

Living in the World of “Touchdown Bookable Space”: Dispatches from the School of Rehabilitation Sciences

Over the past year, senior College of Medicine and School of Rehabilitation Science leadership have embarked on space remodeling plans that are profoundly disrupting teaching, research, student accessibility, health and wellness, and career progression. The SRS is transforming into an environment of “open, touchdown, bookable spaces,” in which the vast majority of tenured-track faculty have lost, will lose, or will never be provided office and research lab space in which to perform their assigned duties. This decision affects staff and faculty across Physiotherapy (PT), Occupational Therapy (OT), and Speech-Language Pathology (SLP).

These changes should not be framed as a consequence of the expansion of the School to include SLP and OT. Rather, touch-down bookable space plans are due to shortsighted decision-making and failure to account for the demands of our work and how we do it. Not only do “open-plan offices” produce stressful work environments, but the choice to create them has entailed non-transparent decision-making, communication failures, and the absence of a coherent plan to support the academic and research mission of the university. Other programs (ie. MPAS, Nursing, Clinical Psychology) have undergone expansion that has not resulted in a transition to bookable shared office and research spaces. Below, we outline the perilous implications of these plans for research integrity, teaching and scholarly excellence, equity, collaboration, and meeting professional regulatory standards.

Research Integrity and the University Mandate

The University of Saskatchewan positions itself as a research-intensive institution. Faculty in the SRS are expected to secure external funding, publish peer-reviewed scholarship, supervise graduate research, and build nationally competitive programs. A growing body of research examining university open-plan research offices demonstrates that indoor environmental quality (i.e., layout, lighting, thermal comfort, and especially acoustic environment) has a significant positive correlation with research productivity (Kang, Ou, & Mak, 2017). Importantly, this work shows that acoustic quality has the strongest relationship with productivity in research-intensive settings, and that researchers engaged in complex academic tasks require higher levels of concentration and cognitive continuity than those in general administrative open-plan offices.

Systematic reviews of academic workplace design similarly report that open-plan environments are associated with decreased concentration and diminished effectiveness in scholarly work (Indergård & Hansen, 2025). Research on office design and job control further demonstrates that reduced workspace autonomy is linked to lower well-being and professional efficacy (Nielsen, 2023). These findings are directly relevant to faculty work in research-intensive graduate training. Beyond research productivity, much of our work involves human participants and is governed by Research Ethics Board and Tri-Agency standards requiring secure data management and protection of confidential information. In short, workspace condi-

tions are part of research integrity. Secure physical storage and confidential conversations are not optional components of ethical compliance. Current proposals for bookable private spaces/pods and secure storage lack sufficient detail to demonstrate compliance with ethical and regulatory obligations.

The Material and Cognitive Reality of Scholarly Work

Much of our work involves prolonged engagement with complex literature over multiple days. When developing an argument, drafting a manuscript, or preparing a grant application, we often have multiple texts open simultaneously, annotated drafts laid out, conceptual diagrams sketched, and articles positioned strategically to support iterative thinking. Scholarship is spatial and cumulative. The physical arrangement of materials becomes part of the cognitive process of building and refining an argument.

The consequences of a non-assigned workspace model extend beyond disruption and inefficiency. Requiring faculty to repeatedly dismantle and reassemble their workspaces throughout the day imposes a cumulative mental and emotional toll. Individuals are acutely aware that this loss of productive time accumulates over the year and that it is not evenly distributed across colleagues. For faculty pursuing tenure or promotion, already operating under significant temporal and evaluative pressure, this structural time disadvantage is compounded by the psychological burden of knowing one's work conditions systematically erode available scholarly time. The constant need to remain vigilant about packing, securing materials, and anticipating displacement also consumes cognitive bandwidth, increases stress, and further undermines sustained scholarly focus and productivity. In contrast, graduate students, adjunct faculty, and sessional lecturers at USask, and elsewhere within the College of Medicine (of which we are a part), are routinely provided with assigned workspaces. The absence of comparable provision within the SRS is striking, particularly given that many of us had more stable and private workspaces as graduate students and as adjunct faculty at other institutions.

While research spaces were reallocated to prioritize critical teaching needs, the resulting loss of faculty research space was not accompanied by a realistic or coordinated plan for replacement access. The expectation that shared university space would be available was never communicated to the faculty of other departments. When those departments—understandably—declined to share their own funded space, faculty were left either spending significant time searching for space or without any practical alternative. The repeated disruptions to workflows that these circumstances create introduce inefficiency and cognitive fragmentation, rather than what we need, which is sustained continuity. The material conditions of touch-down bookable spaces are inconsistent with the expectations of our work.

Teaching and Learning Impacts in Professional Health Care Graduate Programs:

Stable, co-located faculty workspaces are not a luxury but a foundational requirement for effective teaching and student support. Research consistently demonstrates that regular, accessible interaction with faculty is positively associated with student success (Guzzardo et al., 2020; Increasing Equity in Student Experience, 2022). The planned shift to touchdown, bookable workspaces make faculty locations unreliable and haphazard, thus undermining student access. Claims that students will be well served under this model remain speculative and unsupported. Without dedicated, private workspaces, faculty capacity for instructional preparation, timely feedback, and confidential advising is constrained. Graduate, professional, and research students will be disproportionately affected, as inconsistent access to faculty weakens supervision, mentoring, and learning continuity, ultimately diminishing the quality of their educational experience. Over time, these conditions risk eroding teaching quality, program coherence, and the student-centred mission of the university.

Disproportionate Impact and Equity Considerations

Currently, 25 of the 26 faculty members across PT, OT, and SLP are women. The newly established SLP and OT programs are overwhelmingly composed of pre-tenure faculty at the earliest stages of their academic careers. We are also recruiting an additional 12 faculty members (6 OT and 6 SLP), many of whom will likewise be early-career scholars. A structural decision that disproportionately affects a workforce that is approximately 96% women and largely pre-tenure raises legitimate equity concerns.

Even if unintended, institutional decisions can have differential impacts. As our PT and OT faculty are acutely aware, people have vastly different needs for workspace arrangements. For example, keyboard height, monitor usage, screen height, lighting, and foot support are arrangements over which faculty seek to exercise control precisely because these are elements of the workspace that are crucial for preventing injuries and supporting well-being. An environment that is ever shifting undermines these legitimate needs. Adjusting one's workspace multiple times per day is simply not possible. These issues make it likely that SRS faculty will elect to work from home. Yet, as we know from the covid pandemic, working from home exponentially affected women's health, productivity, paid and unpaid work, and well-being compared to men (Hayes and Lee, 2022).

We recognize that some faculty may feel constrained in voicing concerns about working conditions, but silence should not be interpreted as endorsement. If the University is committed to EDIA principles and decolonized institutional practices, spatial decisions must be examined for their differential impact across gender, seniority, and program status. Equity is not solely about representation; it is about conditions of work.

Consequences for Presence and Collaboration

In the absence of private workspaces, most of us will be required to conduct confidential meetings, research writing, and sensitive supervision from home to meet professional and ethical standards. This will reduce our physical presence on campus. Beyond limiting spontaneous accessibility to students, this will also constrain our ability to participate in informal mentorship to graduate students and junior colleagues. We will miss impromptu collaboration with colleagues and interdisciplinary partners. These are forms of engagement that the [University of Saskatchewan explicitly claims to value](#). It is difficult to reconcile a stated commitment to collaboration with infrastructure that pushes faculty off campus to perform work requiring privacy and concentration. As Pam Downe wisely stated in a recent [VOX piece](#), our leaders need to “understand how academic cultures reproduce themselves and how they evolve through collaboration.” The chaotic nature of bookable touchdown workspaces produces alienation, not collaboration.

Professional and Regulatory Responsibilities and Accreditation

As regulated health professionals, faculty are required to conduct confidential student remediation discussions, accessibility and accommodation meetings, discussions around clinical cases involving protected health information, securely store examinations and course materials, and accreditation-related documentation. An open, non-assigned workspace model does not provide appropriate conditions for these responsibilities. Where will confidential exams be securely stored? Where will sensitive student performance discussions occur? How will conversations involving protected clinical information be conducted in a way that ensures privacy and psychological safety? These are regulatory and ethical obligations, not preferences. Moreover, dumping these logistical problems onto faculty amounts to yet another burden that they must consistently manage.

Missed Opportunities

Leadership communications have suggested that staff and faculty were consulted prior to decisions—an

assertion that is not shared by many of us. Some of us have been invited to meetings and focus groups, but these were to “tweak” rather than inform space allocation and management decisions. Many of us clearly opposed these decisions when they were presented at a town hall meeting in January of 2026, in which faculty and staff urged leadership to have broader, open conversations before planning. This was denied, and feedback in working groups has been largely ignored. A February 2026 email from the Dean’s office invited faculty to engage in “people-centred” conflict navigation and 1:1 conversations, emphasizing individual coping and relationship repair, while leaving unresolved core concerns regarding decision-making authority, meaningful consultation, and material working conditions. The message is that the lack of offices is an issue of interpersonal conflict, not flawed management decisions and practices. As Maggie FitzGerald helpfully articulated in a recent [VOX article](#), management decisions need to be explained, not by the context in which they are made, but by “acknowledging the stakes of the decision and clearly articulating and justifying the good [or bad] to be found in it.” Explanations must account for who must bear the good and the bad consequences of those decisions, and their likely effects on our university community. When it is obvious to everyone that corrective decisions are needed, our leadership needs to step up to protect our community. This is why we have asked them to lead.

Conclusion

Importantly, SRS’s space reallocation plans have been described as a “test case” that could be rolled out in other units across the university. In other words, what is happening to SRS could also happen to you. Yet, the work of university faculty requires infrastructure that enables deep intellectual engagement, protects professional standards, and reflects its stated commitments to excellence, equity, and collaboration. For the vast majority of faculty, assigned office space and access to consistent research space are not preferences; they are foundational infrastructure for productive, sustained, high-quality academic work. We remain committed to building a strong, collaborative School of Rehabilitation Science, but this commitment requires physical space that allows us to fulfill the responsibilities for which we were hired.

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