What We Observed

Gen Y and millennials love technology. And while the trend of more laptops on campus is real, only about a third of students use laptops in the classroom. Why? Too little desk space, no power access, too much to carry around and instructors' restrictions on use in class.

Computer labs are still a draw because students can access expensive, specialized software and printing is often at reduced costs or free.

These labs are morphing into media labs where sophisticated software is necessary. They must accommodate individual, dyadic and team work.

In addition to new media labs, many schools are creating small computer pods and placing them in media labs, libraries and other buildings throughout the campus.

Computer spaces for technology and users

Ever since desktop computers first arrived on campuses in the 1980s, colleges have offered dedicated computer spaces for students. Today laptops are part of most students' arsenal, smartphones pack the computing power of a laptop and wi-fi makes content available anywhere.

So what's the role of the computer lab today? It's the new media lab.

Students are drawn to media labs for several reasons.

College computers have program-specific software that's often too expensive for students to buy for their own computers. Schools also offer quality printing provided by school equipment for free or at a reduced cost to students.

Other reasons to go to the lab? They're convenient to classrooms and the library, students need to access heavy-duty computing power (e.g., to run engineering rendering software), project files are stored on the school database (e.g., large video files, art projects, etc.), and students don't always carry their laptops around because they're too heavy or cumbersome and instructors often won't allow them to be used in class.

Faculty and staff often use media labs for training on new software related to coursework or on institution-wide learning management systems (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard).

Steelcase research indicates that two types of computer spaces remain popular: 1. media labs for individual work by students, faculty and staff; and 2. computer pods dispersed in different buildings and used for planned group work and impromptu individual tasks.

Media labs/computer commons.

Media labs are typically rectangular in shape and neutral in color, just like the computers they house. Rows of side-by-side, small desks hold the computers and little else. This approach simplifies furniture specification, layout, and wiring and cabling but does little for the students who use the labs. They have to work elbow to elbow, with little privacy for what's on their screens (a commonly articulated annoyance) and little if any worksurface for other materials, books, etc.

Why not make these spaces more effective for both individual and group work? First, consider the different users who work in these labs and support their various work modes: waiting, quiet discussion and dedicated task work at the computer. Second, consider ways to allow users to be more active during computer work and thus improve their comfort and wellbeing. Third, consider ergonomics to support students who spend many hours completing their studies.

Computer pods. Computer kiosks at standing and seated heights are a common sight on campus, with students checking email, surfing the web or checking their online course sites. Yet many colleges are now finding that students also like using computers in small, seated-height stations that offer enough worksurface to spread out textbooks and notes or to work in groups when needed.

The added worksurface creates a collaborative space where two or three students can huddle together, see the computer screen and work on materials arranged before them.

Proximity is key to locating these pods. Locations in and around cafés, lobbies and entry spaces are typical because they are easily accessible for on-the-go users. Also, adding these pods to library floors designed for more social and collaborative learning activities creates spaces where students can work on the increasing number of group projects assigned to them. The use of large worksurfaces, privacy screens and monitor arms can make these pods even more effective.
The Node chair with five-star base straddles table bases and rolls easily under and around a variety of tables and table heights, making it easy to pair with existing worksurfaces. The five-star chair is height-adjustable and utilizes the Node seat shell, which was designed to provide comfort without upholstery for durability and ease of cleaning.

tips for computer pods & media labs

Computer pods and media labs are not places to warehouse computer equipment. They’re workplaces for students, faculty and staff and should be furnished appropriately. Below are a few tips to consider when designing these spaces to offer flexibility and comfort.

PEDAGOGY

1. Support individual, dyadic and team work in media labs, as well as spaces for instructor demonstration.

2. Computer pods provide the ability to transition between individual and collaborative work.

TECHNOLOGY

1. In media labs, provide a means for users to keep their computer screens private (privacy screens, monitor arms).

2. Monitor arms free up worksurface space and allow adjustment of computer screens for a diverse population.

3. Provide multiple power outlets at worksurface height for portable technology - phones, laptops, etc. – to help prevent students from unplugging other equipment to access power.

SPACE

1. Basics in media labs include adequate legroom, comfortable seating for long work sessions and worksurfaces that hold more than just a keyboard and monitor.

2. Consider benching workspaces in media labs instead of freestanding desks. They use real estate efficiently, route wires and cables, and are simple to expand or contract.

3. Students work with technology, printed materials and other students on group projects; plan pods with enough room for small groups and sufficient worksurface for a wide variety of student materials and personal items.

4. Screens between adjacent pods provide privacy and define territory.

5. Computer pods are effective when located adjacent to other work areas such as library project workspaces and lounge/collaborative areas.

6. Provide a range of choices for seated and standing postures.
Media labs

Designed for both individual and collaborative computer work, media labs let users expand the use of their space as necessary. Students can choose an individual work area or a space for team project work, or they can move easily between the two areas as their work requires. Educators can teach in these spaces and have easy access for assessment.

application ideas: media labs

These space ideas are not simply for media labs but also for computer user spaces. Computer pods can be located wherever student traffic dictates, and they help prove the concept that every space can be a learning space. Media labs/computer common spaces provide support for a variety of work modes, from waiting and reading to small discussions and, of course, dedicated work sessions with computer equipment.
Media lab/classroom
A media lab designed for technology instruction features support for digital and analog content presentation, plenty of worksurface for printed materials and comfortable ergonomic seating.

Use the eno interactive whiteboard to display digital content, annotate it on the board, save notes and instantly send content to the class.

The Train table routes power and data, supports ergonomic tools such as monitor arms and provides users with a generous worksurface.

Monitor arm provides precise height adjustment and viewing distance, thus reducing eyestrain and facilitating more comfortable posture. It also frees up space on the worksurface.

The eno flex supports long-term use and dyadic student-to-student interactions.

The Huddleboard lets users take an energizing yet comfortable walk while they work at the computer to support brain function. It’s also quiet, so it won’t disrupt others.

The Train table routes power and data, supports ergonomic tools such as monitor arms and provides users with a generous worksurface.

Ergonomic and swivel seating supports long-term use and dyadic student-to-student interactions.

Media lab/computer commons
A space-efficient plan for a media lab and/or computer commons supports a variety of work modes and postures: sitting, standing, lounging and even walking while working; software is the key here for students, along with printing services.

The lounge area has comfortable seating that supports multiple postures for improved wellbeing.

The Walkstation lets users take an energizing yet comfortable walk while they work at the computer to support brain function. It’s also quiet, so it won’t disrupt others.

FrameOne benching works in a small footprint. The integrated rail holds lighting, power outlets, screens and work tools and allows students to work alone or together.

Formal learning spaces/media lab

cheated products

Node stool..........................111
Node chair w/ five-star base........111
Train table..........................129
Airtouch adjustable table.........132

Huddleboard........................135
eno flex..............................139

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i2i....................................117
Campfire............................115
Ensa stools..........................109
Hosu.................................109
SOTO II..............................117
FrameOne........................)...130
Post and Beam......................130
Duo storage........................130
Victor II................................130
Currency..............................130
There’s a well-equipped computer lab at Central Michigan University’s academic center for its College of Health Professionals, but just as much computer work happens outside the lab in a variety of computer pods, lounge areas, group workspaces and other impromptu huddle areas. These are spaces where students can work individually or in small groups, tap the school’s wi-fi with their own technology or use school-provided computer tools.

“Our vision was to create a structure that would be flexible and inviting, foster a collaborative spirit and provide the latest tools to facilitate optimal student learning,” says Linda Seestedt-Stanford, assistant dean of health professions and the college’s project manager. “We wanted a building that would encourage active learning, whether it be faculty-to-student or peer-to-peer.”

CMU originally considered built-in furniture for computer labs and student interaction spaces. Working with Steelcase and the Detroit office of architectural firm SmithGroup, they discovered that mobility made more sense.

“What good is having a student interaction area if the students can’t move things around and make it their space? What good is it if they end up not using it?” says Seestedt-Stanford.

The three major components of the health professions programs – clinical, instructional and research – occupy building wings connected by a large central atrium designed as a communication corridor. Wi-fi, mobile seating and portable whiteboards augment the computer-friendly workspaces for students.

Off the atrium is a glass-walled computer lab with both banks of computers and 120-degree configuration computer pods for individual or small group work.

“Steelcase helped us see furniture through a different lens and discover new product options and applications that fully supported our overall goals. They helped us think through our issues in the context of their research findings and expertise,” says Seestedt-Stanford.