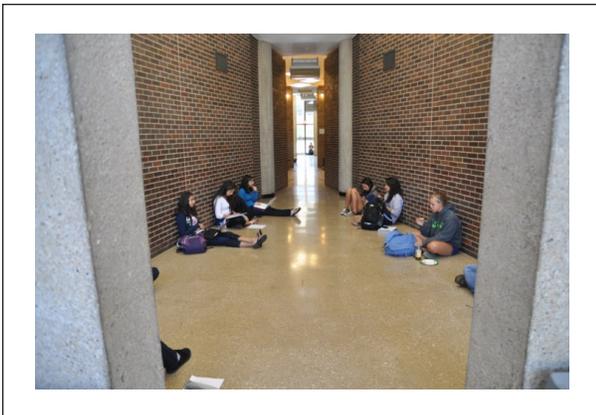# LSC Webinar Snapshot—Project Oasis: An Informal Learning Space Program *(December 2012)*

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The Context

Twelve years ago we understood that learning didn't stop at the classroom door and that our campus was not providing spaces where informal learning could occur. Our goal was to create some "between spaces" that would provide students with opportunities outside the classroom for individual reflection, community building, and peer-to-peer learning. We wanted to create colorful, visually engaging spaces, which would attract students and ended up branding them "Oases".

But, it wasn't as easy as we thought. All the space on campus was already assigned to different units and we had no budget to create these Oases; so, we had to be scrappy. The first step was to tour campus buildings and look at common space differently. Entry vestibules, lobbies, corridors, and alcoves off corridors were opportunities, as were the spaces where students were waiting and/or sitting on the floor between classes. The next step was to try and envision the potential of these spaces – could they be activated or could the equipment currently occupying them be consolidated or eliminated.

After the spaces were found, we tapped into campus resources to bring them to life. The first step was to pitch the Oasis idea to different campus leaders and solicit small monetary contributions from their budgets to buy paint, carpet, and lights. The next step was to convince the Director of Facility Management to donate the labor of the UIC painters, carpenters, and electricians to install these items. And the final step was to place gently used furniture from our surplus warehouse and from local furniture liquidators in the spaces.

The Planning Process

After creating a few successful Oases spaces, we realized that they could be even better if students were involved in the planning and design process. Over the years we used numerous engagement strategies to involve students, including photo contests, video contests, surveys, focus groups, and workshops. These strategies helped us understand where students wanted new Oases, what furniture, fixtures, and equipment they wanted, which Oases were their favorites and why these spaces were significant to their college experience. We also hired student interns to conduct observations of Oases in use to confirm the frequency of different behaviors. The byproducts of all this student involvement are Oases spaces that better meet their needs.
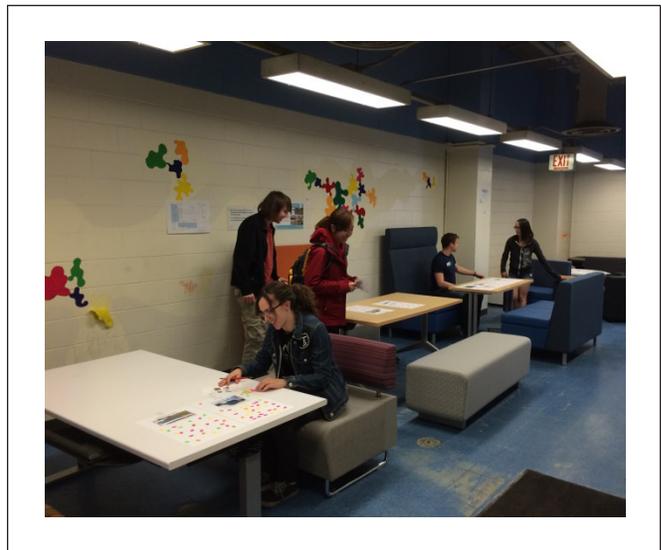

Where are we now

Project Oasis has become institutionalized and is now part of the campus culture. We still don't have a budget to create new Oases, but have found ways around that to enable the creation of new, and the refurbishing of existing, Oasis.

For example, we have secured an annual commitment from the Provost to provide matching funds for any gift to Project Oasis. The campus Development Office has also been engaged to solicit gifts, both using a tele-fund approach for smaller gifts, and a targeted appeal to major donors.

And the Deans have also leant their support. Recently, two Deans lamented the fact that one of our academic buildings was lacking an Oasis, so they made a pitch to the Provost to split the cost of a new one three ways. The Provost agreed and this Oasis is nearing completion of the design phase and about to begin construction.

Currently, there are over 30 Oases spread throughout 13 academic buildings across campus. And that number is expected to grow since the demand for these informal learning spaces remains high.

We have also partnered with our Academic Computing and Communications Center to rethink the concept of a computer lab. Two new pilot spaces, branded C-Stops, have been created based on the results of a qualitative study of students and incorporating design concepts from both Project Oasis and Apple Stores. One of the C-Stops is embedded within a new learning center that we helped create and has been an immediate success, with over 1,000 unique visits a day.

What's next

The inclusion of informal learning spaces is now part of the programming effort for all major capital projects. In fact, the Science and Engineering Lab buildings are about to undergo a major renovation and as part of this project there will be 12 new Oases created throughout the buildings. This one project will increase our number of Oases by 40%!

Students have been involved in the planning process for these Oases. We hosted a furniture mockup to gather student feedback on different types of furniture. The mockup was held at the busiest entrance to the buildings and included over 20 different furniture pieces from six different furniture manufacturers. Student feedback from the mockup was then used to design these new Oases.

Advice about first steps

- Looking back at our beginning we're reminded that is it important to start small, but do something.

- Even creating the smallest informal learning space can make a difference to students.

- Consider your first intervention a pilot or experiment that isn't meant to be perfect.

- Once your pilot project has been up and running, then assess it and identify successes and mistakes.

- Take those lessons learned and incorporate them into the next informal learning space project. It is an iterative process.

- And don't forget to involve students— they have wonderful ideas! ■

LEARNING SPACES COLLABORATORY