

case study

University of Connecticut
School of Business Graduate Learning Center



“Before this building, our facilities were ranked seventh in the country. Now, we believe we’re number one.”

Rich Dino, Associate Dean for Graduate Programs,
School of Business, University of Connecticut

Steelcase

“Faculty love it. Students think they’ve died and gone to heaven. But ultimately what the facility does is portray us as what we’ve always said we are: one of the best business schools in the country.”

“Like nothing else.”

Objectives

The University of Connecticut is the state’s flagship public university, with a business school ranked #1 among public B-schools in New England and consistently ranked as one of the best in the nation. With aspirations set even higher, the university developed plans for an experiential learning environment for graduate business studies, a place to consolidate several programs at one site, and an advanced learning facility that would be unlike any other in the country. “We wanted to clearly differentiate the educational experience and the education product, our students, coming out of the UConn School of Business,” says Rich Dino, Associate Dean for Graduate Programs.

The Graduate Learning Center in downtown Hartford would be part college, part research lab, and part working business: the first floor would house a live trading floor where a university partner would conduct real-time stock trades, and students, faculty and traders would interact, explore, and learn together.

“This was like nothing else I’ve ever worked on,” says designer Bill Clegg, principal of Schoenhardt Architecture+Interior Design in nearby Tariffville, CT. “It’s like nothing else this area has ever seen. It really sets the bar for all business schools.”

The project had one more defining characteristic: the entire project was fast-track. Renovation of 4 floors of a 40-year-old building, 40,000 square feet of new space, had to happen in just 4 months. There was no moving the deadline: the start of the school’s 2004 Fall semester.



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1 US News & World Report 2005 edition of “America’s Best Graduate Schools”

2 Forbes Magazine, October 12, 2003

Max tech.

Situation

Both education and business today rely heavily on technology, and the Graduate Learning Center, opened on schedule in August, 2004, both integrates and celebrates the latest technology. “This is a business and technology school, where students learn how to use technology, use it every day” say Clegg. “From the start, the space had to be innovative, exciting, high tech, and push the envelope on as many things as we could.”

Every room in the Center leverages technology, but the first floor Financial Accelerator screams it. Entering the space requires a retinal scan to verify entry authorization, both to protect the millions of dollars of technology, and to provide the security required by Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulations for a live trading floor. A dramatic two-story space split by a glass wall, the Financial Accelerator is a business laboratory where students, faculty and business executives work together on real-life business issues. On one side students and faculty are actively involved in research and study. On the other side of a central glass wall thrives the live trading floor.

The space feels like Wall Street set in a Star Wars movie. A 45' x 18' “big board” incorporates live video on flat screens and rear screen projection, constantly streaming real-time news and trading information. A PolyVision Impulse LTX multimedia whiteboard system digitally captures writing. Trading desks include three to five monitors, two to three computers, plus phones -on each desk.

To support the business of this space, the technology had to be easy to install, manage, and change, which called for Pathways Floors and Wiring and Pathways

Technology Wall. “We needed the capability to run a lot of cables for all that equipment. We went with Technology Wall for the look, for how sturdy it is, and how much technology it can support,” says Jerry Slabinski, design project manager at BKM Total Office in East Hartford.

“The biggest question anyone would bring up was, does Pathways Low-Profile Floor, a three-inch raised access floor, really have the capacity we need?” recalls Clegg. “Under the floor there are tons of wires down there. And it’s not as though we didn’t have a lot of technology in this building. There was plenty of room; we could have put double the amount of cabling and it still wouldn’t have been an issue.”



It's high tech, high purpose, says Dino. “We're not interested in technology for the sake of technology. What it does is enable us to create an outcome, which is to solve real business problems, create new knowledge, and effectively disseminate it.”

“The general contractor was on a tight schedule and budget, and they weren’t sure how the local inspector would react to electrical systems not installed by the dealer. But the Pathways Modular Power and Zone Cabling got us through that very well.”

Learning to be flexible.



Solution

While the second through fourth floors also integrate elaborate technology- from 20 servers and 24 wireless access points that allow students to check email by phone and voice mail online, to interactive PolyVision whiteboards in each classroom that digitally save and circulate notes —the space and its technology work together, forming a flexible learning environment than can quickly respond to changing educational needs.

Glen Richardson, executive director for the Tri-Campus School of Business, says “what I’m most pleased with in this building is the flexibility of the spaces. For example, there are a variety of different break-out rooms. Students meet in teams or small groups, the furniture’s on wheels and they can move it around inside or outside the room. Hallways have places where students can walk up and log on, or study in comfortable lounge chairs. These are great learning spaces.”

The general contractor, Konover Construction Corporation of Farmington, CT, as well as Hartford building inspectors, were unfamiliar with the Steelcase moveable walls used throughout the building and wondered about their stability. “So we did an on-site mock-up to show them,” recalls Gerry Dunleavy, Steelcase Regional Project Manager. “We had them slam the doors as hard as they could, put all their weight against it, try to make a panel of the wall move. We spent maybe a half-hour, a real hands-on demo. Finally the inspector said, “I see what you’re talking about now. He was happy.”

Meeting the schedule was another benefit of the Pathways products. Each floor, 10,000 square feet of space, was installed with Pathways Low-Profile Floor, Modular Power, and Zone Cabling—in just one week. The moveable walls were installed in another two weeks. “Three floors, five weeks. No way we could have done that with drywall and traditional wiring and cabling.”

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Typical classrooms here are not so typical. Instead of creating tiered classrooms that slope up from front to back, as most colleges do today, the Graduate Learning Center features a more effective and less costly approach: tier the furniture. Four rows of Ellipse tables (also wired for power and data) are set at four different heights. The first row of tables are 28.5" high, with each succeeding row 3" higher. The first two rows have Leap chairs, the back two rows use Leap stools, all with pneumatic height adjustment. This design was less expensive than building a tiered floor, and allowed tiered classrooms within low ceiling heights. There was one more unexpected benefit: "Students with wheelchairs aren't limited to designated areas for wheelchair access, usually in the first row of a tiered classroom. Here they can easily fit wheelchairs under classroom tables and sit where they want," says Richardson.

Centered on the front wall of each classroom is a twelve-foot interactive PolyVision Impulse LTX whiteboard system, plus another eight feet of static whiteboard. "Students started to use the interactive features right away," says Shawn Collins, account manager for PolyVision. "Before anyone had been trained on it, they were off and running." If students miss anything during class, no problem. RoomWizard web-based schedulers on the wall outside each classroom automatically take all the notes from that class and email them. It's a feature unique to RoomWizard.



"Prior to the opening," says Dino, "the Princeton Review ranked us seventh in the nation in terms of facilities. This facility is second to none in the country."

Results

Experiential learning has been a part of the school's curriculum for some time, but the Graduate Learning Center has had an immediate impact on the university's teaching capabilities. Learning and teaching are richer, more visible, and more vibrant for both faculty and students.

Potential students responded immediately. The attendance at monthly open houses by prospective applicants has more than doubled since the facility opened. Admissions in the Fall are expected to rise correspondingly, and the university now has plenty of room for new students.

The new facility works on a larger scale, too. The school's 500 (soon to be 700) students contribute to downtown Hartford's revitalization on a daily basis, adding to the economy, becoming a part of city's daily life. The UConn School of Business clearly helps retain the area's best and brightest young people, while helping those people prepare for their own futures.

"Some of the nicest compliments we've received," says Dino, "have come from other businesses, corporate partners or potential partners with the school. They say, this is not just a great academic facility, it's as good a business facility as anything we've seen." The funny part is, they also say, "when we hire your students, who's going to tell them we don't have anything like this?"

Product directory

Steelcase

Pathways® Post and Beam
I-Line Moveable Walls
Pathways® Technology Wall
Pathways® Low-Profile Floor
Pathways® Modular Power
Pathways® Zone Cabling

Ellipse® Tables
Impact™ Desks
Werndl Flip Top™ Tables by Vecta
Convene™ Tables

Company® Seating
Jersey® Seating
Leap® Seating
Think™ Seating
Cachet™ Seating
Metro Rubber Stools
Bix® Lounge, sectional seating, and benches

PolyVision Impulse™ LTX Multimedia
PolyVision Whiteboard System
Werndl Emerge™ Reception Station
PolyVision Room Wizard™

Credits

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