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Recommended Citation
(2018) "Creativity in Action at DePaul's Idea Realization Lab," DePaul Magazine: Vol. 1 : Iss. 412022 , Article 8. Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine/vol1/iss412022/8

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CREATIVITY IN ACTION

AT DePAUL’S IDEA REALIZATION LAB

BY KELSEY SCHAGEMANN
PHOTOS BY TOM EVANS
Housed on the third floor of the Richard M. and Maggie C. Daley Building, the Idea Realization Lab (IRL) is a 4,500-square-foot makerspace where students, faculty and staff bring their creative ideas to life. The IRL opened last September and quickly became a favorite hangout for members of the DePaul community. In addition to lounge areas, the IRL features a digital fabrication studio, two stop-motion labs, a woodshop and an electronics corner. But it's the plethora of top-notch tools housed in each space that are the real showstoppers: laser cutters, high-resolution 3D printers, button makers, sewing machines and sergers, vinyl cutters, CNC routers, band saws, scroll saws, chop saws, micro miter saws, drills and more.

Of course, these tools would gather dust if not for the creative minds who operate them. “I think the most important aspect of the IRL is the sense of agency students feel in this space,” says Jay Margalus, director of the IRL and an instructor in the School of Design in the College of Computing and Digital Media. “There aren’t a lot of places where students feel like they have the power to do whatever they want.”

Students named the IRL and serve on its advisory board, staff the space, lead educational workshops on the equipment and conduct tours for students from local schools. On Friday nights, it’s not unusual for 70 or more students to gather at the IRL to work on personal projects and hang out. “Anyone can throw a 3D printer in a room and call it a makerspace, but not everyone can focus on the community like we do,” Margalus says. “We tell the students, ‘We trust you, you can do this,’ and then they take it from there. You can’t be a passive learner in a makerspace.”

“A lot of the stuff in this space was actually made here, and more importantly, it was made by students,” Jay Margalus says. “They’ve also done projects for the Office of Admissions, Facility Operations, faculty and other groups around the university.”

In the Digital Fabrication Studio, the women’s rugby team used a vinyl cutter to create a logo, which they then silkscreened onto their jerseys. “It was such a great idea,” Margalus says. “The team saved money, plus they got to do a hands-on project together.”
IRL Supervisor and Workshop Leader Sanjna Malik (right) assists student Sydney Saari (left) with a 3D printing project.

“We don’t hide the tools away,” Margalus says. “All the tools are hanging on walls or in clear bins where you can see them. Everything’s out in the open so students can feel free to grab whatever materials they need.”
Conversations tended to echo in the break room connected to the Digital Fabrication Studio, so Jenn Lawhead, the head lab moderator, decided to do something about it. She collected leftover cardboard and foam from equipment deliveries, cut the material into circles, covered it with cloth and hung it on the wall. “She found a way to do sound dampening basically for free,” Margalus notes.

Students are able to make precision cuts with the lab’s CNC router and create objects like octopus shapes with its 3D printer.