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Insight on the Grousbeck Center for Students & Technology

A Parent's Vision Comes to Life

By MIKE DEL ROSSO

Upon Corinne Grousbeck's first visit to the completed Grousbeck Center for Students and Technology that sits on the south side of Perkins's campus, the reality of her vision brings gasps of awe. She runs her fingers over the mural-like tactile world map hanging just outside the Student Center, by the main entrance. "This was my son Campbell's idea," she says. "The greatest thing is that it's going to get finger-worn."

Corinne Grousbeck, who chairs Perkins' Trust Board, said her initial plan for the building, made possible by a \$10 million gift from the Grousbeck Family Foundation, was to bring Perkins students into the "vernacular" of today's culture, so heavily entrenched in technology. She saw how her son Campbell, who attends Perkins' Secondary Program, used modern devices—his BlackBerry never leaves his side—and realized the need to get his fellow students up to speed.

From a distance, the tactile world map is a beautiful piece of artwork, said Superintendent of Educational Programs Dorinda Rife. But for students who are blind or visually impaired, its true design and richness of detail will "come alive under their fingers."

"The map was engineered using technology, but it's very much for the hands," she said, explaining how a robotic arm read a computer-generated map to fashion topographically accurate dimensions, as it cut through the birch wood panels. "There's no additional information on it. That's the whole idea: to be able to explore it. So it becomes a piece of art and a functional tool."

Hands-on experiences

The marrying of form and function—technology and all the possible ways in which to use it—resonates throughout the 17,000 square feet of the building.

"The role of technology in education is to enhance the experience," said Betsy Bixler, Perkins Training Center coordinator, whose new office sits snugly in the second floor of the Grousbeck Center. For the first time, she has dedicated on-campus training space downstairs to hold sessions for her teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs). Adjacent to these training rooms, which offer adjustable walls, hollow floors for ad hoc electrical wiring and state-of-the-art audio/video equipment, are a student center, a café, an Internet radio station and a recording studio. Each feature offers students the opportunity to develop real-life skills through effective, hands-on practice. Students are not only earning an education at Perkins; they're gaining experience.



From left to right: Corinne Grousbeck, her son Campbell and husband Wyc Grousbeck at the Tactile World Map.

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The Grousbeck Center for Students and Technology lit up at night.

"My own goal for the center was to provide opportunities for students to, in a safe place, practice all kinds of skills that are difficult to master in public places, in a motivating way," said Superintendent Rife. A unifying factor from an educational programs standpoint, she said, would be vocational opportunities and readiness.

Previously, Perkins's 38-acre campus did not have a central location where students, staff and visitors could convene for social occasions, from organized club meetings to chance encounters with friends from separate cottages. The Center provides these opportunities by allowing a flexible, accessible space blending form and function so elegantly that most of its features are invisible to the eye. Instead, they reveal themselves under the fingers.

Innovation



Through a customized app and the built-in accessibility of the iPad, people who are blind can control virtually every aspect of GCST rooms.

In some cases, built-in functionality controls the form of the building itself. Accessible iPads mounted in each room contain a digital interface that allows the operator to alter every adjustable aspect of the space. Individuals sighted and blind can control the Center with a wave of a finger.

"The developers designed an application for the iPad that controls lights, changes channels on the TV and raises and lowers the window curtains," said Jim Denham, Assistive Technology Coordinator. "The end hope is that when someone walks in here, fully sighted or blind, they can just grab this device and control every aspect of the room, via the touch screen."

The iPad was a natural choice for such a versatile application, and not only for its cutting-edge technology; it's accessible for those who are visually impaired, right out of the box.

"The iPad is universally accessible. Apple built in that accessibility right into it. It has VoiceOver, a built-in screen reader, and it also has a screen magnifier that enlarges the text right on the screen."

Interaction

The blending of diverse personalities under one roof carries over into places like the student center. Here, floors, furniture and other equipment installed within the space were carefully selected to promote the natural development of social interaction.

"For people who are blind, hanging out is not something that comes naturally," Rife said. "They don't understand necessarily how to have appropriate social interactions. They don't know where to be facing. There's a fairly large problem with isolation with people who are blind when they leave a structured environment. So everything that we've selected or purchased for the student center was designed to give kids opportunities to practice some of that stuff."

Among the notable pieces of furniture is an S-shaped couch. It's designed, Rife explained, to present questions to students such as: "Where would you sit on a piece of furniture like this and interact with people around you? Would you have a table in front of you? If people were sitting on either side of it, facing two different directions, would that be a natural place to hold a conversation?"

The answer to the last question is, of course, "No." One person would have to come around to be closer to the other.

Students can also practice these skills "safely," said Rife, meaning free from the supervision that can impede autonomous problem solving. She uses the example of a hypothetical student named Johnny. A parent might be reluctant to allow Johnny to slide into a booth because every time he does that, he doesn't know what to do with his cane. So they'd steer him to a chair.

"Now Johnny gets a chance to slide into the booth and figure out what to do with his cane," Rife said. "All the way from the stools in front of the café to the couches in the student center, every piece of furniture was chosen with that in mind."



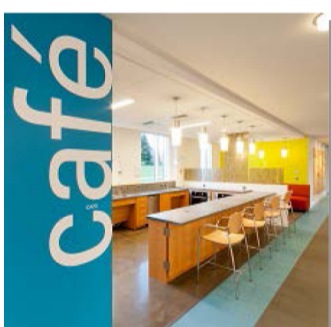
The S-shaped couch in the Student Center was designed specifically for the purpose of figuring out social interaction.

Independence

The café, Internet radio station and recording studio offer students something beyond increased socialization; they offer vocational opportunities.

"The student center is just the beginning," Rife said. "We hope to turn the café into a coffee house in the morning."

Students will work the counter and will be responsible for the money they take in, budgeting for supplies and the paperwork that is part of any business. Students with low vision can even prepare food in the café's kitchen with the help of specialized lighting. When the adjustable arms of the lamps are pulled closer to the counter surface, the bulbs become exponentially brighter for fine tasks like chopping vegetables.



Not only a gathering place, the Café will offer vocational opportunities for students running the morning coffee shop, among other job experience.

The vending machine down the hall will also become a student enterprise. Vocations of this sort run in accordance with the Randolph-Sheppard Act, which was passed to give people who are blind job opportunities in places like government buildings (operating concessions stands, for example). Perkins will work with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) to teach students how to work in such venues.

The radio station and recording studio offer students more technological experience.

"If you think about radio, there are so many aspects of it that are vocational, more than just sitting behind the microphone talking," Denham said. "You need someone that writes what the person's going to say; you need sound editors; you've got to have people that gather the news. I hope students get involved in every level of the radio station. Let's show students what goes on behind the scenes."

Perkins has a contract with Berklee School of Music in Cambridge, Mass., which has experience working with accessible radio equipment, to show Perkins students the ropes.

The recording studio, Denham said, will get students involved in the creative process. By showing them what goes into the recording, editing and fine-tuning to broadcast a program over the Internet, students will get a sense of the engineering aspect, he said.

"With the computer-based tools out there these days, there's so much people who are blind can do," Denham said. "The age of the Internet is opening a lot of opportunities."



(left) The Internet radio station, which will be run by students. (right) The recording studio that will promote the creative process.

Perkins Training Center will also offer vocational opportunities for students, Rife said. When the Training Center prepares for conferences, students will have the opportunity to put out pads of paper and pens, set up rooms, collate relevant documents for the events and do other behind-the-scenes tasks.

"That transfers to all kinds of jobs: customer service, concierge work, hotel work," she said.

A vision for today and tomorrow

At the dedication ceremony for the Center on Nov. 7, Corinne's husband Wyc Grousbeck, Boston Celtics co-owner and CEO, spoke of his wife's tenacity to turn an idea into a 17,000-square-foot reality. Their son Campbell will graduate from Perkins in just a few years, but as Wyc Grousbeck noted during his speech, the story of the Center has just begun.

"This Center is for you, Campbell, and for the next one million Campbells."



Wall-mounted, textured panels like these—this one resembling rain drops in water—not only are beautiful to the eye, but indicate location in the GCST by touch.

Careers

We are always in search of energetic and talented individuals committed to helping children and adults who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired with or without other disabilities. Sound like you? [Take a look at our career opportunities.](#)