Education Research

Hybrid Work Series

Flexible Workspaces in Higher Education Settings

There may have been no other setting that was more fundamentally impacted by Covid than college campuses—primarily because not only are they a center of learning, but also a residence to countless students and a workplace for large numbers of staff and professionals.

Since spring of 2020, institutions of higher learning have reimagined their physical settings as well as their curricula in myriad ways, factoring in both in-person and remote learning and working with a wide range of the "in between." But in actuality, much of this campus workplace evolution was already in place, as leadership had worked to keep up with a shifting landscape, emerging technology and the greater mobility it brought, long before the pandemic changed the work model and population density of the campus community.

To explore how increased mobility is affecting higher education environments, Knoll fielded a roundtable of leaders to share their experiences designing and implementing unassigned workspaces in campus settings. Featured panelists were Mike Carmagnola, University of Texas, Austin; Adem Gusa, Duke University; Peter Hirst, MIT Sloan School of Management; and Elliot Felix, brightspot Strategy, a Buro Happold Company. While the panelists—each of whom are in various stages of the transition to flexible spaces—acknowledged that Covid requirements in some ways escalated their plans, their longer-term efforts toward a flexible workplace have broader implications for the longevity and success of their institutions. What follows is a snapshot of their experiences and advice.

The Case for Flexible Workplaces

It's not uncommon to assume that the primary motivation of reimagining campus space is operational. For example, the physical environment may be reworked in order to optimize real estate utilization, adapt to changing needs, control costs or reduce square footage per person, explained Carolyn Cirillo, Knoll workplace research manager, who moderated the panel.

But there are often strategic reasons that organizations move to new physical-space models, she added. Goals might include accommodating a mobile workforce, driving innovation and creativity, breaking down departmental "silos" and improving employee engagement.

The reality is that offices already have high levels of mobility, as Knoll research revealed. Some 98% of workplace leaders report that their workforces move to a different location occasionally through the day.[1] In the university setting, faculty and administration are often on campus less. Coupling existing strategic plans for flexibility with the acceleration wrought by Covid means that just as in other industries, a highly mobile workforce does not require dedicated workplaces—especially in the heart of the core campus.

Additionally, as organizations around the world realized, the Covid-induced remote work experience proved that alternative work strategies can be a viable solution.

THE FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE:
TERMS TO KNOW

Flex Work
A company-implemented program where workers can choose to work at home or the office. Flex work often follows a set schedule, e.g., Tuesday/Thursdays onsite; Monday/Wednesday/Friday remote.

Free Address
An environment with no seat assignments.

Hoteling
Reservable spaces with a variety of durations—for example, a full day for a desk/table workspace; an hour for a phone room or a private meeting/"huddle" room.

Hot Desking
Non-reservable ("first come, first serve") desk sharing.

Remote Work
Working away from company offices. This can include working from home, another campus location, a coworking space or a "third space" such as a coffee shop.

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Planning Strategies for Flexible Campus Workplaces

There are many reasons for an institution of higher learning to move toward a flexible workplace model. Throughout the case studies and subsequent discussion, the panelists touched on various benefits—such as accessing and retaining talent, reclaiming underutilized space, or even fostering a university's core values like collaboration and commitment to workplace excellence. Overall, an institution's strategic plan for a flexible workplace must include an integration of the **space** and the **people**.

Space Planning on Campus. The campus experts touched on a number of common strategies that can be used across higher education institutions, including where physical assets include older buildings. Ideas included improving the utilization of space by making unused vacant space available to other employees or improving capacity by consolidating spaces. Flexible workplaces were described as "amenities" that can lower an institution's operational expenses, and in many cases, be more sustainable. This type of framework could also help with recruitment and retention by offering more choice to employees.

Bringing Change Amidst Tradition. All agreed that looking at a traditional setting with new eyes can sometimes be a "tough sell," especially in settings where traditions run deep and perception exists that change can be hard to accomplish given the diverse interests of the campus workforce. But it was clear that a well-researched approach that welcomes stakeholders into the collaborative process can turn strategy into success.

From the Front Lines: Tale of Three Campuses

To provide context to the discussion, panelists shared stories of where they were in the process of moving toward flexible campus workplaces and spaces, lessons learned and where they are headed from here.

Case Study 1

Freeing Up Academic and Research Space

University of Texas at Austin

Mike Carmagnola
Director, Project Management & Construction Services

Background

UT Austin's journey started four years ago as a campus-wide staff space allocation initiative to increase campus space for academic student and research use. Over the years, an abundance of staff space was created in the core campus. As Carmangola explained, "The idea was to move staff to the perimeter, thus reinvigorating the core." As happens on many campuses, programs change much more rapidly than space does.

Approach

The first step entailed assembling a group of consultants to engage campus stakeholders. By endeavoring to free up space and also being good stewards of the *available* space, the re-allocation initiative got campus stakeholders ready to approach space in a different manner.

After extensive review of the options, UT-A undertook several dozen projects over a multi-year period. In the case of Carmagnola's team, they had no "swing space," so they worked in the middle of major renovations. At the outset, the team had space for 60 on the floor, with 25 private offices; the new configuration included movable panels amidst space for 85 with 4 private offices, none of which are on an exterior wall.

Overall, UT-A freed up approximately 200,000 square feet of space, or approximately 1% of its 20 million square feet. And while it sounds like a small percentage, Carmagnola emphasized that it made a significant impact.

Lessons Learned

Model the Upsides: Success can sell in reticent workers—especially if leadership goes first.

Carmagnola stressed that those leading the team can be on the front lines of changing attitudes. His new flexible workspace was constructed with a conference room in the middle and his desk space around the edge. When he's not there it is available for use by other staff. "People were initially reluctant—but soon it became another resource within the space," he noted.

> "As director, I had to be first. My office was taken from the corner and put in middle, with construction around me for a year. It was a contributor to building positivity."
>
> Mike Carmagnola
> UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Productivity versus Comfort: Traditional types of furnishings may be preferred.

UT-A tried different types of common spaces, including such options as living room space with couches and easy chairs, and conference areas/movable tables. Interestingly, the most comfortable/casual spaces were the least used.

Spaces that were highly used were the workspaces with desks and tables.

Don't Forget Privacy: The workforce still needs access to "quiet time."

Also popular at UT-A were private 1-person rooms, e.g., phone rooms with a door. And while originally they had solid doors, based on user feedback they changed them out and put in glass to enable workers' colleagues to see into the space and know where they were.

What's Next?

When Covid hit campus, the approximately 10,000 campus employees who could work remotely began doing so. Looking forward, Carmangola speculates that full teams will not all come back to campus at the same time, depending on their functional work. This will likely lead to hoteling and desk-sharing by representatives from different teams on different days. "Or, there may be other groups on campus who come into our space, since we clearly don't need 85 spaces anymore." •

Case Study 2

Using Covid Learnings to Rethink the "Traditional" Campus

Duke University

Adem Gusa
Assistant Director of Planning & Design

Background

Like many in higher ed, those at Duke University left campus in spring of 2020 to finish the semester online. For fall 2020, freshmen and sophomores returned to campus dorms, while juniors and seniors were off campus in apartments that had proximity to campus.

Faculty were given the choice of in-person/socially-distant or online classes for fall. As a result, only 15% of the classes were conducted in person, despite Duke having created social distancing layouts all across campus.

Approach

Gusa noted that a key element of the planning process is considering who really has to be in person in order to perform their job function. He noted that Duke relied heavily on surveys of students, faculty and staff. They wove this information together with space usage data to help determine potential spaces that could be "freed up."

Indeed, much of Duke's 2 million+ square feet of leased off-campus space is used for non-academic roles such as administrative functions, like financial services. Freeing up some of that space would offer cost savings. In addition, moving some jobs to remote could also free up on-campus space.

When reclaiming academic space as a result of reimagining on-campus presence, Gusa cautioned planners to be aware that some of this space might be "pockets" spread over many buildings versus large contiguous spaces, which offer more options. The key is to consider how to free up large chunks of space in key buildings to "grow in place."

"As certain job classifications remain remote, it may free up pockets of space in different buildings on our main campus. But how do we free up meaningful space—large chunks that we can actually do something with?" Gusa asked. By his estimates, converting to a function-based approach could amount to up to 100,000 assignable square feet of on campus space, which would be extremely valuable space for academic program work.

Lessons Learned

According to Adem Gusa, a key part of the planning for a move to partial or full remote for some workers entails asking key questions. For example:

+ Does someone have to be working full-time on campus to justify a permanently assigned office space?
+ How much time per week will remote staff need to be on-campus? How much hoteling space is needed?
+ What locations will offer hoteling, and is it scheduled?
+ What budget should be set aside for remote staff office accommodations?

What's Next?

In looking towards the post-Covid environment, Duke is considering the possibility that certain job classifications may never come back to campus. Rather, they may work remotely permanently. This, in turn, could lead to the need for hoteling space to facilitate team collaboration. Another area to watch is the unintended consequences of dispersed remote workers and the

effect on overall teamwork and professional development and mentoring.

> **"I think back to when I started out my career, and I really can't imagine doing that from home. I learned so much from the daily interactions I had with my mentors. It's another challenge with this new normal, as certain job classifications may or may not be coming back to campus."**
>
> Adem Gusa
> DUKE UNIVERSITY

Plus, while recent online classes received positive feedback, Gusa noted that students still want social contact and engagement—making the campus setting highly valued even though the way instruction is being provided may change permanently.

Gusa cautioned about one change that can be challenging to adapt to. "There is a formality now that's required to bounce ideas off people by floating around somebody's desk," he explained. "This is especially true based on Covid changes, where staff now need to check out availability, set up Zoom calls, and the like."

Gusa concluded by noting that Duke's plans are still conceptual as they weigh various scenarios. But as they pull data together, they'll be asking tough questions and looking to obtain administrative buy-in. •

Case Study 3

Fielding a Successful Workgroup Pilot

Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management

Peter Hirst
Senior Associate Dean, Executive Education

Background

Several years ago, MIT initiated a pilot group for flexible working, headed up by Hirst, and supported by brightspot Strategy, a Buro Happold company. At the outset, they were doing flex work in an off-campus space. But once underway, the group had an opportunity to move closer to the heart of campus, where space was at a premium. At that point, the pilot team chose to put flexible work to the test. They gave up their offices and moved to a no assigned desks model.

Hirst pointed out that because his program was set up as a pilot test, they didn't have to address some of the challenges other institutions experience.

Approach

Long before Covid, there was a growing interest at MIT to see what benefits would be realized by Hirst and his team's flexible user space. The focus on the pilot's findings was not driven by efficiency questions related to space per capita or similar metrics. Rather, Hirst connected the interest to other potential outcomes—such as a flexible use of space that "also helped us break down a lot of the silos." Or in the old model, it was not uncommon for half the staff to be at work without knowing who else was at work, with everyone "stuck in their own offices in different parts of the building."

Lessons Learned

Today, Hirst's team prides itself on the fact that new MIT buildings are being designed and furnished with insights from their pilot. Among the lessons learned in the pilot:

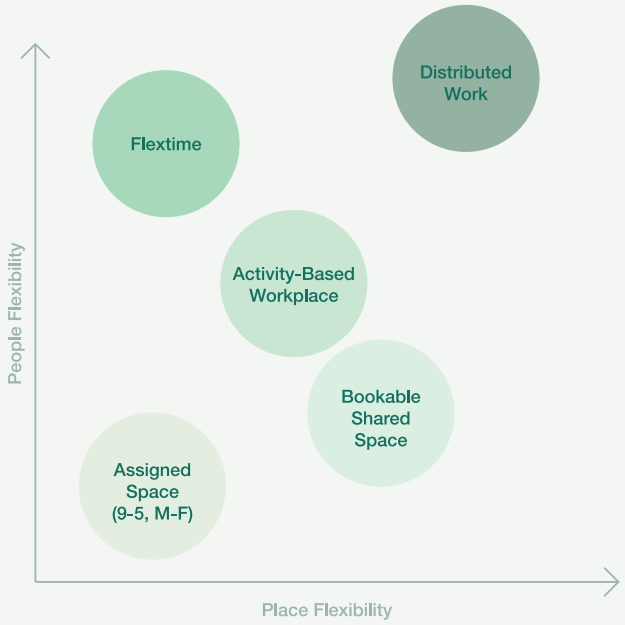
+ "The flexible workplace needs to be agile and creative and require people to operate independently but also collaborate. It's not about managing by looking over shoulders."
+ "We need to be careful not to be biased by the pandemic; I can't wait to get back to our flexible space. How do we digitally enable people to come into those flexible spaces?"
+ "We used outside consultants to help with research. But we also used insiders, getting the whole team involved in the process. As the project evolved, they had some ownership on policies and space. This was a big factor in good outcome."
+ Hirst noted that the old "private offices" actually weren't that private, as they weren't soundproof. His team found spaces allocated for private phone calls to offer huge benefit.
+ Hirst stressed the importance of keeping the internal team closely involved at the draft stage and through the rest of the process. This also fosters the teams' investment in the success of the initiative.

> **"I like to joke that it took me a decade to get a corner office and 10 minutes in a key meeting to lose it. But I did so very willingly—because we absolutely love working in this flexible workspace!"**
>
> Peter Hirst
> MIT SLOAN SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

What's Next?

Hirst attributes the MIT pilot's success to the fact that completely unassigned space supports the kind of work that the team members want to do.

Hirst pointed out that his work was very much about culture/humanism. MIT had already implemented flex working beyond that of typical academia; when the flex-office pilot team moved in, they knew that a key goal was to set up space that would make people want to come to work to be together when needed. •



Understanding the workplace continuum, and that people and place need to work in tandem, is vital when planning a flexible workspace in higher education.

Source: *brightspot Strategy, a Buro Happold company*

A Strategist's Perspective

Elliot Felix from brightspot, a Buro Happold company, provided insight on how the continuum of organizational and space flexibility drives choice and the user experience. "For the flexible workspace in higher ed, it is helpful to understand the different dimensions of flexibility," advised Felix, whose firm has partnered with more than 90 colleges and university to transform the student, faculty and staff experience. "It is about the people, but it is also about the place. When you're creating a flexible workplace, they really need to work in tandem." As an example, he discussed the traditional-to-flexible workspace continuum:

+ **Traditional 9-to-5 onsite,** where space is easy to organize/assign, but it is not very flexible or adaptable to the way that people work and live, or to accessing talent.
+ **Flex time,** whereby the institution gives people flexible working hours and spaces, with shared space that's bookable—like hoteling or hot desking.
+ **A merging of the two,** with flexibility that happens from home or a coworking space or anywhere else, enabling people to choose where and when and how they work, so they can work at their best.

Felix cautioned that workplace reimagination can be about tradeoffs. But while the workforce can be destabilized by not having a home base/predictability, it can also be empowered to work the way they want.

Lessons Learned

+ **Consider Workstyles, not just Job Functions.** According to Felix, looking beyond titles and understanding how individuals work is important for creating space. This can include such findings as how much time a certain "workstyle" spends in a fixed location, how much of that time is collaborating, etc. "Each style can have a kit of parts," he said. He noted that sometimes people who do a very different job have the same workstyle, and space can be developed accordingly. For instance, one project manager might prefer to work primarily from home while another might prefer to be on campus, and so they require different amounts and types of space.
+ **University of Minnesota: Faculty Suite Solution.** In one of brightspot's projects, UMN considered how to reuse and convert space in a cost-efficient way. One of their solutions was the creation of open shared space for faculty with a private suite. The space includes places for faculty to meet with students; faculty can both collaborate and concentrate in various available locations within the suite.
+ **Recognize Personnel Issues.** Remember that change can be difficult for some. While change of a predictable and traditional workspace and onsite schedule can be unsettling for some, panelists noted that the new plan can be a net positive. As Felix pointed out, staff becomes empowered by being able to work where and how they want.

> "The goal of a flexible workplace is to enable people to choose where and when and how they work—so that they can work at their best. "With flex time and space, performance is measured by getting things done and hitting metrics, not by still being at your desk at 5:30."
>
> Elliot Felix
> BRIGHTSPOT STRATEGY, A BURO HAPPOLD COMPANY

Converting to Flexible Workspaces Offers Some Challenges

While the panelists had all experienced—or are in the process of creating—success via their own strategic workplace plans, none would suggest that there aren't challenges to be faced. These could include:

Culture. Hirst noted some skepticism about his MIT pilot among employees who hesitated to relinquish traditional private offices. But he added that it's also about the culture that you want to create to support the organization. This is particularly relevant in academia, where being agile, innovative and creative is possible when people operate both independently and collaboratively with a goal-oriented approach.

Leadership. Another caution is to not discount the importance of getting the "buy-in" from campus stakeholders, whether faculty or administrative staff. As Felix noted, "styles won't miraculously change" with a new approach. With new norms and protocols, managers need to work differently. But once changes are succeeding, stakeholders become excited and momentum will build.

Financial burden. It can also be expensive to undertake physical reconfiguring as well as setting up the personnel procedures to integrate onsite, partially remote and fully remote workers.

Reallocation. Reimagining space might include moving from traditional classrooms and lecture halls to spaces designed for use as studios for live remote learning or videotaped lectures/pre-recorded podcasts as moderator Carolyn Cirillo of Knoll reported. These changes to the physical plant typically have to occur within the finite real estate of the existing campus infrastructure.

BUILDING CONSENSUS

For higher education planners who aren't as far along in the process, the panelists stressed that involving campus stakeholders all along the way can help secure their support of and investment in the supporting change. According to expert Elliot Felix, focusing on "sellable" business aspects can help pave the way to engaging the broader workplace community and leadership.

Key benefits for flexible workplaces include:

+ Future capital and operational cost savings
+ Future-proofing the workplace
+ Investing in people and their producity
+ Supporting future workstyles

Quick Tips for Getting Started

The panelists concurred that reimagining the workplace is about giving people more choice, flexibility, satisfaction and engagement. Wherever an institution might be in their journey, there were key recommendations for how to go about rolling out a flexible workplace in a place of higher education.

+ Start with a discovery phase. Identifying the people and places involved; assess needs in terms of space, IT and HR, such as surveys and space usage data used at Duke.
+ Create a draft design. This is a key time for getting feedback, making adjustments, and obtaining buy–in, such as MIT's focus on keeping the internal team closely involved throughout the process.
+ Develop the space. This includes everything from building out the equipment and modular/flexible spaces to creating the related HR policies for occupancy, booking, etc.
+ Support the people. Felix notes that it will be critical to equip them with "the tools and training they're going to need to work differently."
+ Evaluate and refine. Once you've delivered on the concept and the construction in the first phase, look at ways to scale up in the broader on- and off-campus community.

DOING THE RESEARCH

In addition to involving external consultants and internal stakeholders, basic strategies to overcome challenges can include:

+ Outlining cost versus benefit (the "business case")
+ Field trips to see other spaces
+ Learning from peers
+ Prototyping and iterating to test ideas
+ Piloting plans
+ Recruiting people who are ready to work differently

As Knoll's "Flexible Workspaces in Higher Education Settings" forum revealed, campuses across the country are in various stages—or perhaps just considering—the move toward flexible workspaces. There is no doubt that this shift can present challenges. But as the success stories, brainstorming and conversations shared by the expert panelists showed, bringing change to institutions that are typically steeped in tradition is possible. What's more, it can lead to on- and off-campus benefits that will have a lasting impact by freeing up academic space on the core campus and supporting a collaborative workforce for the future.

A special thanks to the following individuals:

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Elliot Felix
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References

[1]Knoll (2016). Immersive Planning. https://www.knoll.com/knollnewsdetail/immersive-planning

For Further Reading

Webinar Recording
www.knoll.com/design-plan/market-focus/higher-education?pu=1356755711404

Communicating Workplace Change
www.knoll.com/knollnewsdetail/communicating-workplace-change

How to Set up a Flexible Workplace Program at Your College or University
www.brightspotstrategy.com/flexible-workplace-program-higher-education/

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Through research, Knoll explores the connection between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments.

To learn more about this topic or other research resources Knoll can provide, visit www.knoll.com/research.