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# Designing Smart Faculty Offices

**A** capable faculty leaves quite an impact on the quality of any institution. Recruiting “great” teachers, providing them with an excellent environment, which helps them to grow and excel, and retaining the best of the best, are the key challenges before every institution. Admitting that, it is surprising that few institutions spare a thought to the planning and designing of the faculty office, or offices

New teaching methodologies and technologies may be shaping the physical constructs for the instructional space, but little progress has taken place as far as faculty office environment is concerned.

However, there are exceptions. I remember a president of a US college who specifically instructed the college’s Master Planning Faculty Steering Committee to concentrate on the faculty office, pointing out that its “where” and “how” would be one of the most crucial decisions that they would be making, leaving members stumped. The president had understood an important thumb rule—a high percentage of learning happens outside the formal confines of the classrooms, and often within the faculty office. And also, that students’ engagement with the faculty shapes futures. In fact, it is one of the most important aspects of what is considered to be the “college experience”.

### Prime Considerations

Which leads us to the argument that such faculty chambers should be ideally located in places that are accessible to students and enhances student-faculty interaction. And it should be conducive to research as far

as the faculty is concerned. The notion of the “ivory tower”, entailing that a faculty member should be able to “escape” to the confines of his office and then engage in scholarly research, is not necessarily the best idea.

On the other hand, not giving the faculty (even part-timers) any place to hang their hats will not encourage them to stay on campus before and after scheduled class time.

There are a number of conflicting objectives that arise while trying to decide where to locate faculty offices:

- Should privacy for research get priority while constructing offices, or should accessibility to students be highlighted?
- Should promoting interaction between colleagues take precedence, or should inter-departmental interaction be promoted?
- Should offices try to reduce the amount of space

for adjuncts (part-timers), or make sure professors stay on campus after hours to work with students—however expensive the exercise may turn out to be?

## Diverse Methods

Different universities approach the problem differently. Some locate department chairs and principals with respective faculty, while others locate department heads away from their faculties to maintain a hierarchy of designation. Some institutions prefer to mix faculty members, so that office suites don't become silos, encouraging interdepartmental interaction, and flexibility in assignments. Several prefer to locate offices in areas away from classrooms—on different floors, or buildings. In such cases, members share an easier support system, and this creates a faculty club atmosphere. However, on the downside, students feel intimidated to venture into these cloistered areas.

I have been to institutions where a single faculty member holding several posts has had three separate offices: one with his department, one adjacent to his research lab, and one with the entrepreneurial inter-departmental centre he was starting up. One individual with three offices on a single campus seems a bit wasteful. However, it is understandable if the science faculty want second offices, closer to the laboratories.

## Assessing Needs

When assessing campuses, we always ask users about how often a specific room is used. Utilisation is never taken at face value—whenever possible, data is collected from registrars, as well as having visual inspection carried out. (The firm checks out the amount of dust collected in the room and the date of the newspaper on the table).

But, some colleges do indulge in value engineering to locate classrooms on one side of the corridor with faculty offices directly opening on to the other side. This way, the faculty is close to their teaching posts and accessible to students. However, traffic along the corridor negates any sense of privacy.

Designing teacher clusters (comprising faculty offices) close to classrooms is one approach that works well. In the teaching cluster, faculty offices are collocated with student waiting areas, support personnel and equipment, and conferencing space. In some instances, graduate student space, team project and seminar rooms and other non-scheduled spaces can be included nearby. These clusters could be located near classrooms, or heavy activity areas, so that they are welcoming to students.

## Members Speak

Responding to a programme questionnaire, members of a faculty once admitted that they needed private offices with natural light. Their requirement list also included an office large enough to have adequate desk space, a library-cum-bookshelf space, and a conference table for students to meet them. Requirements should ideally dictate the office size.

The need for private offices for faculty should be further questioned. Private, fully-walled and secured offices are still prevalent within the academic circles, while corporations long ago



## OFFICE TALK:

Designing teacher cluster comprising faculty offices close to classrooms is an approach that works well

shifted to open workstations, or glass fronted offices.

Funnily enough, almost all faculty members are quick to tape paper to their glass partitions, if their office is indeed designed with this medium.

Campuses need to invest more in faculty resource areas—places where teachers can access conference rooms, industry journals, a lounging space and refreshments. The place should also offer “technologists”, located nearby to help the faculty with their presentation materials and delivery methodologies.

## Picture This

Consider these areas looking more like a first-class airline lounge. What does a lounge have? It has various seating areas of different types: for quiet work and for discourse. There are areas for informal chit-chat. There is access to food, access to journals, computers, restroom facilities and seminar rooms. There are assigned, secure, cubbies to leave behind resource materials and files.

Imagine that there are several spaces like this dispersed on the campus, close to classrooms and laboratories. If these existed and were distributed properly perhaps we can then re-ask all those questions that we did.

## Image Issue

How and where faculty is housed on campus is a direct reflection on a campus's culture and brand. What is the expected time and type of interaction with the institutions students? What is the expected interdisciplinary interaction? All these answers emerge when the faculty room is examined. Finally, answers regarding priority should determine the size and location of faculty offices and related support spaces. ■■■