Departments Transform Classrooms With Help From New Funding Program

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If your department has a drab and boring classroom in need of an upgrade, the UA’s new ISLE Program may be able to help.

The ISLE Program, which stands for Innovative Spaces for Learning and Engagement, is part of an ongoing effort to transform traditional campus classrooms into collaborative learning spaces, which are designed to engage students in more active learning, through features like flexible seating arrangements and various classroom technologies.

The UA now has 30 collaborative learning spaces, viewable on this map. The rooms are all centrally scheduled, which means instructors across campus can reserve them for their courses.

To support the transformation of additional classrooms on campus, the ISLE Program, administered through the Office of Academic Affairs, provides an opportunity for departments to apply for up to $50,000 in matching funds to transform classroom spaces that they control at the department level.

The ISLE Program is supported by the University’s Strategic Initiatives Fund, which is managed by the Office of the Provost.

Departmentally controlled classrooms could be tailored to benefit students in specific academic disciplines, said Jane Hunter, UA director of academic resources and special projects, who coordinates the ISLE Program.

"Our senior vice president and CFO, Gregg Goldman, conceived the idea to use some of the Strategic Initiatives Funds to help departments develop their own innovative learning spaces with specialized furniture, technology or equipment to address the unique needs for teaching and learning in their discipline," she said.

Applications for the first round of funding are due Aug. 1. Any department can apply, and only one application is allowed per department. Applications must include: a description of the proposed renovations, including furniture and technology needs; an explanation of how the space will be used; a list of estimated costs; and endorsements by the department head and college dean.

Complete instructions for applying can be found here. A second round of applications will be accepted Dec. 3.
The ISLE Program will award half a million dollars over two cycles, which means 10 or more projects could be funded, depending on the scope of the selected projects, Hunter said.

To be eligible for ISLE Program funding, the room must be used primarily by students. A committee will choose the funding recipients, looking particularly for projects that have the most innovative design concepts and foster the highest levels of student engagement.

“There’s a lot of evidence that high levels of student engagement lead to better learning,” Hunter said. “The ISLE rooms will be designed for both formal and informal learning, not for faculty meetings or graduate student workspaces. They’re really all about collaborative, engaged learning for students.”

Departments awarded funding will partner with members of the UA Classroom Committee [7], which includes representatives from the Office of Academic Affairs, Facilities Management, Classroom Technology Services and others, to design, plan, prepare and construct the renovated spaces. Any project costs that exceed the matching funds awarded through the ISLE Program will be the responsibility of the department, and the finished classrooms will remain under the control of the department or unit.


A campuswide survey in fall 2017 revealed that collaborative learning spaces are the No. 1 preferred type of classroom on campus for faculty and students, Hunter said.

"Implementation of collaborative, active learning strategies usually requires faculty to invest some time to transform their courses, so it’s really important that departments are committed to professional development for instructors," she said.

The Office of Instruction and Assessment [9] offers consultations and a variety of professional development opportunities designed to support instructors teaching in collaborative learning spaces for the first time.

"In general, both students and faculty enjoy these spaces because of the opportunities they afford for more engaged learning and deeper-level thinking in the classroom," Hunter said. "We’re doing our best to let students know that this is how you learn at the University of Arizona, and the more we have these types of rooms, the more we demonstrate our commitment to evidence-based teaching and learning."

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