What if students could customize their studio desktops to better suit their needs?

Hands-on learning takes on a whole new meaning when you are a design student. You develop the idea through multiple iterations, then head to the fabrication lab to bring it to life.

This process, on repeat for the four years in their undergraduate program, will be the same for just about every student, yet for studio with Director of Design Technology Bill Massie, there is personal investment in their final project.

Two studios have designed student desks for the polycultural environment entrenched in the new building for the College of Design. “It occurred to me when planning for the new facility that student desks should be slightly different than they were 20 even 10 years ago,” said Massie. “Everybody is working on laptops now. Actual drafting tables? They don’t even use them anymore.”

As Massie, along with other members of the new building committee, went on a tour of other design colleges, he made note of the steel desks found in many of these studio spaces. This concept organically aligned with Massie’s digital fabrication expertise, resulting in a fully immersive studio concept. “I thought ‘I have a way that students could involve themselves in the design process, and we could pull off designing and building our own student desks,’” Massie concluded.

With the purchase of the Fab Light steel-cutting tube laser, Massie set the studio in motion during the spring 2020 semester with help from Pooya Mohaghegh, graduate student and fabrication lab technician, researching and developing plans for the desks. Yet as with many other well-laid plans, COVID forced the shut-down of the physical prototyping of the desks, so Massie developed a comparable studio during the 2020 Winter Intersession to perfect the design. “We are going through the process of refining to the point where we can be inordinately confident about cost,” explained Massie. The concept is for students to be able to remove the desktop – made of 3/4” plywood – and take it from studio to studio, year over year, with the ability to personalize the design as they develop more fabrication skills during their time at the College. “They can modify and alter it to put a drawer in it, to do anything else,” he said. “They can hack the desktop that goes with them.” Think cutting board or laptop holder, whatever modifications a student wants to make. The bottom of the desks, made with the steel tubing and a substrate for connecting accessories, remain fixed in each studio. As freshmen come into the program, one of the first fabrication lessons could be these desktops and the accessories of their choice, using the computer file that includes all the necessary parameters. “Students learning by being exposed to state-of-the-art technology, that’s the future of how we’re going to build everything,” said Massie.
Prototype removable backstop with slots for configurable shelves and other add-ons, connected with steel risers (optional accessory)

Removable plywood desktop (included in base unit)

Plywood desktop substrate (included in base unit)

Prototype removable and configurable drawer and storage cabinet (optional accessories)

Laser-cut steel frame that can be etched with donor name (included in base unit)

Desktop, substrate and frame make up the base unit (pictured opposite); backstop and drawers/cabinets can be added as optional accessories.

Want to buy or sponsor a studio desk?

Contact Assistant Vice President for Philanthropy Don Witt at dwitt@uky.edu or Associate Director of Philanthropy for the College of Engineering Patrick Robinson at patrick.robinson@uky.edu