

The Ideal Learning Center

The Learning Center functions as the hub of the local Career Development Program. The Learning Center is used for conferring confidentially with individual learners, for accommodating groups in a wide variety of customized classes, and as a place that the Local Joint Committee (LJC) can hold its planning meetings and open houses and other recruiting functions. There are many considerations which must be discussed by the LJC in order to design a setting which is accessible, comfortable and cost-efficient. This position paper considers the ideal location; types of suitable structures; the purposes and components of the center; the scheduling and staffing of the center; and the process of planning a center. Reading this paper before visiting other programs' learning centers will help LJC members know what to look for during the tours.

Location

ICD policy speaks to the location of the Learning Center--stating that existing space in the company facility or in the Union facility must be used if suitable. Consult the ICD Field Policy Manual. The fact that the Local Joint Committee is not a legal entity is one reason why the facility is best placed on company or Union property.

If the building cannot be in the heart of the plant, the center should be located within a few blocks from the plant. The facility must be comfortable for participants as well as accessible: this means that workers must have positive feelings about the facility. In ICD's experience, a vacant town hall, school, car dealership or even an old tattoo parlor may be renovated as a Learning Center if workers have no substantial negative associations with the former occupants. On the other hand, there are some company buildings which are not appropriate for workers and which can significantly inhibit participation even when the company is being completely supportive of the program.

Types of Structures

When learning centers must be established outside of the company or Union space, there are three basic ways of establishing learning centers. First, many Local Joint Committees lease space in existing buildings, such as former schools or offices, and make renovations to create enticing learning areas. Second, Local Joint Committees lease trailers or double-wide trailers and design suitable facilities within these modular structures. Third, a few Local Joint Committees have built independent buildings to house their Career Development Programs when such action had clear and significant advantages over the other two types of structures.

Purposes and Components

The ideal Learning Center is a facility designed to comfortably accommodate basic skills, personal development and pretechnical classes. It also serves recruiting purposes, planning meeting purposes, and one-on-one counseling purposes. The Center should be constructed with the expectation that the program will be growing and there should be spaces reserved for future needs that are as of now unforeseen by the LJC.

To maximize people's learning, we must first make them comfortable. We touch on this goal when we choose a location that is accessible to all workers. Adequate parking in a well-lit and well-drained lot matters to most participants. Once inside, the learners need a tension-free environment that communicates to them that this is their program. To that end, the ideal Learning Center has a reception area which makes workers feel immediately welcome. A place where learners can confer in confidence with a coordinator,

learning advocate, or LJC member is also a requirement from the workers' standpoint. After classes start, a break room where participants can relax together is another important feature that helps keep participants in the program.

Functionally, a learning center needs at least two offices, a modular computer lab, storage and classrooms for both traditional lecture and hands-on training. A lending library and a conference room are other integral parts of the center. The Center houses a 7-15 workstation computer lab, and several classrooms. Instructors provide computer-based basic skills instruction on the dedicated workstations which are networked so that skills enhancement software is accessible at all stations. The greatest growth in future participation may come in on-line distance learning which allows participants access to E-mail, on-line classes, shareware files for downloading and program information, and access to the Internet.

When most of the classes, whether pretechnical, personal development or basic skills, are offered on-site by the same LJC-identified and worker-oriented instructor, it affords workers continual instructional support from a familiar mentor. The ideal Learning Center would allow the LJC to offer popular pretechnical classes on-site, reducing the need for expensive courses offered at other institutions. For instance, VCR Repair and Small Engine Repair are expected to remain very popular courses for the next few years. Sometimes a separate training room must be housed in the Union Hall or plant. In addition, the LJC should be prepared to lease space as needed for hands-on training within a few blocks of the workplace.

Scheduling and Staffing

The LJC may retain one or two part-time instructors and an administrative assistant. Such staffing can assist the coordinator to keep the Learning Center open to workers as much as possible. An on-site Basic Skills Program provides classes in both basic computer skills and educational skills. One of the instructors will undoubtedly be a nearly full-time computer instructor who provides various computer classes and one-on-one tutoring at least 24 hours each week. The instructor is available to workers regardless of shifts and arranges classes to accommodate rotating shifts. Computer courses are offered year round and workers are continuously moving up to more advanced and/or diverse computer courses. The center provides electronic access to the information highway, according to carefully-stated LJC policies, for all interested participants.

The second instructor is typically a basic skills instructor who works from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. at least one or two days a week. The basic skills instructor offers one-on-one tutoring in Math and Reading--especially for those who dislike computer-assisted learning. Private tutoring is also focused on preparation for the GED or other credentialing or certifying assessments. Often workers can set both the hours and the meeting place for the one-on-one tutoring.

The learning lab is open at least 10 hours a day to make it convenient for workers to take advantage of a variety of classes, including the self-paced and tutorial basic skill instruction. Most sessions of computer classes are offered three times a day.

Planning a Learning Center

The key players in planning a learning center are the LJC members, the Coordinator (if applicable) and the Program Counselor. The process begins with expression of a vision--an idea which needs ample discussion at the LJC Committee meetings. A specially-designed survey or needs assessment updates the committee's understanding of the workers' self-perceived needs and desires. Along with the survey's interpretation, committee members and coordinator should make four or five site visits to Career Development Programs with workforces of similar size. Consideration of the type of learning center (refurbished building, trailer, or new structure) is important at this time. Committees should visit learning centers at steel mills and mines rather than at other industries; however, visiting the local adult education

facility is an appropriate action which will inform the committee in important ways. During the visits, look for what has NOT been included as well as what is there. For instance, are there fiber optic capabilities? Is each classroom self-contained, having its own temperature control, coat rack and storage area? Ask the program administrators what they would do differently if they were starting over with the design of the facility.

As site visits wind down, selection of vendors to build, renovate or equip the center could be made through the bid process. ICD policies need to be followed, and the Program Counselor should be consulted. The Coordinator typically serves as the project manager as the Committee looks for a consensus; the Coordinator is wise to seek observations from the teachers who will provide instruction in the facility. Codes and permits must be meticulously taken into account, for skipping any step may delay all other steps. An architectural firm is often enlisted to draw up plans.

As the actual construction begins, a Committee can be thinking about how to involve the workers in the process--in effect, how can we build ownership of the Center at the same time we build the Center? Especially with learning centers undergoing building renovations, many individuals have skills which can be put to use not only to save money but also to help participants feel connected. Some sites have used their need for building renovations as opportunities for running special customized classes wherein the participants learned to do dry walling and some of the other construction operations. Learners who have helped to construct an educational facility have a special bond with the program and they typically help to bring in others.

Throughout the entire process of designing a learning center, extraordinary patience is called for in order to create a functional and inviting facility in the least expensive manner. While the Center must be located close to the workplace, once participants are inside the facility, the aesthetics of the space must allow people to forget about the pressures of work so that learning can become the top priority.

Conclusion

The Learning Center, if properly envisioned and constructed, can boost a program's participation; and that is the ultimate goal of the LJC. How much growth will result depends on many factors. The Center must be a comfortable and flexible facility. It must have the potential to grow with the program and to change with the workers' needs. While no Center is ever perfect, careful planning based on experiences of other CDPs, can insure that the workers' money is well spent. ICD can help your committee conduct surveys of the workforce to plan the new facility, set up site visits, and think through other sites' lessons learned. Much of the preparatory work on ideal Learning Centers can be donated by the participants and the Local Joint Committee members. Such participation from those who will inhabit the Learning Center leads to a sense of ownership which will not exist if the Center is designed and constructed exclusively by outside contractors. If the planning process is successful, workers who participate in the Career Development Program Learning Center will feel that they are in a special place that is different from the workplace and more comfortable than other local education institutions.