The central axis of the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee campus courtyard now boasts a new fountain with granite plaques memorializing key donors. Long-leaf pines (the large trees at right) were protected. Quercus virginiana “Park Side” trees line each walkway. These young oaks don’t provide much shade yet, but their beauty and stature in the years to come will give this area a special feel.
University of South Florida Courtyard

A place for students to call their own
Three years after the construction of the University of South Florida (USF) Sarasota-Manatee campus, students now have a space to call their own. That space, a vibrant student courtyard, a aesthetic retreat from the classroom and locus of student spirit, had been delayed because of budgetary restraints. However, in the fall of 2009, it was finally opened through the efforts and support of its students.

The courtyard was part of the original Sarasota-Manatee campus' Academic Facility designed by RS&H. But many of the landscape features planned for the U-shaped building, which houses classrooms and faculty offices, had to be postponed. Sadly, when the facility opened, the anticipated courtyard was empty and underused, as there was a lack of seating, shade and landscaping. More importantly, students were deprived of the spirit and elan it expected to evince.

Envisioning an area that could be the hub of campus life, the Student Government Association (SGA) voted to redesign the courtyard to make it more student-friendly, a place to socialize, study and relax on campus. The SGA paid for the $750,000 project with a portion of student fees dedicated to enhancing student life, and worked closely with the USF Sarasota-Manatee Facilities Planning and Management Department and consulting firm RS&H to design the outdoor space.

Project Manager Carey Lizza, of RS&H's Health, Education and Science program, said the plan, which took six months to design and six months to construct, was guided and approved by a steering committee comprised of students, faculty and consultants.
Above: Landscaping specifications include Celebration Bermuda sod and a ground cover of Dianella tasmanica, Lomandra longifolia “Breeze” and Trachelospermum asiaticum “Tricolor.”

Top, Right: The Student Government Association voted to redesign the courtyard to make it more student-friendly, including ipe wood-slat benches (Landscape Forms) and litter receptacles (Park-n-Pool). Banners throughout the courtyard celebrate school spirit. USF standard luminaries/poles, highlander lighter bollards and banner arms were provided by Beacon Products.

Right: The bull mascot of the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, elevated within a seat wall, is rendered in bronze at the center of the courtyard. Uplights keep the bull the focal point of the courtyard when the sun goes down. A cultured stone veneer caps the seat wall.
"We had three members of the student government as advisors, an ADA representative, facilities team member and Ron Sill as well as myself," says Lazzari. "The committee came up with several ideas that we tried to integrate into the final design." She says the three prominent themes that emerged were color, shade and school spirit.

"It was a barren, hot space," says RS&H designer Ron Sill, RLA, ASLA, LEED AP. "We wanted to take it from being a space without a personality to one that reflected the character and spirit of the university and, particularly, the students," Rick Lytle, director of facilities planning for USF Manatee-Sarasota, says that the popularity of the space has been overwhelming.

"The courtyard was to be the focus of the campus, and now there has been a complete turnaround. Barbecues are common and classes are always being held out there," says Lytle. He says the canopy has become a great backdrop for evening activities, many more than he could have imagined.

Lytle says school officials and students challenged the architect to create not only a pleasing space, but also an area imbued with school spirit.

"The way RS&H engaged students in the planning made them feel it was their project," says Lytle. "They deserved kudos for that."

The enhanced courtyard, named after Clyde G. Nixon, the late chairman of the board at Sun Hydraulics Corporation and a former campus board member, also features a tensioned
Top, Right: The once under-used, under-shaded and minimally landscaped courtyard has been transformed into an energetic outdoor setting. The flagstone is an eye-catching contrast to the concrete walks.

Bottom, Right: The courtyard’s open barbeque area is a popular venue, complete with two large grills (Weber Grills supplied by American Grill & Hearth), propane tank storage, concrete surfacing for seating and a flagstone landscape.

fabric canopy shade structure with seating walls and planters, benches, a central fountain and reflecting pool, plantings, and young oaks throughout that will provide even more shade as they grow. Large trellises with blooming bougainvillea flowers cover walkways and are reminiscent of the Martin Luther King Plaza on USF’s main campus in Tampa. The courtyard borders a beautiful pond and proudly features at its center a large raised bronze sculpture of the USF bull, the University’s mascot, bringing life and a sense of school spirit to the once empty space.

“The canopy shade is a logical extension of the student space and classroom into the courtyard,” says Sill. “We wanted something that was iconic and free form that would not conflict with the building.”

The canopy lights up in the evening with different colors, magenta, blue and green, adding a striking and artistic centerpiece to the courtyard and dramatically reflecting the contrasting dynamic of form between it and the building.
Above: A food court with shaded seating is integrated within a brick paved plaza. The large trellises (Sundance Architectural Products), reminiscent of the Martin Luther King Plaza on USF’s main campus in Tampa, incorporate lighting and are blooming with bougainvillea.

Left: The central fountain features architectural cast stone. On the ground plane, flagstone separates the pool from the concrete paths.

Right: The reflecting pool near the main entrance of the Academic Facility Building has seating built into the wall.

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— RS&H designer Ron Sill, RLA, ASLA, LEED AP
Project Team—USF Sarasota/Mannatee Campus Courtyard
RS&H: Lead design consultant and provided construction administration services. The firm also designed the campus Academic Facility Building on the courtyard. RS&H is a multidisciplinary firm with over 800 associates and 93 offices nationwide.

Wetbridge: Construction manager for the courtyard.

Studio Eclairage: Programmable architectural lighting.

Other Key Team Members
Aqua Dynamics
Doyle Electric Services
Holland Landscape & Tree Service
Irrigation Design Associates
Turner Tree & Landscape
Wyman Plumbing
Zemke General Contracting

Vendors
• American Grill & Hearth, Inc.—Weber grill supplier
• Beacon Products—Highlander bollard (illuminated) banner arms
• Biss Products—Plastic tables
• ERCO—Tree-up lights/ball pedestal accent lighting
• LED—Trellis lighting/canopy lighting
• Landscape Forms, Inc.—Benches
• Owens Corning—Cultured stone/stone veneer
• Park-n-Pool—Litter receptacles
• Standard Tile Co.—Granite for plaques
• Suncoast Stone Works—Architectural precast
• Sundance Architectural Products—Trellis and canopy (tensile)
• W&E Baum Bronze Tablet Corp.—Plaques
• Weaver & Ducré—Step lighting

July 2010 73
One of the unique features of the courtyard is an open barbeque area, complete with two large grills served by water and electric, as well as seating areas. It is now the site of the dean's annual barbeque. Space was left open for student events and other activities, including the annual Perlman Music Program, where students come from around the world to study with famed violinist Itzhak Perlman. Rehearsals and master classes are held under tents in the courtyard.

In all, USF, RS&H and the students took what was once an under-shaded, hot, and minimally landscaped courtyard and turned it into an energetic outdoor setting aimed at invigorating and bringing together students, staff, faculty and the community. The opening last September provided a warm welcome for students attending their first week of classes. Over 200 people attended the ribbon cutting, including school board members, elected officials, community leaders and donors. USF students hosted a barbeque lunch.

Above: Highlander illuminated bollards (Beacon) and light standards keep the walkways safe for night strolling. In addition to the colorful LED canopy lighting, the trees are up lit in the courtyard, plus there are step lights (Wever & Ducre) and flush architectural lighting (ERCO) for additional interesting nighttime effects.

Left: Cool colors shine softly against the canopy shades (Sundance Architectural Products) from the programmable LED fixtures, which vary from magenta, to blue and then to green (canopy lighting by ILED).