AUID
ASSOCIATION of UNIVERSITY INTERIOR DESIGNERS

Ask a Designer: Using Data to Drive Success

Data-driven determinations ease the ensions of change

By Sean O'Keefe

In learning, as in life, change is a critical constant. As knowledge is gained, all previously held information must also account for what is new. In learning, accounting for what is new can mean changing everything from the pedagogy to the facilities. In higher education, however, the pace, process, and performance of change can be a problem. In the 21st century, unfortunately, colleges and universities across the U.S. have struggled to keep up with the speed of change as the new normal relentlessly marches on.

The Association of University Interior Designers (AUID) provides an engaged network of more than 100 professional interior designers working at institutions of higher learning around the country. Founded in 1979, AUID facilitates the conversation on interior design for higher education from the perspective of those that do the work for the better of all. Organized around three primary objectives—Inspire, Inform, and Invest—AUID partners with *Learning By Design* to share the earned knowledge of its members through the "Ask A Designer" series.

In this issue, the conversation turns toward evidenced-based design and the need for data-driven determinations in decision-making beforehand and in measuring success post-occupancy. AUID member, Courtney Bell, a Lead Interiors Specialist at Ball State University is joined by interiors consultant, Tristen Dolores, of Space Advocate, LLC, in an exploration of the challenges of change on college campuses and how data can help.

"As an interior designer in higher education, it's easy to tell when a newly designed space has been done well, because of the way students interact with it," says Courtney Bell from the Facilities Planning and Management office at Ball State, in Muncie, IN. Founded in 1918, Ball State offers approximately 120 majors and 100 graduate degrees through seven academic colleges. Ball State's campus spans 731 acres and includes more than 7,000,000 square feet in a combined 109 buildings. "If spaces are being used as intended, then we can accurately plan for the maintenance and replacement costs in the facilities planning and management process."

Tristen Dolores agrees wholeheartedly. "It's amazing when a new space opens on a college campus. If it's great, it's populated and alive. However, if a space doesn't reflect student needs, they will soon start to destroy it," adds Tristen Dolores of Space Advocate, LLC. After spending seven years as an interior designer at Western Washington University in Bellingham, WA, Dolores founded her practice in 2022. Specializing in connecting people with their environments, Space Advocate provides space analysis, planning, and interior design services to clients across the full spectrum of learning environments. Typically, available data points of interest at universities begin with overall enrollment, program-specific enrollment, class demand, room sizes and technological capacities, student demographics, and learning styles which have been routinely tracked for decades. "In public institutions, all decisions are based on data. In space planning for academic environments, end users tend to be passionate and opinionated, so solid data is the safest thing to rely on," says Dolores.

"From a facility planning perspective, we must often explain our decisions to the university. Data helps administrators and users understand there is more to this than what the interior designer thinks looks nice," says Bell. Historically, institutions of higher learning have amassed very strong data on student enrollment, faculty retention, and class registrations. "At Ball State, as enrollment numbers come in, the facilities team meets with the registrar to look at the number of spaces needed, the learning style, and attributes of space required by each class."

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Taking this level of planning to the next step is where a resource like Space Advocates can bridge the gap between the university's understanding and a third-party designer's perspective. As an interior consultant and space planning professional, Dolores works with clients to understand what a building needs to be future-ready before design. Preplanning the building reduces the number of iterations on the designer's desk and facilitates strategic thinking on spatial programming and use.

"Increasingly, data is the connection between the university and the design team," shares Dolores. Data can ease the tensions that may exist between opposing points of view. While the university administrator may be budget conscious and the architect design-driven, facilities managers can find themselves in the middle. Data is a common denominator that professionals of any persuasion are unlikely to ignore. "Data allows interior designers and facilities planners to do their jobs without disregarding the voices of committee members whose perspectives also inform the project."

In many university settings, post-occupancy surveys are conducted to quantitatively assess the impact of change, but in many regards, there is a lack of consistency across the industry in how or what is measured. Some projects are surveyed by the universities, others by the furniture manufacturer or the architect. Without uni-

form measurement and data set tabulation analysis remains inferential. Adding to the complexity, some institutions have building assets that span centuries, making the concept of a synchronized experience of space simply impossible.

Bell and Dolores believe it is important to look beyond enrollment and class resignations, illuminating the very real need for data to be cultivated from sources of institutional knowledge. AUID members are distinct from many other design professionals in that they live the experience of the spaces they design day to day on campus.

"A university's facilities people—interior designers, custodians, staff carpenters, and such—all tend to have very long tenures, they become caretakers in a sense," says Bell. "The same building may be remodeled many times in my career here. Harnessing the institutional knowledge of these caretakers is essential to improving spaces in the next project."

A well-rounded data set, therefore, should be quantitative, experiential, and institutional. Both caution universities to avoid investing in trends without due diligence.

"Data reflects culture and as such, it has the potential to lead people in the wrong direction if is misinterpreted or we overact to it," says Dolores, who uses recent trends toward active learning in education as an example of a course correction that needs consideration. "Wisely, many universities are developing prototype spaces that students and faculty can try out before converting large volumes of space. Change is an investment, so take it slow."

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Universities, of course, are slow by nature. Unlike their corporate counterparts, college campuses are generally orchestrated by committees. Dolores and Bell both point to the power of data to elevate the voice of the interior designer in the campus conversation on future planning.

"Like learning, good design is a process," finishes Bell. "Increasingly purpose-driven, functionality-driven design is being recognized and prioritized in developing spaces on college campuses and encourages data-based collaborative decision-making across all professional dispositions." **LBD**

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