

Why Space? Why Now?

By E. Lander Medlin

Higher education has proven to be a key factor in spurring innovation and sparking our global competitiveness. Higher education is critical to fueling a country's economic engine. That most assuredly will not happen if we don't find solutions to the three big interrelated problems of cost, access, and quality—the “iron triangle.” With student loan debt approaching a trillion dollars, the cost of a degree up 115 percent since 1990, fewer students graduating from a four-year institution in six years, and employers in need of college-educated workers, these problems are real, yet remain vexing. However, they deserve our best efforts.

WHY SPACE, WHY NOW?

No other issue has such potential to transform an institution's costs than that of the policies related to effective space management and utilization. Herman A. Berliner, provost of Hofstra University, said, “As all of us look for economies that will not adversely impact the quality of education, efficient utilization of space should not be left out of the discussion.” Especially since the average space utilization rate is 40 to 50 percent; buildings operated 24/7 “just in case”; classrooms vacant on Fridays and most evenings; and office/lab allocations left unreviewed for decades.

Frankly, we know that effective space management can positively impact an institution financially, its productivity and sustainability. Keeping in mind, the *most* sustainable building is the one NEVER built! Most of the issues and challenges



confronting higher education today have ramifications for space and cannot and should not be ignored. We do so at our own peril.

Recognize that colleges and universities are intensely focused on the allocation of their endowment portfolios—for good reason. However, we need to be just as focused on the allocation of our space portfolios. In fact, the current replacement value (CRV) of our institutions' buildings and utility infrastructure is two to three times that of our collective endowment investments! Therefore, the attitude needs to be:

- *Space is valuable* – representing a vast long-term investment;
- *Space is essential* – without which higher education could not operate (even with MOOCs);
- *Space is powerful* – a tool to accomplish the institution's goals.

The benefits are numerous:

- Increased productivity and efficiency

- Improved student services
- Reduced costs
- Greater equity
- Improved sustainability

CONFLICT ON CAMPUS

Campus space is an asset and a burden; a value and a cost; quantitative in terms of dollars and qualitative in terms of its intrinsic sense of place for those who engage in it. Yet, few institutional battles can be as intense as those regarding space. Faculty and staff will argue over money; they will fight, tooth and nail, over space.

Despite this potential for conflict on campus, higher education leaders must recognize the value and cost of their space and take steps to better manage it. The beliefs, issues, and attitudes on the part of faculty, staff, and campus administrators can be a barrier, a real deterrent in preventing effective space management on many college and university campuses:

- *Space is expensive.* Both new construction (up 67 percent since 1997)

and operations costs (up half as much) place an increasing burden on college and university budgets.

- **Space is in demand.** Demand is expected to grow in the next few decades with some 23 million students crowding U.S. colleges and universities by the end of the decade.
- **Space is underutilized.** Used or not, space costs money—it's an unsustainable business model.
- **Space is poorly measured.** When it comes to the quality, functionality, and usage of actual space, the data has serious limitations. Without data...space management is strictly politics.
- **Space is poorly managed.** Governance policies are often weak, ineffective, and highly political or "allocation by politics" versus strategic need.
- **Space is "free."** That's the attitude! Space has inherent costs to the institution, no matter who bears the expense.
- **Space doesn't work.** Since half the buildings were built in the 1960s and '70s, poor design quality with little flexibility renders some of them practically useless.
- **Space can't be ignored.** Institutions need to maximize every resource available in these economically challenged times.

We need to move from viewing "space as a possession" to "space as an institutional asset" that deserves senior management attention and enterprise-wide policies. Space requires strategic thinking, hence a new vision for effective space management emphasizing the true value of space. To make better use of space, the focus should be on:

- Establishing metrics to better measure and allocate space.
- Developing effective policies, decision-making processes, and standards.
- Creating effective organizational governance structures.
- Implementing incentives to encourage smart space management.
- Designing spaces that are easy to manage.

THE ONLINE EDUCATION PLATFORM

If this argument isn't enough, we need to recognize that MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are most definitely disrupting the delivery system of higher education. New technologies are significantly lowering the costs and slowly improving the quality of the online education platform. And, most traditional colleges and universities are offering classes, even degrees, online.

Demand for new skills has reached an all-time high. People on every continent have realized that to thrive in the modern economy, they need to be able to think, reason, code and calculate at higher levels than before. (*Time* magazine article "Reinventing College," October 29, 2012, by Amanda Ripley)

At a time when the American public, in particular, is questioning the value and cost of a college degree, most colleges and universities are experimenting with more online deliveries and additional ways to enhance and enrich the campus experience. MOOCs aren't there yet for the masses, but they aren't going away either. MOOCs are a reality and gaining momentum. Arguably, it's not about online versus bricks and mortar; it's about an enriched blended environment that takes advantage of both venues. In the same *Time* magazine article, the author illuminates online offerings at their best and their worst.

Ideally, Udacity and other MOOC providers will help strip away all the distractions of higher education—the brand, the price and the facilities—and remind all of us that education is about learning. In addition to putting downward pressure on student costs, it would be nice if MOOCs put upward pressure on teaching quality.

The author closed with this take on an international MOOC student's experience:

Niazi loved MOOCs more than her own school . . . But when I asked her if she would get her degree from Udacity University, if such a thing were possible, she demurred. She had a dream, and it was made of bricks. "I would still want to go to Oxford or Stanford," she said. "I would love to really meet my teachers in person and learn with the whole class and made friends—instead of being there in spirit."

EMBRACING THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Clearly, the winds of change are upon us in ways many could not even fathom a dozen years ago. Can the current system remain in place? Should space, once allocated, generally become a "fixed" asset? Can higher education afford the luxury of convenience and tradition? We need a cultural transformation to make better use of space on campus where:

- People accept less space for better space.
- People share space with assurances they can get it back when needed.
- Facilities staff embraces a proactive, consultative role.
- Data-driven resource allocation practices are utilized.

An approach that is far more systematic and enterprise-wide. As Frances Mueller (University of Michigan) aptly stated, "Space is a critical resource, just like your institution's financial resources; it has to be managed effectively and used efficiently. It is an asset that you need to allocate in order to support short- and long-term priorities."

It's Your Choice! Remember, "The future is won by those creating the future . . . and not the ones trying to maintain the status quo." ☛

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