

Society for College and University Planning 2018-19 SCUP Fellow Research Proposal

SCUP Fellow:

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Project Title

Assessing the Impact of Active Learning Spaces on Development of Career-Ready Soft Skills

Project Description

According to the National Association for Colleges and Employers, today's employers highly rank two essential attributes that graduates need for success: problem-solving skills and ability to work in teams. Higher education institutions have adopted evidence-based pedagogical strategies to build these essential soft skills. To enhance these pedagogical paradigm shifts, campus planners, in conjunction with a suite of vital stakeholders, have redesigned campus learning spaces to optimize learning-centric methodologies that focus on developing and honing marketable, career-ready skills. These initiatives reconceive conventional 'row and column' classrooms into spaces that optimize collaborative, real world environments through use of flexible furniture and technologies. These spaces allow instructors and students to easily toggle between different teaching and learning modalities, prioritizing student-to-student interactions as opposed to traditional instructor-centric or lecture-based approaches. But what is the evidence to support that these non-traditional physical spaces enhance soft skills and career-readiness in graduates?

This project will specifically address this critical question by assessing the gains, if any, in soft skill preparation with relation to the physical attributes of learning spaces with current undergraduates and recent alumni. Surveys and interviews will be used to quantify and qualify self-reported gains in soft skill development in students and alumni that had some courses taught in our active learning spaces, as well as traditional classrooms. Although current students are often targeted in these types of assessment studies, alumni have, until now, been overlooked due to the daunting nature of contacting them and low response rates when surveys are sent. However, this cohort is missing piece in building the evidence that may support any links between learning spaces and career ready, soft skill development.

The results of this study will be presented at various conferences (e.g., SCUP, International Forum on Active Learning Classrooms) and a manuscript for peer-review publication will be prepared. This study may result in the evidence to support many institutions' missions that are centered on imparting graduates with the essential soft skills needed for success and career readiness in today's global marketplace. This study is one of the few known to specially target alumni to provide insight and gather potential evidence regarding the value of campus overhauls of learning spaces.

Project Goal

Campus planners have invested time and resources in designing and implementing innovative learning spaces that optimize evidence-based pedagogical approaches that embrace collaborative, real-world teaching and learning. But to what degree do these newly conceived physical spaces enhance learning and honing of soft skills that are ranked highly by today's employers? The overall goal of this research is to evaluate the gains, if any, in soft skill acquisition of current students and alumni who experienced part of their undergraduate learning within active learning spaces. Attainment of this goal will have broader impacts, as it will assist campus planners in providing the evidence and guidance in active learning space initiatives on their campuses.

My specific objectives to meet this goal are to:

1. Discuss with SCUP members and mentors the strategies on their campuses regarding current assessment practices of active learning spaces,
2. Solicit input and feedback on the design of assessment tools (e.g., surveys, interviews, etc.) from SCUP members and mentors,
3. Implement assessment tools that will support the overall research goal, and
4. Disseminate the results and conclusions to SCUP members, and other interested stakeholders.

To my knowledge, this will be the first study to utilize alumni feedback to evaluate the potential relationships between learning space and career readiness skills.

Methodology & Rationale

In the fall of 2019, our campus will celebrate the fifth year of an initiative that targets room-by-room overhauls of traditional spaces into learning environments that optimize collaborative learning. Many students who graduated since 2015 had courses within these active learning classrooms. That gives us an opportunity to conduct longitudinal surveys on the value of these spaces to recent graduates. While our institution is not unique in designing and implementing these spaces, tools for assessing the effectiveness of these spaces in development of soft skills in our alumni is lacking. This study will aim to provide that evidence.

Specifically, this study will:

1. Identify current students and alumni who have had multiple courses within active learning spaces and in traditional (row and column) classrooms,
2. Administer a post-occupancy survey that allows reflection of soft skill acquisition in both types of learning spaces,
3. Quantify any gains in soft skill acquisition between the two types of learning spaces,
4. Conduct interviews to further provide insight into the link between learning spaces and soft skills (e.g., problem solving skills and collaboration) and career readiness, and
5. Analyze these acquired data and reflections to assess whether learning space reforms correlate to enhanced soft skill development and acquisition.

Project Deliverables

As required by this fellowship, I will present my research at SCUP's annual international conference and submit a one/two-page end or project summary shared with all SCUP members. In addition, I will present the study at the International Forum on Active Learning Classrooms, a preeminent conference held biennially at the University of Minnesota. I intend to write a manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal (e.g., *Journal of Learning Spaces*, *Planning for Higher Education Journal*) that will provide tools for assessment of enhanced soft skill development in active learning spaces. Furthermore, the results will be essential for campus planners and administrators seeking evidence supporting active learning space to career readiness.

Implementation Plan and Preliminary Schedule

Quarter/Time Period	Activities
Quarter 1: July–September 2018	Work with Registrar, Alumni Affairs, and Careers Services on identifying current students and alumni to target for study. Prepare survey and interview questions from literature ¹ and guidance from SCUP mentors and other stakeholders. Prepare an application to Jefferson's IRB.
Quarter 2: October–December 2018	Administer surveys and conduct individual interviews with current students and alumni.
Quarter 3: January–March 2019	Synthesize and analyze data; identify gaps and address through further assessment tools.
Quarter 4: April–June 2019	Create presentation for SCUP national conference; write a final report; begin manuscript for potential publication.

¹Scott-Webber, Strickland, Kapitula. *Built Environments Impact Behaviors: Results of an Active Learning Post-Occupancy Evaluation*. *Planning for Higher Education Journal*. Oct-Dec 2013.

What I Hope To Learn

I have recently shifted my research interests from environmental chemistry to campus planning issues that focus on the design, implementation, and assessment of active learning spaces (see an example of a final report that I wrote in the supporting material section). This shift has coincided with my transition from being a full professor to the roles I now serve as Director of the Center for Teaching Innovation and Nexus Learning, and as Coordinator of the Active Learning Space Initiative on the East Falls campus of Jefferson (formerly Philadelphia University). While I have managed to quickly navigate campus planning initiatives involving both campus and external stakeholders, I would enhance my knowledge base, leadership and innovation skills, and strategic planning and assessment methods by interacting with SCUP members and working closely with assigned mentors. In turn, my experiences in optimizing active and collaborative teaching by implementing innovative and mindfully designed learning environments would be of value to SCUP members/community.
