LIKE MANY CCCU CAMPUSES, Belhaven University, in Jackson, Miss., offers a freshman seminar course designed to equip incoming students with essential skills for college life, such as time management, effective study techniques, and maximizing on-campus resources.

But Erin Price, Belhaven’s assistant vice president for student success, has also launched a more innovative initiative to help Belhaven students. In addition to giving them the tools to succeed, she and her colleagues strive to offer students the ideal space in which to use them.

Price started at Belhaven in the admissions department and eventually became an adjunct instructor before leaving the school in 2008 to work at The University of Southern Mississippi. While at USM, she completed her doctorate in higher education leadership from Union University in Jackson, Tenn.

For two years she worked as a student development specialist at USM’s Student Think Center, which included working with a team on a research grant studying how space affects learning. They were implementing a design-thinking model into instructional design, learning space, and student development.
The concept was new for Price at the time. In fact, she says she had a difficult time at first visualizing what was being discussed. Because her colleagues had visited the d.school, the Institute of Design at Stanford, which has since published a 2012 book on manipulating space to ignite creativity, they had a better picture of the type of space being discussed. At the time of the USM team’s grant proposal, their research was cutting edge, though Price notes there is evidence that more institutions are now embracing the importance of active learning spaces.

When Belhaven hired Price back as part of its student development team, she was asked if she had any thoughts about using space to augment student success. “I said, ‘Absolutely! I’ve got some thoughts about it,’” Price recalls.

The result was the Wynn Kenyon Think Center, a designated study and teaching facility located inside the school’s Hood Library. The center opened in September 2012.

What makes the Think Center unique, according to Price, is its adaptability: nearly every piece of furniture in the center rotates, slides, or modifies to accommodate group sessions, backpacks, and laptops. Likewise, the technology in the center is wired for networking: students using the center’s computers can share screens between units to collaborate with classmates, or they can connect laptops to one of several TV monitors for multiple viewers. Additionally, writing surfaces are virtually everywhere, from moveable whiteboards to “paper tables” that allow students to map out their thought processes.

Unlike the traditional library setting, students appreciate the Think Center because each student has the option to create his or her ideal setting. Price says the mobility of the center’s equipment allows for varied learning preferences—from processing with others to writing material out to concentrating individually—to be accommodated. “We encourage them to do what they need to with the space,” says Price. And in contrast to a traditional computer lab, she explains, the Think Center is colorful, inviting, and flexible.

While the environment serves primarily as a study space, the abundant technology also lends itself to teaching. Price says professors are increasingly taking advantage of the Think Center for class sessions requiring intensive or collaborative use of technology that traditional classrooms do not accommodate.

While the Think Center provides students with freedom, it is also designed to offer ample support. Price, along with the rest of the student development staff, has her office inside the center. No one is ever more than a knock away from students in need, whether they have questions about using the computers or are seeking in-depth conversations about choosing majors and careers. Peer academic tutors are also stationed in the Think Center, so if a student or group hits a roadblock while studying, they can quickly find assistance.

Price says it is too early to determine the Think Center’s impact on student outcomes, but she’s excited for the potential research it may yield. “This kind of space in higher education is kind of new, so there’s a good deal to be learned about it,” she says. According to Price, Belhaven is only the second school in Mississippi exploring space and student outcomes.

In the short term, the metric that Price says she is paying the most attention to is foot traffic. Part of the goal with the high-tech, customizable feel of the Think Center, Price explains, is to pique the curiosity of passing students. “We feel like we’ve done that,” Price says. “In my mind it’s just been a huge success.”

Price’s assessment is backed by many students, including Rachel Kniseley.

Kniseley, a junior majoring in psychology, says she has been hooked on the Think Center since she took a tour shortly after it opened last year. She recalls thinking the center was awesome.

Kniseley credits the Think Center with getting her study habits on track, leading to markedly different outcomes between her freshman and sophomore years. “My freshman year I’d be like, ‘Oh, let me call Mom, because she’s the only one who can help me with this,’” she says.

When the Think Center opened the following year, Kniseley discovered a place where she could study with some privacy when necessary but also connect with tutors. This provided Kniseley with a much-needed sense of accountability, because each time she returned she would share her scores with tutors.

“They encourage you and they motivate you to continue with your work,” Kniseley says, noting that the laid-back and collaborative nature of the facility allows students to tackle homework assignments from all angles, which is especially helpful when working on a group project or presentation. “It really does help you think out loud, especially if you like to process things with other people,” she says.

In fact, Kniseley was so impressed by the center she took a student employment position there working as a desk assistant. For many entering the Think Center for the first time, Kniseley is the first face they see—and that is just fine with her.

“I love the Think Center,” she says. “I want every student at Belhaven to use the Think Center.”
RESPONDING TO OBSERVED NEEDS

While the Thnk Center at Bethhaven reflects a new concept in higher education student success programs, the CCCU’s other campuses also work hard to provide just what students need to be successful, seeking to keep in step with changes in student needs over time.

For example, taking the lead to address an area of student need is exactly what Houghton College in Houghton, N.Y., had in mind when in 1989 it launched the Academic Support Center, now called the Center for Academic Success and Advising. The center was a response to a student need over time.

In 2004 tutoring was offered regardless of grade standing, and in 2013 an Intensive Academic English Program was developed to assist students who are non-native English speakers. IAEP aims to improve reading and writing abilities to the level expected at Houghton. Participating students take classes in reading, writing, speaking, and listening instruction as well as biblical literature. A College Study Methods course is also available to all Houghton students through CASA.

“In our first semester, she was still on academic probation,” says Pam De Jong, director and department chair of CASA. “Most of them have a strong desire to serve. They regard their jobs as a way of serving their fellow students and building a stronger learning community.”

De Jong says there have been hundreds of peer tutors throughout ASK’s history. She says they are an important reason why the center has successfully helped ASK realize its vision to enable students to maximize learning while equipping them with the necessary skills to function both within an academic community and as lifelong, independent learners.

“Some tutors choose to work in this capacity for a variety of reasons,” says Pam De Jong, director and department chair of ASK. “Most of them have a strong desire to serve. They regard their jobs as a way of serving their fellow students and building a stronger learning community.”

The College Study Methods course is available for all students, not only those needing remediation. Services expanded in 1982 to address the growing realization that students were increasingly unprepared in other areas, such as reading, math, and study skills, as they transitioned from high school. Peer tutoring has been part of ASK ever since.

“My tutors choose to work in this capacity for a variety of reasons,” says Pam De Jong, director and department chair of ASK. “Most of them have a strong desire to serve. They regard their jobs as a way of serving their fellow students and building a stronger learning community.”

De Jong says there have been hundreds of peer tutors throughout ASK’s history. She says they are an important reason why the center has successfully helped ASK realize its vision to enable students to maximize learning while equipping them with the necessary skills to function both within an academic community and as lifelong, independent learners.

In each of the past few years alone, more than 600 students—approximately 40 percent of Dordt’s student body—have made more than 6,000 tutoring visits. Generally, half of the students accessing tutoring are freshmen, another quarter sophomores, and the remaining quarter juniors, seniors, or special enrollment students.

But De Jong says the impact is best seen on the individual level, beyond the numbers. She remembers one undecided student who eventually settled on majoring in accounting. She provided that needed recommendation to teach, and I don’t know who was there to serve, but I don’t know who was most proud at commencement, the soon-to-be teacher, her parents, or me.”

Luke Reihl, a graduate of Bethel University (MN) and an alumnus of the CCCU’s BestSemester Washington Journalism Center, is an editor at a community newspaper covering the suburbs of St. Paul, Minn.

Chris Turner is founder of D. Chris Turner Communications, a public relations firm specializing in social media strategies, writing, and crisis communications. A former overseas correspondent with the International Mission Board, Chris has lived in England and Panama and covered stories in 28 countries.

—THEODORE HIEBERT, Francis A. McGaw Professor of Old Testament, McCormick Theological Seminary

“For me, food is an invitation to moral responsibility. Each meal we eat is an invitation to moral responsibility.”

—THEODORE HIEBERT, Francis A. McGaw Professor of Old Testament, McCormick Theological Seminary

Learn More: www.eastern.edu/sld 267.392.2076