

# a customer story

higher education

“Our students were running away from the building”



Northern Arizona University  
College of Business

Credits:

Carter Burgess Architects  
Walsh Bros.  
IDEO

Like most higher education institutions today, Northern Arizona University’s (NAU) College of Business was struggling to keep pace with the increasingly complex demands of diverse teaching and learning styles, ongoing changes in technology and student expectations. When plans to build a new facility were announced, administrators recognized they could use this as an opportunity to rethink how they delivered the educational experience and create a state-of-the-art academic facility that could compete for the nation’s best and brightest students, faculty and staff.

“We wanted to differentiate ourselves from other business schools by designing a building that would create a sense of community between faculty, staff and students,” explains Dean Mason Gerety. “That was our primary goal. But we didn’t really understand how to actually do this.” NAU looked to Steelcase, IDEO, a Steelcase

partner and worldwide leader in innovation and design, and Carter Burgess Architects to help them.

The team’s discoveries were alarming: students did not want to spend time in the building. In fact, they avoided it whenever possible. “They really helped us come to grips with what our students wanted,” says Dean Gerety. “Students had no reason to stay in the building – there was nowhere for them to study, collaborate with other students or faculty, or just hang out. Our students were running away from the building when they weren’t in class.”

The College of Business understood that the new facility would have to provide environments that would stimulate and support the formal, informal and social activities associated with learning.

The new LEED certified four-storey building is designed completely around the needs of the student. “In our old building,

hallways and stairways led nowhere,” explains Dean Gerety. “Staff was pigeon-holed in corners and down narrow hallways. No one ever saw each other. In this new building we have put the student in the middle of the building and built everything they need around them.”

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■ ■ ■ Dean Mason Gerety

Working with Steelcase dealer Walsh Bros., the team began to incorporate what they learned from the findings into solutions for all areas in the building:

**Classrooms.** Creating flexible environments to meet the demands of group work and different teaching styles was critical.

Classroom features include:

- all tables and chairs are on casters to allow easy grouping (Werndl Vitesse tables and ergonomic Vecta Kart stack seating)
- Tenaro II computer tables can be linked and easily manage all wiring & cabling requirements

**In-between spaces:** 30,000 sq. ft (almost one-third of the entire building) has been dedicated to student breakout spaces or “in-between spaces”. These include:

from collaborating with each other and their location made it difficult for students to find them. As a result:

- Professors are all now located on the third and fourth floors in private offices located right outside student classrooms
- Topo freestanding systems furniture by Metro, a Steelcase company, is used in the private offices (Topo was chosen for its flexibility, variety of components and high end look)
- Faculty members chose the components they wanted in their offices (bookcases, credenzas, sliding whiteboards, slatwall, meeting tables) to create their optimum working environment

natural light from entering the entire space, which was important for LEED certification)

- providing conference rooms and informal teaming spaces

The College of Business opened its doors in January 2006. And already the new facility seems to have achieved its main goal. Administrators have already seen an increase in student enrollment for the fall 2006 semester.

“It appears that the new facility is already making an impact,” says Dean Gerety. “Students are very excited about coming here.”

Far right: All classrooms were designed with tables and chairs on castors so they could be easily moved to meet different needs within the classroom environment.

Center: Topo freestanding systems furniture is used in faculty and staff offices to allow collaboration and provide an upscale working environment.



- “front porch areas” outside all classrooms (peninsula-style worksurfaces extend off eight-foot diameter cylinders to provide students a place to plug in computers, continue classroom conversations or exchange ideas)
- a variety of different informal meeting areas in hallways (all with wireless internet access) which encourage interaction (products used in these areas are Metro Bix sectional seating, Brayton Sidewalk seating, Groupwork easels to capture information, and Brayton Enea Stools and Cafe Tables)

“We are actually extending learning time before and after class by providing these areas,” says Dean Gerety.

**Faculty offices.** Inadequate and poorly designed offices were preventing faculty

- All faculty sit in Think seating, a highly-environmentally conscience ergonomic chair.

“This puts front and center our mission,” says Dean Gerety. “This space demonstrates the relationship we want between students and faculty and tells prospective faculty members what we’re all about.”

**Staff offices.** It was important to create an open, collaborative environment where staff could easily share information with each other, as well as be accessible to students. This was accomplished by:

- Designing open plan offices located outside student classrooms, using Answer systems furniture (53-inch high panels provide adequate privacy for users but do not block

And the college is ready. With current enrollment at 1650 students, the new facility has the flexibility to accommodate 2200, a goal they are confident they will meet very soon.



Steelcase products: Answer Systems furniture, Think seating.

Turnstone products: Groupwork easels.

Metro products: Topo freestanding systems furniture, Bix seating.

Vecta: Werndl Vitesse tables, Tenaro II tables, Kart seating, Derby tables.

Brayton: Sidewalk seating, Enea cafe table and stools.

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