Disruption creates improvement in campus
Commons at Hancock

With the right ingredients, the vibe on a college campus can be exciting. Yes, students are there to learn, but does that learning environment allow for engagement, in and out of the classroom?

The Allan Hancock College Santa Maria campus has long been known for its park-like setting with beautiful, mature trees and a planned building layout that creates the Commons, the central core of the campus. It is in the Commons, with its rolling lawns and lumbering trees, where students connect on another level, whether it be walking together, studying or sharing a meal.

The desire to create the right learning environment is why we took advantage of a construction disruption last year that called for the north end of the Commons to be torn up.

We learned that our Measure I-funded capital construction projects first required that the college’s 60-year-old underground utilities be upgraded and expanded. This included the cabling that will allow for installation of a new voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) phone system that will be installed when our antiquated system is demolished as part of the Student Services Center project.

To bring those utilities through campus, the Commons had to be un-earthed to such a degree that we had no choice but to completely re-landscape when the work was done. We took this reality as a challenge and opportunity to re-turn the Commons to the students as an improved space that would heighten their overall campus experience.

Last month, we completed the final step of this rebirth. Hancock blue umbrellas were installed in the 10 new round tables positioned under or near our beloved 50-year-old jacaranda tree. Next to those tables are concrete picnic tables and benches that allow access to the new electrical pods for direct laptop WiFi connectivity. Across from this location is a staging area, with more electrical pods and trees that will eventually frame the space and provide prominence.

The stage is meant for student rallies, musical groups, performances and other special events. Several events have already taken place in the short time since it was completed. This usage is especially gratifying since the Associated Student Body government helped fund the new seating.

"If you build it, they will come" could have been the slogan for this new outdoor living space. Before, when a lush, green lawn was beautiful to the eye but short on planned seating, groups of students were few and far between. Now we have a new gathering space that helps all of us to spend more time together in the teaching and learning process.

Student Activities Coordinator Stephanie Robb reports she has been bombarded with new student requests for activities in the area, from bake sales to a movie night.

"It was long overdue. Students are just loving it!" she said.

Fire technology student Eddie Ramos said the work to improve the Commons was a “good hit. I use it to do my homework or just socialize.”

Another employee, Vicki Hernandez, believes the umbrellas and tables attract students and staff, and in turn, it just “pulls you there. I love it.”

I think we agree — it’s a good vibe.

Jose M. Ortiz is superintendent and president of Hancock College.