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**ADVANCED
TECHNOLOGY CENTER
REVOLUTIONIZES
LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

Gulf Coast State College, in Panama City, Florida, has just opened its brand-new Advanced Technology Center (ATC)—one of the most sophisticated learning centers in the country—for 2013 fall term classes.

The LEED gold certified facility is 93,500 square feet, the first green building on the Gulf Coast campus, and among the most state-of-the-art centers of its kind. Through the ATC, the college seeks to provide students with the opportunities, resources, and network they need to succeed in a highly competitive global marketplace.

A NEW APPROACH TO EDUCATION

According to the online ATC Philosophy statement, the new center “is a transformative facility embracing a ‘future forward’ philosophy grounded in innovative partnerships. This premier facility will be the tipping point of the region, harnessing the wealth of talent in our area to accelerate economic development and job creation.”

The ATC’s interdisciplinary approach to education distinguishes it from other institutions of higher education. The academic

programs range from Alternative Energies to Digital Forensics, Entrepreneurship Operations, Sustainable Design, and Logistics. Students can pursue both Associate’s degrees and Baccalaureate courses of study depending on their individual goals and needs. The varied ATC course catalogue reflects the institution’s mission to spark collaborative partnerships between the private business, government, industry, and educational sectors.

A workforce-training resource prepares graduates of the ATC programs with the tools to communicate their skills and strengths in the 21st century job market, in addition to pursue their own innovative entrepreneurial ventures. The ATC, a \$35 million investment, promises to bring economic prosperity back to the northwest Florida region, and aims to elevate the local community with educational and research opportunities provided nowhere else.

The ATC also emphasizes STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) to prepare students for practical application of skills in the workplace. Additionally, GCSC has partnerships with local K-12 schools. The goal is to confer higher education degrees to local Florida students considering that slightly less than 20% of high school freshmen do not pursue postsecondary studies.

TOP-OF-THE LINE FACILITY RESOURCES

The building itself demonstrates a commitment to progressive design and education. The outdoor patio and green roof are home to wind turbines and photovoltaic solar panels with views of nature and the St. Andrews and West Bay. Additionally, students have access to labs, where among other projects, students are working on converting fossil-fuel vehicles to an electric power source. They are also planning a marketable solution for the government and public and private transit institutions that do not realize their potential for a fleet of green vehicles. In other departments, students can build robots, use 3-D printers, and experiment with windmills and even new culinary technologies.

At the Entrepreneurial Development Center, the ATC houses a community training room and CNC machines to which students working on projects have full access. The resources enable collaboration across a cross section of engineers, sustainable builders, robotics researchers, and students of the Alternative Energy program.







STATE-OF-THE-ART FURNISHINGS

The ATC furniture is critical to its mission, and was designed to accommodate students and faculty who both bring their own devices and use technology infrastructure that GCSC invested in as part of their “learning convergence” environment. “Learning convergence” refers to areas where students can work or have class while collaborating or using information technologies. Following this thread, the ATC has no corridors in its buildings; all floors are open architecture and open, collaborative zones where students can gather around technology clusters.

Joe Sorci, director of design at Florida Architects, was the head architect for the entire project, and as the building progressed, it became clear that cutting edge furnishings for the ATC were going to be difficult to find. As the ATC goal was to optimize the utility and flexibility of every space within the building, standardized, traditional furniture would not prove satisfactory. In March 2011, Mr. Sorci contacted SMARTdesks, a collaborative furniture company committed to meeting the needs of the 21st

century classroom. The company followed up with sample furniture, including the unique, reconfigurable Exchange table, as well as the HorizonLine and Pi tables. In June 2011, at the NEOCON trade show, Sorci continued searching for the ideal furniture, but found that while most other companies also touted their furniture as “collaborative,” few lived up to his expectations. The company’s design team engaged in dialogue with Florida Architects to assess the very space-specific needs of the ATC, launching a synergistic relationship that would ultimately lead to the completion of a world-class facility.

PREPARING AND PRESENTING THE INVITATION TO NEGOTIATE

Because the ATC needs varied widely—from audio-visual tools to wireless connectivity to moveable furniture—Gulf Coast put out an Invitation to Negotiate (ITN) to contract out various parts of the project. Sorci explained that instead of organizing a binding bid contract, the ITN would engage potential suppliers and



enable a discourse between the architects and furniture designers. He explained, “It really came down to finding the right pieces of furniture. Because they’re only going to buy it one time, it had to be the right product for the project.”

Sorci also did not want to wait for the furniture to arrive before realizing it wasn’t suitable for the space. His goal was simple: interactions between furniture suppliers, the architects, and the school board would be as collaborative and solutions-oriented as the curriculum soon to take place at the ATC. He needed a company willing to take on the challenge of integrating audio-visual technology into a wireless environment, and he was having a difficult time finding assistance in designing changeable configurations of furniture with the audio-visual necessary hard-wiring systems. The ATC board sought to leave the “old” standard of education behind, but to do so customized, organized orders were crucial to success.

The Design Team immediately began working collaboratively with Sorci to achieve the custom vision for the ATC. The team

met twice per week for several months in 2012. Director of Design Michele McHenry said that they covered “all the details for every component in every room.” The scope of the project was enormous. The company accounted for conference tables and collaboration centers, café tables, and seating to generate a unified and flexible workspace that would soon define the interior sophistication of the ATC. Regarding the comprehensive design process for each and every room, GCSC President James Kerley said: “If it was not highly utilized space, then forget it.”

ABOUT ONE YEAR LATER: CELEBRATING THE GRAND OPENING

In October of 2013, over 500 students, faculty, staff, administrators, architects, and designers attended the grand opening of the ATC. Six years after initial planning and three years after breaking ground, the building is finally ready for full-time use. President Kerley told local news channel 7, “Our goal was to try to be one of those top 2 or 3 schools, and I think



we've reached that. That's a great feeling for our faculty and staff and our students and our community. This is the community's building."

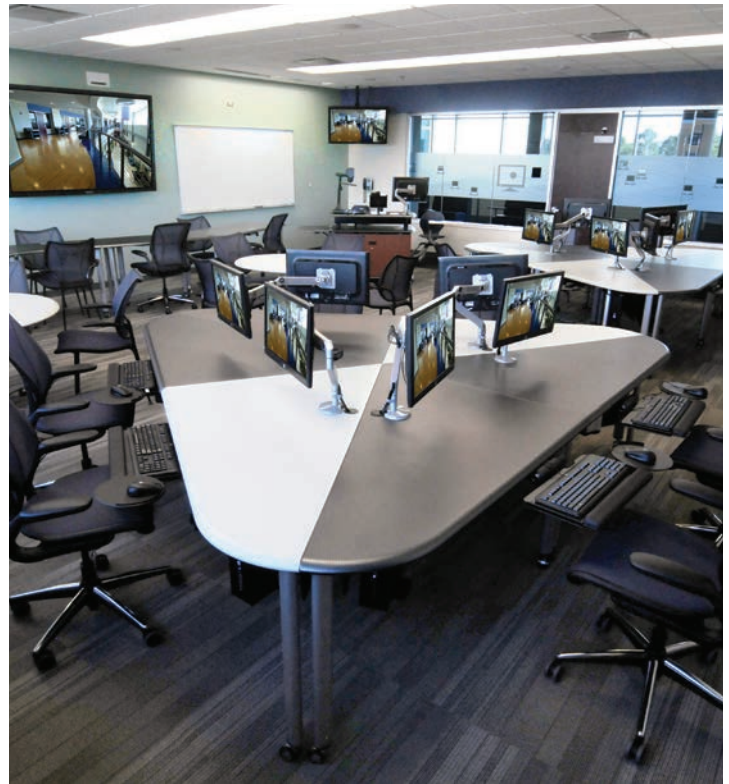
The design team developed furniture that, according to Sorci, "fits the style and statement of the building." For example, the Exchange tables are comprised of modular units that each houses a FlipIT mechanism for secure display and presentation of computers and monitors. These modules can be arranged into hexagon, pinwheel, wave, and triangular combinations, depending on the needs of the students and educators for each project. In another area of the building, a scaled down version of Exchange, called the iGroup, serves other students' needs.

Dr. Ariba Garmin, Director of E-learning said, "The furniture provided allows staff and student to create any learning environment you want. You almost don't see it at all because you can move it around to suit your needs." One example of this flexibility in the ATC is the third floor boardroom table for 28 people. The table is comprised of fixed and foldable Nesta tables that can be collapsed and used elsewhere, thereby giving the space multi-functionality for various meetings, classes, and disciplines.

Kim Allan—assistant professor of Micro-Computer Applications—stated, "The current generation does not want to be lectured to. They are going to figure it out for themselves. In order to keep pace with the current generation of students, you have to change your pedagogy to keep their interest." Allan added that the best way to teach is to have students learn as a group; she believes these furnishings allow her to meet her own pedagogical goals.

Wendy Payne, an Associate Professor of Business Technology, teaches in the Vista Collaborative Space; Payne noted, "I came from a space that used cubicles. Conversations with your neighbors were not all that easy. What is nice in the space that SMARTdesks has provided is that everyone can see one another. All eight students can work in teams, in pairs or as groups. All of my classes are not lecture-based. They are working groups that we assign problems to. They have the tools and can read; therefore the hard work is solving the problem."

In the "community training room," Pi tables offer a modern twist to the typical lecture configuration of desks. While the tables are usually arranged in long arcs for easy visibility and comfortable use of laptops, the Pi tables can also be organized differently should the need arise for another arrangement. Antonio Adessi, assistant professor of Business and Technology,



commented on this flexibility: "What we are doing in the digital manufacturing, electronic engineering and product design with students is giving them that creative edge and experience that most employers require. Our programs really promote entrepreneurship, collaboration, and innovation in our students."

LAUNCHING FUTURE LEADERS

The invigorating learning atmosphere for ATC students aims not only to improve the economic health of the region, but also foster analytical skills that will serve students in their community at large. Pre-engineering ATC student John Freeman said, "It's exciting! You walk in here and you feel like you are a part of something! I'm from this area, so I know how valuable it is for us to have this building. It gives us a broader band of education. It offered to bring new businesses to this area and caters to the businesses we already have."

Jeff Korber, President of SMARTdesks, noted, "All social change must be common. It is based in community interaction and consensus. This ATC center represents a model for the upper Florida peninsula to bring together many disciplines which support its local community connected to a much wider set of similar cultures. Interdisciplinary education and sustainability are its foundation." 🦋



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