

Spotlight



Giant beach balls and team-building games help business groups brainstorm in the Silberman School's iSpace.



Creative Space, Innovative Ideas

iSpace, newly opened at Fairleigh Dickinson's Silberman School of Business, offers unconventional tools to encourage out-of-the-box thinking.

Inflatable chairs, karaoke, and a game of Twister may not be the usual props to inspire the best business ideas. But they may do more for brainstorming and team-building than a business meeting over bagels in the conference room.

In May, that belief inspired the Rothman Institute of Entrepreneurial Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University's Silberman School of Business in Teaneck, New Jersey, to add iSpace to its innovation program. The new room is equipped with colorful inflatable chairs, beach balls, games, and a giant orange flower suspended from the ceiling. Upon entering iSpace, people immediately know—this won't be business brainstorming as usual.

While iSpace may appear to be more romper room than conference room, it represents a serious commitment to innovation, says James Barood, director of the Rothman Institute. "It's a toolbox for brain-

storming," says Barood. "Once people are comfortable and relaxed, you can draw ideas out, however crazy they may be."

Led by facilitators, groups use a number of tools and props to spur creative thought—they can sing karaoke, throw a ball, or go outside to participate in challenge exercises. The walls are lined with whiteboards to encourage people to generate and capture ideas. Furnishings are lightweight and movable by design, for easy rearrangement and small group discussion. So far, organizations from healthcare company Novartis to a local chapter of the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners have reserved the space.

John Crawford, a Fairleigh Dickinson alum and owner of The Time-ly Ideas Corporation of Caldwell, New Jersey, recently came to iSpace with other alumni to generate ideas for the business school. A facilitator walked them through icebreaking

activities, small group discussions, and "what if?" scenarios.

Some participants found the space "disorienting" at first, says Crawford, but relaxed as ideas started to flow. "As a brainstorming warm-up, we were asked to think about a problem at Toyota, to think about what it could have done better to compete, to be more nimble. That helped us build chemistry and get to deeper ideas," he says. "The space activates your brain in a different way. To think clearly, sometimes you have to get rid of the noise."

Crawford already has booked the space for a meeting with one of his own clients. "We've done similar exercises," he says, "but we've never done them in a space like that."

Barood plans to add cooking activities to the program. Small-scale team-building projects, such as building pizzas or sundaes, will take place in iSpace. Large-scale cooking modules will be held elsewhere.

So far, reaction to iSpace has ranged from delight to surprise, says Barood, who adds that the room will now also be opened to faculty for classes. "We preach a lot about innovation," he says. "We thought it was time to help people with that very important brainstorming stage. We wanted to help them get out of the office, out of that boring conference room. In iSpace, they can relax and think outside the box." 