Active learning spaces can be created in most areas of the campus by using flexible, durable furniture customized to the specific needs of each functional space. This will ensure that the campus becomes an active learning zone, where educators can facilitate the students’ natural desire to “power up, connect, hang out” and at the same time seamlessly engage all of the assets on campus to accomplish their educational mission.
Furniture for Active Learning

In the 1960s, a generation of Baby Boomers was encouraged to embrace cultural change with the phrase “turn on, tune in, drop out.” Forty years later, changes in technology and cultural communication have altered the phrase to “power up, connect, hang out.”

Generation Y, also known as the ‘Millenials’, has grown up in a world of increasing social interaction and collaboration. It’s no longer enough for them to find a local coffee shop in order to plug into the world. Their expectation is that any environment will provide the digital and social ‘bandwidth’ they require. It’s as basic as the air they breathe and more essential than the gasoline that powers their cars. They’re always connected.

Cultural norms have allowed highly integrated methods of communication to flourish so that work and social interactions often intersect. These collaborative networks are powered by fast-moving technology, where discussion, problem solving, and everyday conversation create a new foundation for learning and societal advancement.

Teaching Styles and the Learning Environment

Against this backdrop, college and university administrators are adapting educational and classroom environments that align with these new cultural norms. At all levels of education, classroom learning is pivoting away from the lecture, a predominately ‘one way’ flow of information. Teaching and learning is pivoting toward a contemporary adaptation of the Socratic Method in which an instructor, no longer stationary, moves throughout a classroom which has been designed to facilitate active and continuous engagement between students, teacher and subject matter.

The space layout and customized furniture design plays a very important role in creating an environment which facilitates the active learning process. These must be adapted for student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction whether in the classroom, the cafeteria, the library, or even such informal learning areas such as student unions.

Today’s furniture options include technology-driven and research-based solutions for all college and university learning areas. No matter how much or how little space is available, no matter what technological functionality is needed, today’s ‘smart’ furniture is highly customizable to serve each specific need – a significant advantage for the institution, instructors, and students.
1. Classrooms

The active learning classroom is designed to foster multiple conversations, lively discussions, and develop social networks which encourage learning. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that in an active learning classroom “students learn and remember more” notes Robert Beichner, Ph.D., Alumni Distinguished Undergraduate Professor in the Physics Department and Director of the STEM Education Initiative at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh.

Many studies have reported great improvement in overall student learning within environments that feature highly active and collaborative atmospheres. In fact, a recent study at NCSU reported that test scores and class rankings were higher after moving from passive learning environments to active learning environments. In some early tests, student failure rates in active learning environments dropped by 75 percent when compared with traditional classrooms.

These environments, facilitated by functional space layout and state-of-the-art custom furniture design, allow student collaboration with peers and teacher, thus creating better understanding and learning. Beichner, who created NCSU’s Student-Centered Active Learning Environment for Undergraduate Programs (SCALE-UP) project, aims to establish a highly collaborative, hands-on, computer-rich, interactive learning environment for large-enrollment courses. To achieve this Beichner conducted in-depth studies of many aspects of this challenge, including the importance of furniture in facilitating interactive learning.

Beichner notes that the classroom is designed the same as a restaurant, with groups of students at tables. In this manner, a large-enrollment course feels small because students are working within groups at their tables. “The instructor moves around the classroom, just as a waiter does,” he says, “stopping at the tables to see what assistance is needed. He might even move a student from one table to another.”

“I knew from research that teams of three or four students maximized their learning,” says Beichner. “Yet knew I would have 100 students, six to a table (further broken into two teams of three. I started with trapezoid tables placed back to back to form a hexagon but found that this takes a lot of space in a room.”

Next, Beichner tried six-foot and seven-foot diameter tables for nine students, and nine-foot and 10-foot diameter tables for 12 students. “I found that students preferred big tables for the added space,” he observes, “but this was not efficient in terms of using space in the room. Also, there was a lot of unused space in the middle of the table, and discussion across a larger table is difficult, causing the noise level to increase.”

Because a six-foot round table is standard, Beichner hoped he could work with that, even borrowing tables from a hotel for a few years to test this theory. He ultimately decided that nine students at a six-foot table is too tight and opted for seven-foot tables spaced five feet apart.

Further, Beichner recommends molded plastic chairs, which have thin backs, over upholstered chairs which have backs that are three inches wide and take up six inches of space when placed back to back. He also recommends chairs without arms but equipped with wheels so that students can get close when collaborating and can easily move around to reconfigure the teams when necessary.
2. Dining Areas

Active and social learning doesn’t end when students leave the classroom. Indeed, because students fully expect that any environment will provide digital and social interaction, learning occurs everywhere on campus. “There are probably as many ways for active learning to occur outside the classroom as there are inside the classroom,” Beichner says.

Today’s campus dining area, where students recharge before heading off to the next assignment, can is a vital social hub. Food may be the centerpiece, but there is an opportunity to create an informal setting where learning continues individually or in groups. Beichner notes that, while he hasn’t studied active learning in dining areas, it would be much the same as the restaurant design used for the classroom, and appropriately so since it is functioning as a dining space. “A curved-edge table works better than a rectangular table,” he points out. “Flexibility is a good thing so that students can make adjustments as their needs change.” It is safe to assume that chairs with wheels, but without arms, would further enhance this flexibility and booths could be customized to create study ‘nooks’ with power and data hubs conveniently available to students in that space.
3. Libraries and Student Unions

In the active and social learning environment, library and student union spaces are natural extensions of the classroom setting. They are used for individual methods of study or to facilitate group discussions.

It’s important in these informational common areas to have the ability to push student learning in new and creative ways. The furniture and layout form important physical foundations for enhanced learning techniques. It’s the multifunctional aspect of many furniture options that allow these campus settings to be easily adapted to the many ways a library or student union may be used on any given day.

Beichner recommends strength and flexibility in library furniture, noting that, in this setting, students participate in collaborative learning without an instructor and their creativity has no boundaries.
Make your campus into an ‘active learning zone’

Active learning spaces can be created in most areas of the campus by using flexible, durable furniture customized to the specific needs of each functional space. This will ensure that the campus becomes an active learning zone, where educators can facilitate the students’ natural desire to “power up, connect, hang out” and at the same time seamlessly engage all of the assets on campus to accomplish their educational mission.

For more information or to learn how Falcon can help you with make your campus an “active learning zone”, please call (800)873-3252, or visit our website at www.falconproducts.com.