *location* of space problem, where related units were scattered around campus or were not located in the academic core. The third campus had a *quantity* of space problem caused by years of rapid enrollment growth.

Despite these core differences, each institution talked in terms of “not having enough space” even though they may have had vacant space or underutilized areas on campus. The importance of clearly identifying and accurately defining an institution’s space management challenges emerged as an important finding. Institutions that fail to recognize their primary challenge may end up pursuing unnecessary new construction projects as a solution to a non-existent problem.

For instance, institutions in this study were reluctant to move entire departments to make better use of existing space leaving

the impression that there was a space shortage, when in fact; there was adequate space, but in a different location on campus. This presented a different challenge in terms of engaging in departmental negotiation and organization culture change, which many institutions are disinclined to address. A mindset of ownership and entitlement that develops on campus makes it difficult to alter space assignments and these attitudes inhibit organizational flexibility and opportunities to accommodate uneven growth and expansion.

WHAT ARE COMMON INDICATORS OF SPACE PROBLEMS?

Quality of Space. Quality of space issues can be identified by recognizing that you do have space on campus, but it may not meet your current programmatic needs. For example, your buildings were not designed for their current use, as seen at one institution that purchased a car dealership and adapted the space to suit their needs, and another that purchased a convent and converted the dormitory rooms into office space, each with its own sink. Many older buildings do not conform to current standards, you have open space when you need private offices, you have outdated science laboratories, or you have classrooms that are not updated to address new pedagogy and technology needs.

Before you build new facilities, you need to ask questions: Can we upgrade the existing facilities? Can we relocate departments to maximize utility? Can we use creative designs to adapt unconventional space to our needs? A space planner at one institution noted that the quality of the space affected people’s attitudes and behaviors; people that were assigned to new or renovated space had positive feelings and were more interactive and welcoming. The quality of the space made them feel better about themselves, their work, and their university.

Location of Space. Perhaps you have space, but it is not where you want or need it. Departments may not have contiguous space. Space may be located outside the academic or campus core and is not near other campus services and programs. One campus was physically divided by a major roadway, resulting in an east and west campus. One side was built as the original

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campus, and the other side was viewed as less desirable expansion space consisting of pre-existing buildings.

Questions you can ask include: Can you move departments around to locate related offices in contiguous space?

Can you develop an interdisciplinary approach to space that takes advantage of a department's scattered locations?

Can you improve services to enhance perimeter locations? Can you incentivize departmental relocation to less desirable locations on campus?

One campus successfully offered a department more space than requested to relocate in a less desirable location on campus.

Quantity of Space. You have examined all your space and have determined that all available space is fully utilized and conclude that your institution has outgrown its footprint. One institution recognized that they had a surplus of classrooms during the day, but the classrooms were used to capacity during the evening hours due to the large number of part-time undergraduate and graduate students. To accommodate this imbalance, they established satellite campuses to relieve the shortage of classrooms in the evening and adopted an alternative scheduling model which utilized classrooms on weekends.

Questions you need to consider are: Have you really fully utilized

your space? Can you increase the hours and days of facility usage? Is building a new building the best alternative? Can you lease or purchase an existing building in the vicinity? Can you move some services or departments off campus to free up space? Even after examining your campus situation, you may need to engage in a combination of new construction, renovations to existing buildings, purchases of buildings, and leasing private space in the surrounding area.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

Most importantly, have you engaged the campus community in these space discussions? The stakeholders on campus may have ideas and suggestions that have not been discussed. Can departments openly discuss the space challenges and propose solutions? Can you facilitate collegial discussions with all stakeholders that result in cooperative efforts to resolve these issues? Take time to listen and promote open communication. Pay attention to the process.

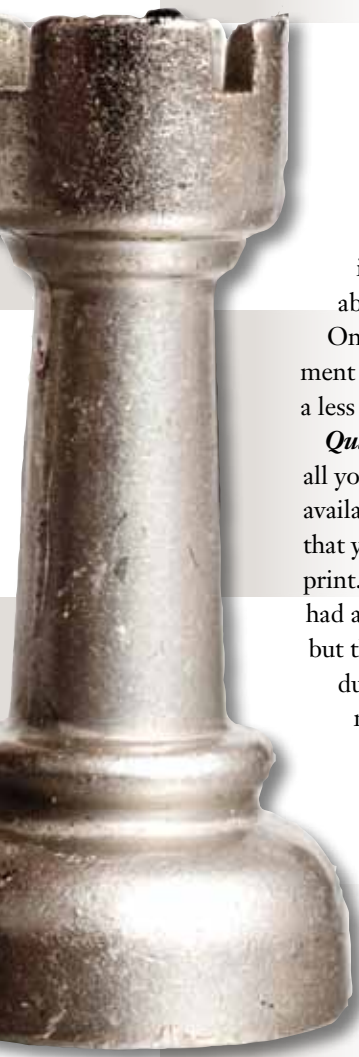
WHAT'S THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS?

Once you have a better understanding of your space-related challenges, do you have an effective and efficient process to make decisions? The findings in this study related to decision making can be translated into four interrelated fundamental components that enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of space management decision making in public higher education institutions.

1. Establish a process for requesting, reviewing, and making space-related decisions. A process will standardize procedure and make it more transparent. The process needs to be clearly identified and communicated to the campus community. The process should include criteria for evaluating requests, prioritization, communication, and implementation. The process requires requestors to fully explain their needs and provide the necessary information and rationale for the request and explain how the request aligns with the institution's mission and priorities. One institution identified both a top-down process and a bottom-up process to accommodate requests coming from the administration as well as the academic department.

2. Delegate decision-making authority. Recognize and identify the levels of authority required for different types of space related requests, typically assistant vice presidents or vice provosts were designated with space allocation responsibilities. Do not burden the highest level executives with issues related to incremental space issues and minor renovations. Developing and maintaining trust in the next level of administrators is critical; one vice president remarked: "If I didn't trust them, I wouldn't be giving them the job." Delegating authority resulted in a more open and transparent process. Identify criteria when chief executives must be consulted, such as expenditure limits, major renovations, or legal challenges.

3. Design an effective space committee. Knowledgeable committee members can identify available space based on



the requestor's needs. Determine who is best situated to make space-related decisions. What expertise do you need on the committee? On one campus, the role of the space committee was to listen, review information, and make recommendations on major space issues to the vice presidents, who then made final decisions. They served in an advisory capacity to help resolve conflicts resulting from controversial space issues. Another model was to give the space committee decision-making authority and have the vice presidents serve as an appeals committee. In an effective space committee, the members must be well informed about campus priorities and trusted to act in the best interest of the institution.

4. Collect accurate data. Both quantitative and qualitative data are necessary to effectively make space-related decisions. Maintain an accurate inventory of space and its use, and conduct annual space inventories and audits. All space modifications need to be reported to the office of space management to be entered in the master database. Numbers alone do not provide enough information; someone has to be familiar with the physical space and conduct regular inspections to evaluate usage and condition. Not all functional usage can be described by square footage. National standards and guidelines for space allocation are important for new construction, but are less relevant when applied to older buildings. One space planner noted that conducting a personal inspection of space not only enhances data collection, it helps to build a network of people knowledgeable about space in their unit. Another institution made all space-related data available online for the campus community.

CONCLUSIONS

The most pressing implication for practice is the evidence of the importance of establishing a process for space management decision making. This process needs to include stakeholders and be clearly identified and communicated to the campus community. Authority and responsibility for decision making should be delegated to administrators that are knowledgeable about space on campus and institutional priorities. Space planners need to collect and maintain accurate data based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis to make valid recommendations to the decision makers. Having designated personnel to maintain and analyze space data is important in that it frees up the time of higher level administrators and utilizes the skills and expertise of another group of professionals.

Although some campuses had detailed criteria for space committees and decision-making processes, the campus community was not always well informed or knowledgeable about either. A lack of good communication made many members of the academic community unaware of how space was really managed on campus.

Additional implications indicate that institutional priorities need to drive decision making, and individuals that bring an institutional perspective should participate at the highest level.

Campus-wide planning processes that are intended to identify priorities, such as strategic planning, master planning, and academic program planning, are often decentralized and lack integration, which will negatively impact their overall effectiveness.

When planning is integrated and well communicated, plans for expansion of programs and enrollments can be considered as they relate to space and future space needs. Educational innovation and change require infrastructure flexibility and adaptability that are both necessary to accommodate uneven growth and constant change. ☺

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