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The Next Hot Trend On Campus: Creating Innovation

Innovation centers are transforming higher education campuses and powering the future of learning.



1/9 Colleges and universities are embracing “learning by creating,” by creating innovation centers, like this one at TCU.

BY BRAD LUKANIC
3 MINUTE READ

As tomorrow’s global citizens enter higher education with words like “make,” “hack,” and “prototype” embedded in their vocabulary, they are fueling a powerful movement toward “learning by creating.”

Faced with the shifting ambitions of students and changes in institutional funding streams, colleges and universities are embracing “learning by creating,” allowing them to leverage the traditional spirit of an educational community with students’ growing entrepreneurial focus. In response, these institutions are adopting powerful new models to erode the boundaries of historically siloed disciplinary thinking and empower new levels of discovery.

A number of colleges and universities around the world are leading the way as they introduce learning facilities billed as “innovation + incubator + maker centers.” These centers focus on multi-disciplinary inquiry that can foster partnerships with industry and fully leverage available grants and funding for research. Advancing these new models can help universities recruit fresh talent, establish new partnerships for success and promote an environment where emerging leaders can explore the complex social challenges of our time.



However, introducing an innovation center into a higher education setting isn’t as simple as pressing a button. There are three specific types of innovation centers, each with their own benefits, and academic leaders must make key strategic decisions to ensure they select a relevant and powerful model that can succeed for their own institution. Here’s a look at each model:

INNOVATION CENTERS PROMOTING MULTI-DISCIPLINARY LEARNING



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As the challenges our society faces become more complex, academic institutions are recognizing the power of crossing traditional academic lines thinking to develop relevant solutions. This recognition is triggering the creation of innovation centers that drive cross-pollination and fuse creative fields like computer science, math, design, engineering, and others to expand potential for developing new products and real-world applications. These centers are focused on accelerating discovery through problem-based, multi-disciplinary learning that addresses 21st-century challenges.

Texas Christian University (TCU) is focused on this type of innovation center with the introduction of Rees Jones Hall, an incubator facility designed to maximize social and intellectual connectivity. The building houses the [TCU IdeaFactory](#), a unit of the College of Science & Engineering—and CannonDesign project—where students can develop ideas, advance prototypes, conduct market analysis and test. Rees Jones Hall surrounds the IdeaFactory with diverse programs including its Institute of Child Development and the TCU Energy Institute, organizing them around a central atrium to create a “vertical street” of interactive public space. This street helps the building facilitate creative, intellectual “collisions” to encourage student/faculty collaboration across multiple fields.

INNOVATION CENTERS FOSTERING INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

Universities can also leverage innovation centers as a powerful means for enhanced industry partnership. Under this model, institutions creates facilities where enterprising business entities can be embedded and work in tandem with university business and engineering schools to create new products and services. These partnerships create mutual benefits: providing valuable learning experiences for students who, in turn, lend their talents to solving challenges facing business and industry.



Penn State Behrend is focused on this model with the creation of the [Advanced Manufacturing and Innovation Center](#). The result of a partnership between the college and the Greater Erie Industrial Development Corporation, the facility reflects the “open lab” initiative, where regional business and industry leaders, faculty members and students engage in research and development as teams. Industrial tenants will occupy nearly half of the new building and have access to university research space and equipment. This learning model will promote collaboration between academia and industry, offer students real-world experience and support the growth of manufacturing in the region.

INNOVATION CENTERS ENCOURAGING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

It has become easier than ever for students to use ideas to launch new companies through the transformative growth of our technological connective tissue. Universities are responding by developing incubator programs along with facilities that harness these creative passions and entrepreneurial ambitions.

Institutions like Iowa State University and the University of Utah are creating these types of innovation centers focused on bringing the energy of startup companies to collegiate campuses. These centers, which CannonDesign has also worked on, are often highly flexible and work to blur the lines between life and work in way that gives students 24/7 access to technology and support as they seek to live, learn, and launch companies.

Innovation, incubation, partnership, entrepreneurship. While the spaces that are emerging on today’s campuses come with a variety of names, they share the goal of breaking down historical silos and creating new partnerships. Business schools are becoming immersed in design thinking; libraries are not just “delivering” service, but becoming fully immersed as partners in research endeavors; educational institutions are actively seeking collaborative engagement with the world of industry to address real-world issues.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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