

# Steelcase University Learning Center

**In the knowledge economy, a corporate university can be a competitive advantage. Here's how one company designed theirs to stay on top.**

The first sign of the fun going on in the building is the little man outside the front door, leaning against a post. His right leg hangs over the edge of the concrete wall, his left bent slightly to prop up a laptop. The delighted expression of his face never changes, regardless of the weather.

Just inside the door you're surprised by another man who sits on a bench. He stares straight ahead, a thoughtful look about him. There's plenty of room next to him and you're tempted to sit, if only to get a closer look at the whimsical bronze sculpture.

But then you see the third of the "little men," as they're called, just up the slightly inclined walkway, and you're drawn further into the captivating environment of the Steelcase University Learning Center in Grand Rapids, MI.

It's one of the benchmark corporate learning facilities in the country, 63,000 square feet dedicated to learning and development, and a prime example of a how companies are leveraging knowledge to get a competitive edge in the global economy.

Most of the Fortune 1000 companies now have a corporate university, and many more are planned. By 2010, it's expected there will be more than 3,700 corporate universities in the U.S. Companies see learning environments as a key to developing specific skills employees need to reach corporate goals, react quickly to changing markets, and nurture innovation.

When Corporate University Xchange (CUX), a leading provider of corporate learning research, benchmarking, and consulting services based in New York, conducted a survey of 170 corporate universities of leading edge companies, 55% said their corporate university programs significantly improve their business performance.

Steelcase saw an opportunity in the late 90s to consolidate its learning and development activities and provide a central location for formal classes as well as an informal business site for employees. It also wanted the design of its Learning Center to demonstrate the company's research and understanding of how people learn and how space influences learning.

From the start, the company sought to set the learning curve. Steelcase teams made more than two dozen benchmarking trips to private and public universities around North America. Their key learnings reinforced Steelcase's own research into how people work and learn:

- up to 70% of learning takes place informally
- nearly 80% of innovation results from communication
- a strong technology infrastructure extends the reach of learning around the globe
- comfort and collaboration sparks creativity
- people are re-energized by natural light, greenery, and art

Progressive AE, Grand Rapids, MI, a veteran of other Steelcase projects, and Steelcase staff designers formed the architecture and design team. "It was a great collaboration," says designer Frank Graziano. "We worked as partners, did prototyping together, developed a concept classroom. It was a real life example of the research and benchmarking we'd done on how people collaborate together."

At first the company considered building a new facility, but decided to convert a former manufacturing site using integrated interior architectural, furniture, and technology products, and in the process save \$4 million compared to the original plan, as well as preserve trees and green space.

To work within and complement the plant's standard 40' X 40' structural column grid, Pathways Architectural walls are set at a 45 degree angle to create dimension and depth in the space. The factory skin was removed to expose the original rough concrete walls and the factory steel structure, and contrast those elements with Pathways walls and polished aluminum Post and Beam products used to define the learning cube within the space.

The A&D team created a welcoming and revealing entry in the face of the 30-foot high factory walls with a canopy, a gradual curving ramp, and the cast bronze little men created by sculptor Albert Guibara of California. Four more of the sculptures are placed around the Center.

"The message we wanted to send at the entry was: you're not alone," says Graziano. "So much of learning and knowledge work is about interaction, conversation, people working back and forth together. We wanted to immediately introduce that social aspect of the Learning Center, and the sculptures were just right for it."

Adds Guibara: "If you've got some art that's got a little bit of whimsy to it, the atmosphere lightens people up, makes them feel more comfortable where they're going."

The entry also quietly deals with a ten-foot change in elevation from ground level to the center's reception area. "The space welcomes everyone. Disabled or not, everyone travels the same path," says Graziano.

Standing at the reception desk, visitors enjoy views in several directions and discover a key concept of the Learning Center: an amazing range of spaces for people to meet, talk, collaborate, listen, and learn:

- 9 formal classrooms
- 10 breakout rooms
- 22 touchdown areas
- a brightly lit café
- a 3,000 sq. ft. outdoor courtyard
- numerous enclaves, conversation areas, and casual meeting spots

Every classroom is rich in technology. The Learning Center conducts virtual classroom sessions with attendees around the world, boasts a full video studio and editing suite, hangs flat screen monitors in just the right places, and provides power and data jacks practically everywhere. Yet the facility's informal collaboration spaces generate the real power here.

James Hackett, Steelcase president and CEO, says the facility supports the organization's "social networks, the ways work gets done. They feed off of each other and make connections. Linking those networks physically actually builds trust between the networks' members."

"The informal spaces really differentiate us," says George Wolfe, Ph.D., vice president of global learning & development. "Our research into the power of collaboration, especially the power of dyads –two people working together– as a source of innovation, is something we see proven every day in the collaboration spaces here. It's an environment that really inspires people."

Even the center's café supports collaboration with its mix of informal meeting options. Stools and standing height tables, side chairs and mobile tables, and lounge spaces all create spaces that encourage socialization and open communication.

The cafe also shares two glass walls with an outdoor courtyard that invites collaboration in milder weather. Suspended in the middle of the courtyard is a signature piece of art, a 12-foot high glass sculpture by the internationally renowned artist Dale Chihuly.

"The natural light from the courtyard spreads almost throughout the Learning Center," says Graziano, "and we wanted something out there that would set the place aglow. Dale had done many sculptures as chandeliers, but never one that was suspended. His sculpture just floats out there. It looks different at every time of the day."

The locations of the cafe, the coffee and juice bar, and other resources in the Learning Center, were carefully planned. "How do you allow provisions for breaks, so that restrooms, a computer for email, a place to rest, all of that is accessible?" says Graziano. "We saw in our research that five-minute breaks ended up taking much longer because people went looking for a computer or something to eat and then got lost! We put things in closer proximity, improved sight lines, and put collaboration spaces right outside the classrooms."

Many learning centers get their greatest use by white collar workers, people already attuned to lifelong learning. Steelcase encourages all employees to use the Learning Center. "64% of the employees who come through the door are manufacturing employees," says Wolfe.

Another measure of the center's success is its status as a benchmark for other corporate universities, even though it's been open since March, 2000. "We had over 300 higher education universities and training organizations come to benchmark us in less than five years," says Wolfe. "I stopped counting. I haven't seen another learning center that has the capability of our facility. There are some in the making, though."

Steelcase isn't waiting to see what's coming. It continues to push the Learning Center's limits. The latest innovation is due this spring: a 25' X 30' "classroom of the future" that will further the company's research in learning environments and test new concepts in classroom and furniture design.

The company has researched the three styles of teaching. "Informative" evokes the traditional lecture style, where students take in information with little participation. "Evaluative" teaching involves sharing and critiquing information, while "generative" teaching is a collaborative effort of teachers and students working together to generate and share ideas and information.

Different types of course material require different styles, so Steelcase designer Julie Barnhart Hoffman is designing the space to support all three styles. "What we're really doing is prototype while the users are in the space. We'll test classroom layouts, tech support, even prototype furniture. We'll also observe students and teachers using it, and over time the space and the furniture will change based on what we learn in the space."

The classroom will feature such technology products as the innovative PolyVision Thunder Virtual Flipchart System ("It's like those huge 'post-its' you put on wall, but it's a projected surface and it collects information and shares it all at once."), cordless lectern, and CopyCam whiteboard.

A breakout space formed with Pathways Post and Beam outside the classroom will be visually connected to the classroom by glass sidelights on either side of the door. Learning tools also include Huddleboard portable whiteboards, Duo storage that doubles as a collaborative worksurface, Turnstone's Pet lounge and Vecta Rocky seating, and a number of new prototype tables. "The geometry of these worksurfaces enhance collaboration in the classroom and help maximize horizontal and vertical space," says Hoffman.

In the fall, a local university will offer two undergraduate courses in the newly redesigned classroom. And when the schedule allows, Steelcase makes the Learning Center facilities available to other community organizations to use.

Meanwhile, the building buzzes daily with manufacturing employees in Kaizen sessions, managers holding strategy meetings, Steelcase dealers in product training events, and more. The Learning Center has transcended its name and become a destination for all kinds of work. It's a place where individuals and groups come to feel more comfortable with whatever they're working on. It is in fact a unique space that enriches the individual, the company, and the community.

"We broke the paradigm for corporate learning centers," says Wolfe. "This place is fun, creative, welcoming – it's an exciting place to work and learn. People just enjoy being in the environment at the Learning Center."

Now we know why that little man out front is always smiling.