Campus Environments Reflection

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Studying the many and various ways that campus environments influence students who inhabit them has made it clear to me that campus environments are complex places. My hope and expectation as a professional who will work with college students is that they will learn to navigate the intricacies of campus environments leading them to engagement and inclusion and ultimately academic success. The theories and research on this topic have revealed the critical importance of considering environmental factors when working with students in both academic and co curricular arenas so that all students feel safe, included and part of a community, whatever type of institution they attend.

Strange and Banning (2001) emphasized that safety and inclusion are both inherently integrated campus conditions that are necessary for development and learning. They believe, “Being free from physical threat and harm and experiencing a fundamental psychological sense of belonging on campus are important conditions for the pursuit of opportunities to learn, develop and grow” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p.135). Recent events on our campus at Pennsylvania State University have provided personal evidence to support their thoughts. Two recent instances of physical assault at the west end of campus have encouraged me to alter some of my behaviors. I have changed the pathways I use in this area at night, often going out of my way and through well lit buildings as opposed to taking a shorter darkened path. I have also chosen not to accept postings for substitute work assignments at Rec Hall due to the lack of close parking and the dark walkways leading to the parking that is available. My changes in behavior were a direct environmental result of feeling a lack of safety. In a broader sense beyond my own reaction, I wonder how many students are now reluctant to walk at night to study at the
Pattee-Paterno Library which is in the same vicinity. As most students were informed of these incidents via PSU-text, a campus wide alert system, knowledge now lingers as a psychological threat of the real fact that walking at night on campus is not always safe. This knowledge will decidedly inform decisions that may impact students attending both academic and co-curricular activities.

Fisher and Nasar (as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) recommended specific corrections to micro level design features to improve campus safety. Improving victim prospect and reducing offender refuge are examples of their suggestions. In the case of the Penn State assaults, having less shrubbery where offenders can hide and better lit walkways and residence hall entrances may have provided deterrents to the offenders.

On a constructive note, I was recently made aware of an occurrence at Penn State that attempts to assess and improve micro level design features related to physical safety. The director of the Women’s Resource Center along with representatives from the Office of Physical Plant perform periodic “safety walks.” They walk together at night on campus looking for areas that need better lighting, areas where offenders can lurk, and areas where additional call boxes may be needed.

A different type of design weakness can produce feelings of withdrawal and lack of inclusion. Banning (as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) suggested that high student density in campus environments can lead to behaviors that reduce community and inclusion. This affect can occur in places such as residence halls, eating commons, or classrooms. I have worked with some students who are assigned to temporary housing in the residence halls. They appear to be true victims of high density living. These students have voiced an inability to sleep due to the noise of six students living in one space. This
has impacted their ability to attend and focus in their early morning classes, and they are not performing as well as they would like. One also shared an incident in which two or three of her roommates verbally teased or harassed one of the others. Her perception of her roommates’ behavior as inconsiderate has led her to withdraw from social connections with her roommates. She has experienced feelings of isolation in the main area that should be a safe haven for her, her residence. I wonder if residence assistants are educated to pay more attention to students in areas of high density considering the increased likelihood these students have for interference with psychological safety and academic concerns. I also wonder how many students in these high density residential settings succumb to psychological pressure and leave the university. That would prove to be an interesting study.

My past experiences in K-12 education were replete with professional development concerning psychological safety and its affect on feelings of belonging and educational performance. We had several programs at our disposal to both prevent bullying and to repair damage from instances of bullying. One promising program that would be transferable to higher education was Restorative Practices which is based on the principle of restorative justice. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen and Allen (1999) also espoused several programs of “promising practice” that could be utilized in campus environments to promote positive intergroup relations, to resolve conflict, and to promote intergroup dialogue. All of these also advance the improvement of the campus climate for racial and ethnic diversity which would go a long way toward building stronger feelings of safety, inclusion and community.
An educative endeavor that occurs in regard to helping students deal with safety and belonging takes place at Penn State’s summer orientation program, First Year Testing, Consulting and Advising Program (FTCAP). A portion of the program is devoted to safety: pointing out the availability of call boxes, the importance of keeping an eye on friends and traveling at night in pairs, and the added danger alcohol consumption can bring to a situation. Numerous campus resources that offer support are introduced at this first phase of student orientation. Students who may experience future academic or psychological needs when they begin their transition to college acquire the knowledge of these support systems to store in their mental backpacks. I now better understand the reason for the inclusion of this information as an important first step in educating incoming students about how we support members of our campus community.

At FTCAP, involvement and engagement are also promoted. Clubs and organizations are highlighted and the importance of joining and engaging in student development is summed up in the slogan: Be a Part from the Start. Astin (as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 138) stated simply, “Students learn from becoming involved.” Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) found that frequent participation in college-sponsored activities was one of the environmental factors that maximized persistence and educational attainment. As an adviser, I recognize that I have the ability to teach students the benefits of involvement. It is clearly within my purview to help students find and join clubs and organizations that will enhance their person-environment fit and increase their feelings of inclusion and engagement.
One activity most all students at Penn State strive to become involved with is the Pan-Hellenic Dance Marathon, affectionately known as THON. While reading about organizational dimensions of involvement, in my mind THON presents as a contradiction. Moos, (as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) shared that as group size in a setting increases, morale and attitudes become less positive; absenteeism is more frequent. It would appear that an event of the magnitude of THON would have these characteristics of overmanning (Wicker, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001) where there are too many people for meaningful achievement. Yet, this does not appear to be the case. THON seems to be brilliantly managed by having multitudes of sub committees responsible for a large variety of tasks. The organizational scheme presents a host of leadership opportunities from a single event. Ultimately, as Strange and Banning (2001) pointed out, the ratio of participants to opportunities is the main consideration for designing an involving environment.

However, all students may not approach involvement, engagement and participation in the same fashion. Strange and Banning (2001) stated that underrepresented groups’ involvement may be encouraged by providing offices or clubs that function as supportive aggregates. These can be deemed by students to be safe spaces. Spitzberg and Thorndike (as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001, p.148) described these as “places for homogeneous groupings of individuals who share common cultures, experiences, and values that distinguish them from others in the setting.” Holland (as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001), believed that consistent aggregates create greater potential for attracting and retaining students who share the group’s dominant features.
Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen and Allen, (1999) provided additional views on building inclusion and feelings of belonging for students from minority or ethnic populations. Many of their suggestions place emphasis on the role that faculty can play in helping minority students feel a sense of belonging. Faculty involvement appears to be an important consideration for creating an inclusive environment in which all students can develop and learn. However, both the quantity and quality of faculty involvement with students varies by institutional type as evidenced by Hirt (2006). Inherent in all of the recommendations put forth by Hurtado et al. (1999) was the affirmation that administrators, staff, faculty and student leaders work together to recognize the action of building an inclusive climate as an important goal.

In my opinion the two institutional types that appear to have the best formula for success in achieving this goal are comprehensive universities and community colleges. Both of these institutions serve diverse populations and student affairs workers work closely with faculty to support students. It appears that the institutional environments at comprehensive universities and community colleges would best support efforts to build diverse climates and inclusive learning environments. This may prove to be more challenging at community colleges, however, where the bureaucracy inherent in this institutional type may slow programmatic or curricular changes.

Another factor to consider in the variability of institutional types is the dissemination of knowledge to potential students pertaining to the characteristics of each type. Strange and Banning (2001) promoted the theory of attraction as a dynamic in recruiting potential students. They believe providing a good student-institutional match maximizes student satisfaction and retention. Yet, I wonder, how much information do
high school students actually have to help them make a good match? What knowledge do they bring in regard to the amount of time they will interact with faculty based on their choice of college? Do they know the benefits of attending a diverse university or the positive influence that involvement and engagement will bring them? Do they inquire about safety features as they visit campuses? We learned from Magolda, (2001) that campus tours often only show the brighter side of the institution and do not necessarily highlight the student characteristics vital to becoming a member of the particular campus community. It seems to me that a short course in high school on the different types of higher education institutions and the characteristics of each, as well as, what questions to ask when choosing a college would go a long way in fostering accurate student-environment fit to promote long term retention.

I have come to recognize the critical role that students’ safety, inclusion, and community belonging play in their success at the institutions of their choice. These concepts interact and are linked to a variety of factors, environmental influences among them. Efforts to provide a safe campus environment both physically and psychologically are necessary and involve the efforts of both faculty and student affairs professionals. Opportunities for involvement in differentiated and non-differentiated settings are also important for student success. Experiences with these factors will most likely take different forms based on the institutional type attended. It is my belief that giving high school students the critical knowledge about institutional differences will better inform their college choice and create the right person-environment fit to promote feelings of safety, inclusion and community in whatever campus environment they select.
References


