

 LEADING STRATEGIES

The Impact of Campus Environments on College Choice and Persistence

by Scott Secore

The reasons a student may choose a particular institution when seeking a postsecondary education are many. So, too, are the reasons students may opt to persist at their chosen institutions. However, a sense of belonging and a strong emotional connection often supply students all the incentive they need. College campus environments play a pivotal role in the decision-making process, as the ecology, climate, and culture of an institution profoundly influence student perceptions and behaviors. Consequently, higher education administrators must take into account more than just their institution's good name, as the attractiveness and sociability of a college campus evoke feelings of acceptance and affirmation that extend beyond the classroom. This article explores the influences that affect student perceptions and explains why the campus environment is crucial to both college choice and persistence. In addition, it deconstructs the components that comprise the campus environment and offers insight into how administrators can elicit desirable student responses.

Whether large or small, rural or urban, public or private, two- or four-year, institutions of higher education differ in many ways. These differences are best understood through real-life situations within each specific institution's cultural milieu (Kuh and Whitt 1988) and are significant because they play an integral role in the decision-making processes and scholastic pursuits of both prospective and matriculating students. For prospective students, the campus visit is often the single-most influential source of information in their college choice (Brown 2010; Hesel 2004; Okerson 2016). Campus visits provide prospective students with the opportunity to en-

gage with the campus environment at large—to connect openly with the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution—thus informing and influencing their enrollment decision. For matriculating students, the campus environment has a similar effect, building upon initial sentiments to create contextual conditions that both encourage and support student learning and development. In many respects, the campus environment serves as the lone determinant of a student's future as the “feel” of a college campus and the sense of belonging it elicits have a powerful impact on cognitive and behavioral responses. As a result, enrollment managers, admission of-

ficers, and administrators alike must have an exhaustive understanding of the institutional environment and its effect on students' psyches. Only with a well-informed and complete understanding of how students feel and what they want and expect from a college campus can enrollment managers, admission officers, and administrators truly provide students with the best possible environment for social and academic successes.

College Choice and Persistence

Historically, researchers studying student enrollment behaviors generally concur that most students arrive at their college choice through an interactive and evolutionary process that begins as early as middle school and culminates with postsecondary matriculation (Bateman and Spruill 1996; D. Chapman 1981; R. Chapman 1984; Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith 1989; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Jackson 1982; Litten 1982; Paulsen 1990). Essentially, the process unfolds as students determine their educational aspirations, investigate institutions of interest, and evaluate plausible options. While this decision process is intrinsically protean, it commonly occurs in three stages: (1) predisposition, (2) search, and (3) choice (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). In this context, however, stages are not explicitly prescribed and measurable. Rather, they are fluid, representing the changing mix of factors that affect decisions (Bateman and Spruill 1996). In other words, what occurs in the first stage of choice is likely to influence the second and third stages, thereby shaping students' interest and commitment not only to postsecondary education but also to a particular institution (Bateman and Spruill 1996). For example, during the search phase, interaction between students and institutions reaches its zenith as both parties aim to gather information and impress. Naturally, impressions formed during the search phase—particularly for the student— influence conclusions reached in the choice phase.

For most students, institutional selection (choice) emanates from a composite of personal sociological, psychological, and economic characteristics and those of the institutional choice set (considered institutions) (Hossler and Palmer 2008; Jackson 1982; Paulsen 1990).

For example, student attributes such as socioeconomic status, familial circumstances, academic performance and ability, educational goals, and career ambitions often serve as motivational factors guiding the decision process (Chapman 1981; Hossler and Stage 1992; Jackson 1982). Institutional attributes such as location, size, cost, academic offerings and reputation, social climate, and campus appearance also have a profound impact on students' final decisions (Chapman 1981; Hossler *et al.* 1989; Lee and Chatfield 2011; Noel-Levitz 2012). In addition, interpersonal communications with family and friends, as well as the Internet and social media, greatly affect how students communicate, receive, and adjudicate information (Secore 2018). Simply put, the reasons students choose to enroll at particular institutions are many. However, despite abundant resources and a rich array of variables, campus visits remain overwhelmingly influential to students and their families. Research indicates that social ethos and campus aesthetics weigh heavily in the decision-making process.

Studies suggest that during campus visits, attendance at social events (*e.g.*, sports competitions, arts functions, etc.), patronage of campus services (*e.g.*, coffee shops, dining halls, bookstores, etc.), and congenial interface with members of the campus community (*e.g.*, students, faculty, and staff) have a tremendous impact on students' college choices (Barrett 2014; Okerson 2016; Spoon 2006). More often than not, students simply identify with a welcoming and affable atmosphere where their potential peers are ostensibly benevolent, happy, enthusiastic, and proud constituents of their respective institutions. Friendly people, neighborly ambience, positive personal interactions, and a strong sense of community routinely appear in the literature as rationales for students' college choices (Barrett 2014; Hayes 1989; Hesel 2004; Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly 1991; Nora 2004; Okerson 2016; Petr and Wendel 1998; Spoon 2006).

Campus appearance also plays an influential role in students' college choices. In studies conducted by Boyer (1987), Heath (1993), Hesel (2004), Noel-Levitz (2012), and Okerson (2016), prospective students gave high marks and rave reviews for campus attractiveness.

Students frequently cite natural scenery/habitats (*e.g.*, green spaces, open/outdoor areas, trees, flowers, water features, etc.), and physical structures and layouts (*e.g.*, buildings, offices, residence halls, student unions, etc.) as having an effect on how they perceive a college campus (Barrett 2014; Harrington 2014; McFarland, Waliczek and Zajicek 2008; Okerson 2016; Spoon 2006).

These two factors (sociability and appearance) are of central importance to students' college choices as they provide an understanding of campus dynamics and evoke feelings that render positive or negative impressions. Students with positive feelings about a particular institution often forge an emotional connection with the school. Certainty and an emotional connection give the student a sense of belonging and acceptance. Students who feel that they belong and have value are more likely to enroll and matriculate (Kuh 2009). Moreover, matriculating students who continue to feel cared about tend to develop stronger connections to their schools and are wont to participate in educationally purposeful activities, establish meaningful relationships, take advantage of resources provided by the school, and report higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience (Cuseo, Fecas, and Thompson 2007; Harrington 2014; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek 2006; Kuh 2009). Kuh (2009) opines, "When students' expectations match their experiences in college, students are more likely to be satisfied and persist to graduation" (61). Thus, the impression rendered by acculturation of social and topographical milieus, along with ample provision of opportunity for the student to contribute to said atmosphere, is highly influential on both college choice and persistence.

Environment

According to Dewey (1916), "environment" denotes something more than just the surroundings that encompass an individual: it is the connection between one's literal surroundings and one's interactions with it. He states, "The environment consists of those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being" (16). As such, where one's environment subsumes everything one en-

counters and interacts with—objects, structures, and people—environment is both fundamentally physical and social. Environment is also psychological, as interaction influences one's beliefs, behaviors, and overall disposition. In other words, environment is "where the individual mind, the social group, and the organizational structure meet and interact" (Baird, 1988, 126).

Moos (1973) theorizes that conceptualization of human environments occurs in six different yet inter-related dimensions that have a decisive influence on individual and group behavior: (1) ecological, (2) organizational structure, (3) personal characteristics, (4) behavior settings, (5) psychosocial characteristics and organizational climate, and (6) functional/reinforcement properties. Notably, the *ecological* dimension asserts that architecture and the physical constraints that limit or define activity influence behavior, while dimensions of *organizational structure* avouch that those characteristics inherent to the workplace—such as size, staffing ratios, salaries, and spans of control—influence behavior (Insel and Moos 1974; Moos 1973). *Personal characteristics* imply that the character of an environment is dependent on its members' demographics and traits—such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, etc.—while *psychosocial characteristics and organizational climate* aver that the impressions and perceptions of individuals both internal and external to the environment influence behavior (Insel and Moos 1974). Moos' approach infers that environments, like people, have unique personalities characterized by their order and structure (Insel and Moos 1974). Essentially, the relationship between humans and their environment is a two-way street: perception influences behavior, and environments dictate potential. Simply put, people shape their environment, and the environment shapes people.

The college campus environment comprises many facets influencing thought and behavior. From physical properties (*e.g.*, buildings and equipment), to citizenry (*e.g.*, students, faculty, and staff), to social and academic opportunities for connectivity, psychological and behavioral stimuli litter college campuses. With this in mind, Strange and Banning (2001) propose that campus environments embody four distinct elements, or sub-

environments, reminiscent of Moos' (1973) dimensions: physical, aggregate, organized, and constructed. Combined, these elements create the physical, perceived, and enacted environments embedded within the "total" environment of the institution.

The *physical* environment is the most salient and contains the natural and synthetic components of the campus (Harrington 2014). It includes tangible and concrete structures, outdoor/green spaces, navigational flow, spatial organization, accessibility, furniture, signage, lighting, and a host of other architectural, infrastructural, and/or design elements (Harrington 2014; Kuh 2009; Strange and Banning 2001). The *aggregate* environment consists of the collective characteristics of the individuals who occupy the physical environment—that is, the environment takes shape via the demographic features (*e.g.*, age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and psychosocial traits (*e.g.*, personality, interests, habits, etc.) of its members and their interactions. *Organizational* environment refers to purposes and goals achieved through existing policies, procedures, and system of governance—that is, all campus entities and functions (*e.g.*, classes, clubs, offices, departments, etc.) are responsible for organizational outcomes. Finally, *constructed* environments are the shared perceptions and subjective experiences of group members and the meanings they assign to them (Harrington 2014; Strange and Banning 2001). In essence, this is the foundation for *campus climate* and *culture*.

For a better understanding of how the contextual conditions and sociability of an institution can influence a student's perception and behavioral responses, Kuh (2009) suggests viewing "total" environment through an interpretive frame that encompasses the ecology, climate, and culture of the school. However, it is important to heed the often arbitrary and interchangeable use of these terms to describe the physical, social, and psychological conditions of organizational environments. For example, Moos (1973) notes that ecology and climate are primarily concerned with the relationship between man and his physical environment whereas Williams (2010) argues that climate and culture should be viewed as "highly related organizational ideas that describe how the complex social systems of the campus come

together and coalesce to create a unique organizational milieu of people, interactions, politics, policies, beliefs, values, and outcomes" (9). Ecology, climate, and culture interrelate and overlap but individually emphasize different aspects of the campus environment.

Ecology

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines ecology as "the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment." Lawrence (2009) defines human ecology as "the study of the dynamic interrelationships between human populations and the physical, biotic, cultural, and social characteristics of their environment" (176). Correspondingly, social ecology has roots in both ecology and human ecology but expands to incorporate communal and value-oriented properties that induce effective human functionality. On this subject, Insel and Moos (1974) surmise that "social cooperation is perhaps the most important regulatory mechanism in society, serving to mitigate the destructive and predatory elements found in the ecological evolution of other animal communities" (180). In other words, social ecology concerns the regulatory system of checks and balances between human societies and the resources of their environment wherein transactional relationships and interactions define behavior.

For institutions of higher education, the transactional relationships and interactions between students and the campus environment characterize *campus ecology*. Much like the interpretations of environment presented by Dewey (1916) and Moos (1973), campus ecology concerns a broad scope of criteria influencing student perception and behavior. How students affect campus spaces—and how campus spaces, in turn, affect students—is meaningful as students and campuses mutually define one another (Kaiser 1978). Roberts and Taylor (2016) avow:

The setting of a university can shape for good or bad the learning experiences of its scholars; it can nurture or frustrate the building of social bonds and community interactions; and it can boost—or undermine—an institution's competitiveness in relation to its peers (16).

According to Smith and Wertlieb (2005), ecological theory often explains students' ability to connect with an institution based on the relative attractiveness of the college environment, as the physical attributes and characteristics of the campus significantly affect students' emotional and psychosocial outlooks. For instance, a stimulating atmosphere generates interest and appeal. Griffith (1994) expounds on this sentiment, suggesting that "Attractively landscaped formal open spaces or habitats left in their natural form, as woods and gorges, help establish a venerable campus identity, stir alumni sentimentalism, create a strong sense of community, and curb escalating campus densities" (648). Moreover, environmental psychologists posit that one's surroundings influence both cognition and intellectual development, as research shows that interactions with nature often link to restorative and/or improved psychological and physiological health (*i.e.*, increased self-esteem, reduced stress, diminished fatigue, etc.) (Joye 2007; McFarland *et al.* 2008; Salingaros 1999; Scholl and Gulwadi 2015).

Physical spaces on campus also convey symbolic and nonverbal messages about the college experience, as the amount, locations, and arrangements of physical spaces both directly and indirectly influence students' perceptions and behaviors toward a school (Harrington 2014; Kuh 2009). For example, placement of residence halls near academic buildings and communal spaces (*e.g.*, student union, library, dining hall, etc.) increases opportunity for social interaction and encourages rigorous academic engagement. Likewise, situating regularly visited critical support services (*e.g.*, admission, registrar, financial aid, etc.) in a single location implies cohesiveness, organization, and convenience. In response, students' stress levels decrease, and their institutional satisfaction levels increase. Conversely, open spaces (*e.g.*, courtyards, fields, lawns, etc.) offer students relief from congested high-traffic areas—as well as their studies. Depending on students' needs, open and green spaces may promote active fraternization and integration or rest and relaxation. Research confirms that students who frequently utilize open and green spaces tend to rate their quality of life, overall satisfaction, and level of academic achievement higher than those who do not

(Hajrasouliha and Ewing 2016; Harrington 2014; McFarland *et al.* 2008).

Hajrasouliha and Ewing (2016) posit that "well-designed" campuses comprise seven morphological dimensions: land-use organization, compactness, connectivity, configuration, campus living, greenness, and context. *Land-use organization* constitutes the mix of research, residence, athletic, and academic facilities where *compactness* denotes campus density and building proximity. *Connectivity* describes the degree of street networks that bridge campus amenities and the campus to the surrounding area while *configuration* characterizes the strength of campus spatial structure. Patently, *campus living* refers to student residency, *greenness* represents nature and verdure, and *context* delineates urbanization. Simply stated, Hajrasouliha and Ewing (2016) deem a "well-designed" campus a "mixed, compact, well-connected, well-structured, inhabited, and green campus in an urbanized setting" (2). In light of this, Scholl and Gulwadi (2015) aver:

Well-designed and connected networks of indoor and open spaces on campuses can be key, yet typically overlooked catalysts, in student learning and a strong influence on students' initial and longstanding experiences that promote a sense of belonging to the learning community (53).

Students have preconceived notions of what a college campus should look like and therefore expect college campuses to look different from other places with which they are familiar (Okerson 2016; Scholl and Gulwadi 2015). Dober (1996) asserts that the college campus "expresses something about the quality of academic life as well as its role as a citizen of the community in which it is located" (47). For those experiencing their first visit, a well-designed and aesthetically pleasing campus doubtless will stand out. On this subject, Griffith (1994) contends:

Universities that create and maintain an engaging campus environment, which is conducive to both activity and tranquility, receive further dividends. A well laid out campus with sufficient open space will assist in the recruitment of top notch students and faculty. A student's perception of

how a campus looks and feels plays a critical role in the choice of a higher education institution (650).

Where the intentional placement of natural and manufactured physical properties helps students make important connections and form a sense of belonging to the campus, physical space is a worthy consideration for administrators (Harrington 2014). As such, higher education institutions can—and should—strategically design ecosystems and environments that are appealing and engaging to both prospective and matriculating students. Acute consciousness of tangible and intangible campus properties is vital, especially where enrollment managers must perpetually attract new students and retain current students. At a minimum, enrollment managers should familiarize themselves and their staff members with key physical attributes on campus. They also should work with admission officers to assess student interactions and deportment in order to better understand their campuses. Admission personnel can augment existing recruitment and retention strategies—such as the campus visit—to harness the potential of campus attributes. By identifying dominant purviews, performing appraisals, and exploiting campus geography, enrollment managers can optimize institutional idiosyncrasies to everyone's benefit.

Climate

One of the most well-known—and highly referenced—definitions of campus climate is that of Susan Rankin, Senior Research Associate in the Center for the Study of Higher Education and Associate Professor of Education in the College Student Affairs Program at The Pennsylvania State University. Rankin (n.d.), as lead consultant on a campus climate initiative at the University of California, defines campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potentials” (para 1). Another campus climate initiative (that of the University of Wisconsin-Madison) offers a different, more resplendent definition of campus climate:

The atmosphere or ambience of an organization as perceived by its members...reflected in its structures, policies, and practices; the demographics of its membership; the attitudes and values of its members and leaders; and the quality of personal interactions.

Behaviors within a workplace or learning environment...that influence whether an individual feels personally safe, listened to, valued, and treated fairly and with respect (as cited in Bowers, n.d., para. 1).

Simply, campus climate refers to the perceptions and experiences of institutional members (*e.g.*, students, faculty, staff, etc.) as it summarizes the inclusivity dynamics of the institution and the degree to which its members feel included or excluded (Baird 1988; Kuh 2009; Williams 2010).

More often than not, discussion of climate leads to discussion of diversity. In this context, diversity represents more than the differences in experience, age, sexuality, gender, race, religion, etc. that comprise the constituency of an institution and contributes to the richness of the campus environment (Fine and Handelsman 2010). It represents opportunities for institutional members to interact with—and better understand—differing histories and identities. Opportunities for recognition and interchange of diversity may include programs, clubs, academic courses, and even residence halls.

To highlight the complexities and overall significance of diversity, Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) devised a four-dimensional framework for understanding campus climate. According to Hurtado *et al.* (1998), an understanding of campus climate materializes best through (1) historical contexts, (2) structural breadth, (3) a psychological component, and (4) a behavioral component. *Historical contexts* have concern for the evolutionary factors of campus inclusion as well as the methodologies and experiences that helped shape contemporary institutional norms. The *structural dimension* is analogous to Moos' (1973) personal characteristics dimension and Strange and Bannings' (2001) aggregate environment, as the demographic features and personal identities that make up institutional membership are of central focus. The *psychological dimension*

sion addresses perceptions of belonging and/or alienation among constituents while the *behavioral component* targets student experiences with the campus system. Thus, the primary concern is evaluation of student participation in campus programs, traditions, and activities together with interpersonal interactions among different identity groups. Unified, these dimensions are the foundation of a climate that cultivates engagement and celebrates difference (Williams 2010).

Whether academic or sociological, diversity on a college campus exposes students to a seemingly compounded, contrastive and enigmatic world. Diversity strengthens social maturity, broadens sagaciousness, reinforces adaptability, and promotes acceptance. Most important, it offers students opportunity for involvement, collaboration, personal growth, and development.

In terms of instilling and sustaining diversity on college campuses, enrollment managers are, in many respects, both the façade of and the stimulus for positive movement. Unfortunately, many ethnic, minority, and underrepresented students (*e.g.*, African American, Hispanic, Native American, or LGBTQ) experience a variety of personal, environmental, and institutional barriers that result in unequal, limited, or no access to a college education (Nitri 2001; Opp 2001; Thomason and Thurber 1999). These barriers often include extensive financial difficulties, lack of familial support, paucity of information about the college preparation and application process, low academic grades and test scores, and/or an absence of role models who have pursued higher education (Lee 1991; Nitri 2001). Nevertheless, enrollment managers can employ a variety of measures that can mitigate barriers and ensure diversity.

Foremost, enrollment managers and higher education marketers must be aware of the needs, histories, identities, and barriers that typify the students—and student groups—they seek to reach. To attract and retain certain students, institutions of higher education must identify with them. Likewise, recruitment and retention efforts geared toward certain students must be in direct response to the characteristics of the target group. Recruitment and retention exercises cannot—and should not—follow a “one-size-fits-all” approach. What works

for one type of student does not work for all students. LaBrie (2014) contends:

It is important for an institution that is interested in recruiting a diverse student population to have an appreciation for the various communities it wishes to recruit in and to understand the role of the recruiter. The recruiter not only needs to have a deeper appreciation of the communities he or she is talking to, but often needs to be a member of that community (as cited in Lynch 2014, para. 22).

In view of this, enrollment managers can also collaborate with current institutional members—faculty, staff, or students—and alumni to increase diversity. Admission officers may also solicit assistance from non-institutional community members, such as church leaders, athletic directors, and school counselors. By including minority (and other underrepresented) group members in recruitment and retention efforts, admission personnel can promote diversity. For example, during the recruitment process, minority student tour guides clearly communicate messages of inclusion and success at the institution (Alger and Carrasco 1997). Similarly, a minority adult presence (*e.g.*, faculty, counselors, etc.) at community events and college fairs demonstrates support and professional success. LaBrie (2014) posits:

One of the more powerful ways of changing and becoming much more appealing to a diverse population is to reflect that population in the faculty as well as the staff who represent the institution. Students from underrepresented minorities will often look for mentors and colleagues that come from a common experience. They will see themselves within the institution if they see members of their community represented within the institution, and this has a snowball effect where a more diverse student population mandates a more diverse staff and faculty (as cited in Lynch 2014, para. 21).

Among the most effective methods for stimulating retention are mentoring and support systems (Whitaker, Montgomery, and Acosta 2015). Institutional members, regardless of position and/or status, “can play a significant role in students’ lives by making a conscious effort to act as mentors, particularly to students who have

come from less privileged backgrounds or have overcome significant obstacles simply to enroll in college” (Alger and Carrasco 1997, para. 11). Likewise, academic and outreach programs, as well as varied co-curricular activities, should provide underrepresented students with opportunities to both explore and express the values of their mores.

Last, higher education marketers need to create effective messaging that transcends cookie-cutter parlance. The language and visual imagery used in institutional messages (*e.g.*, websites, presentations, social media, etc.) communicate a great deal about the types of students enrolled at a given institution. Perceptions rendered—whether intentional or incidental—not only inform prospective students’ impression of an institution but also affect their confidence in their own abilities (Arendt and Dohrman 2016). Thus, the means and modes of information delivery in recruitment and retention efforts must relay institutional intentions to serve all students equitably. To successfully attract and retain diverse students, higher education institutions must meet students’ psychological, safety, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs (Donnell, Edwards, and Green 2002).

Culture

According to Smircich (1983), “Culture is usually defined as a social and normative glue that holds an organization together” (344). Expounding on this definition, Masland (1985) asserts that organizational culture “induces purpose, commitment, and order; provides meaning and social cohesion; and clarifies and explains behavioral expectations. Culture influences an organization through the people within it” (157). Kuh (2009) concludes that institutional culture is “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in college or university” (71).

Finding a canonical definition of culture applicable to all institutions of higher education is implausible. Each university and college is a world unto itself. With varied governance and organizational structures, am-

biguous and clashing methodologies for attaining goals, and a diverse array of personal philosophies and communal subcultures, higher education institutions are, in many respects, isolated in comparison to other organizations. Consequently, campus life and the college community are inextricably unique. Where campus climate reflects the perceptions and experiences of individuals toward an institution, campus culture reflects the character of an institution (Kuh 1993, 2009). Institutional character exists in two varieties: formal and informal, or espoused and enacted.

Character

Hartshorne (1943) describes the college community as a social system based on three inherent elements: (1) demographic processes, (2) formal organization and material equipment, and (3) informal organization. *Demographic processes* are the backgrounds, characteristics, and overall composition of the student population—much like the previously discussed dimensions of Moos (1973), Strange and Banning (2001), and Hurtado *et al.* (1998). *Formal organization and material equipment* encompass both the functional makeup of the college setting (*e.g.*, classes, co-curricular activities, etc.), as well as the physical elements (*e.g.*, buildings, pathways, etc.), and concentrates specifically on how these elements affect student thought and behavior. Hartshorne (1943) labels this the “official culture” of the college environment (321). Finally, *informal organization* is the “unofficial culture” of the college environment and corresponds to the behavioral patterns and norms that students develop through their adjustment to the formal/official culture (321).

Values

Kuh (1993) suggests that an institution’s values—and how those values are transmitted—elicit character. An institution’s values represent “widely held beliefs or sentiments about the importance of certain goals, activities, relationships, and feelings” (Kuh and Whitt, 1988, 23). Values and beliefs are either espoused or enacted. Espoused values are what people say they believe but do not necessarily do. They are often unconscious themes or symbolic interpretations of reality and tend

to take the form of assertions and assumptions—true or false—about institutional aspirations that come to portray the institution (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Smircich 1983). Enacted values are beliefs put into practice, such as policy and procedure. Enacted values and beliefs are conscious and explicit and guide the day-to-day routines performed by the institution's constituents (Kuh 1993; Kuh and Whitt 1988). Bear in mind that enacted values and beliefs are not always congruent with espoused values and beliefs. The intersections of formal and informal organization, in addition to inconsistencies regarding values, shepherd the creation of institutional character.

Institutional character manifests itself in campus culture through a “holistic, complex web of physical and verbal artifacts, enduring behavioral patterns, embedded values and beliefs, and ideologies and assumptions” (Kuh, 2009, 71). Members within their respective college communities use artifacts, values, beliefs, assumptions, and existing comportment to depict their campus culture to themselves and others (Schein 2004).

Artifacts

Taking a cue from anthropology, artifacts signify cultural identity. They can be physical, verbal, or behavioral—that is, anything one can see, hear, and feel when encountering a new group with an unfamiliar culture (Schein 2004). Kuh and Whitt (1988) propose that physical (visible) artifacts are “things that surround people and provide them with immediate sensory stimuli as they carry out culturally expressive activities” (19). Physical artifacts encompass a macroscopic expanse and may include features such as indoor and outdoor spaces, architecture, art, and technology. Physical artifacts are often symbolic, creating a sense of place and establishing a style and personality singular to an institution and its environment. This helps convey institutional character and dictate behavioral conduct. Verbal artifacts concern language and the spoken and written word. Historical accounts and stories, as well as words and phrases (*e.g.*, slogans, mottos, and catchphrases), impart clues and insights into the character and culture of the institution. Behavioral artifacts refer to traditions, rituals, and ceremonies. Traditions connect the past with

the present and constitute means through which an institution's character grows and perpetuates (Kuh 1993; Masland 1985). Traditions vary from school to school and transmit the values and beliefs of the institution to its members and the external community through rituals and ceremonies (*e.g.*, convocations, graduations, inaugurations, dedications, etc.).

Assumptions

Assumptions derive from values and beliefs. Values Orientation Theory (VOT) presents the idea that,

humans share biological traits and characteristics which form the basis for the development of culture, and that people typically feel their own cultural beliefs and practices are normal and natural, and those of others are strange, or even inferior or abnormal (Hills, 2002, 4).

VOT presumes that solutions to common human problems vary substantially, but societies and cultures typically choose one as dominant. Dominant value orientation (DVO) states that while one solution is preferable to the group, alternative solutions are still visible in the culture, and any given member of the group may behave according to both the dominant and variant solutions (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Schein 2004). On college campuses, the administrative line holds the DVO, yet faculty and students bring diverse ideologies, thus establishing diverging perspectives. At times, these diverging perspectives may seem counterproductive. However, as colleges and universities are understood in terms of their expressive, ideational, and symbolic features, alternative solutions and differing perspectives only add to an institution's character (Smircich 1983).

Institutional cultures are generally stable but are by no means static (Kuh 2009; Kuh and Whitt 1988). Cultures change over time for any number of reasons. For institutions of higher education, culture is both product and process, with changes occurring on a daily basis (Kuh 2009). As student needs and demands increase, technology improves, faculty turns over, and the student body shifts annually, so does the culture of higher education and of individual institutions. Not all individuals will experience campus culture in like manner, nor

will they exhibit the same behavioral outcomes (Billings and Terkla 2014). For this reason, administrators, enrollment managers, and student affairs personnel alike must create and sustain a vibrant sense of mission as well as a distinctive culture that supports students' civic understanding and engagement (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, n.d.). Accomplishing this, however, requires an extensive and penetrating grasp of both institutional character and student disposition. Hossler (n.d.) opines, "The more enrollment management professionals know about the characteristics, attitudes, and values of prospective students, the better able they are to design effective recruitment and orientation programs" (para. 5).

As stated above, both campus life and the college community are unique. As with issues of diversity, there is no fixed praxis for evaluating institutional character, discerning student disposition, and/or sowing a cultural imprint. Rather, as Scannell (2013) suggests, "Administrators must find a system that fits with their institution's mission and tradition to create" (54). Because student socialization occurs through perceptions of institutional norms—as well as through habitual participation in routine practices and communal events—it would behoove administrators, enrollment managers, and student affairs officials to carefully scrutinize their respective institutions' espoused and enacted values, examine institutional conventionalities, and heed inferences drawn by internal and external bodies (Colby, *et al.*, n.d.).

Community

Diversity is an intrinsic part of campus life and adds to the institutional climate. With such an array of dissimilar, yet inimitable, castes of demography, experiences, values, beliefs, and assumptions present, one can only wonder how they connect. The answer appears to lie in *community*. Multiple studies reveal that a student's sense of community is rooted in personalized treatment and the quality of social life on campus (Cheng, 2004, 2005). Students' feelings of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as individuals, and accepted as part of the collective citizenry contribute directly to their sense of belonging (Cheng 2004).

Currently, a "catch-all" definition for what exactly constitutes campus community is lacking. However, Boyer (1990) provides a framework for community building, identifying six characteristics that define campus communities. He suggests that colleges and universities are at their best when they are: (1) educationally purposeful, (2) open, (3) just, (4) disciplined, (5) caring, and (6) celebratory. Institutions applying Boyer's framework offer a dignified, honest, and compassionate environment where students and faculty work collaboratively to strengthen teaching and learning, share in time-honored traditions and rituals, and work toward the good of the institution. Boyer's framework is noteworthy because it not only presents a model for community enhancement, but it also aligns with student ideologies about campus environments. Cheng (2004) underscores this by stating, "As valuable as this line of research has been, one can hardly take for granted that this is also how students perceive what a campus community should be" (219).

While the term community may mean different things to different people, it is undoubtedly an indispensable aspect of campus life, as existing literature and a spate of studies repeatedly cite a student's sense of belonging and feeling of connection to the campus community as the primary reasons for enrollment and matriculation (Harrington 2014; Okerson 2016; Yazedjian, Towes, Sevin and Purswell 2008). Brazzell (2001) notes:

Whether consciously or unconsciously, students come to our educational institutions seeking more than just an academic education. They yearn for a sense of belonging, and the lack of it may prompt some to abandon either their institutions—or worse—their education (31).

Schlossberg (1989) defines a student's connection to a specific college or university as an issue of "marginality versus mattering" (7). Marginality refers to feelings of dissociation one experiences when entering and/or inhabiting a particular environment. When students go from a place of inclusion and acceptance to a place of antipathy or insecurity, they are liable to bear feelings of anxiety and discomfort, as if they do not "fit in." Marginality is usually temporary and corresponds to

life transitions such as starting a new job or moving to a different city. Conversely, mattering is about affirmation. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) suggest that “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are connected with our fate, or experience us as an egoextension [*sic*] exercises a powerful influence on our actions” (165). Mattering centers on four prominent conditions that are common to the human view of acceptance and affirmation: attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence. *Attention* pertains to the idea that others may command an interest in or take notice of another person. *Importance* submits to the belief that people care about what others want, think, and do while *ego-extension* causatively ascribes to one’s impression that others will be proud of their accomplishments and saddened by their failures. Last, *dependence* taps into the concept of need whereby individuals rely on one another for subsistence. Simply put, “Mattering refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else” (Schlossberg, 1989, 9).

Analogous to Schlossberg’s theory of mattering is Rendon’s (1993) theory of validation. According to Rendon-Linares and Munoz (2011), validation refers to the:

intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: (1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and (2) foster personal development and social adjustment (12).

In other words, validation is a developmental process whereby expressing and demonstrating an active interest in students’ lives positively affects those students’ perceptions and attitude toward their sense of belonging as well as their personal, social, and academic capabilities. The more validation students receive, the richer their academic and interpersonal experiences will be (Rendon 1993). According to Rendon (1993), “When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self worth and feel that they and everything that they bring to the college experience is accepted and recognized as valuable” (16). Rendon-Linares and Munoz (2011) further postulate

that validation helps marginalized students “acquire a confident, motivating, ‘I can do it’ attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student” (15).

Apropos of this, rituals and ceremonies play an active role in helping individuals overcome marginality, as rites of passage help them make sense of the contradictory nature of transitions—being a part of the past and the future concurrently. According to van Gennep (1960), rites of passage transpire in three stages: separation, transition (or liminal), and incorporation. Consider high school seniors, for example: Come graduation (ceremony), seniors withdraw (separation) from their status as high school students and transition into the liminal stage, during which they have no status. Once they begin college (reincorporation)—perhaps attending a new student orientation or convocation (ceremony)—they likely will develop a new identity that differs greatly from what they had in high school, culminating in acceptance. Tinto (1975, 1993) adopts this concept in his interactionist theory, postulating that students’ initial commitment to an institution as well as their goal of graduation relates directly to their level of integration into the academic and social systems of the college or university (Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon 2004).

What this should signify to administrators is the need to establish and sustain environments that cultivate growth and development, boost morale, incite feelings of commitment and loyalty, and bring about a sense of belonging (Baird 1988). Students identify with environments that are dynamic, benevolent, genial, inclusive, and steeped in pride. By keying in on characteristics associated with these descriptors, administrators can strategically identify areas that may need improvement, command added attention, or require simple maintenance. However, those deputed to perform recruitment and retention exercises are, fundamentally, at the helm of evoking, conjuring, and promulgating institutional community. Prospective students on a campus tour engage in “anticipatory socialization”—the “process by which individuals identify a group they aim to belong and socialize themselves

according to that group's norms" (Latham, 2004, 17). During this process, prospective students learn about the institution and develop a picture of what they anticipate from institutional membership (Feldman 1981; Latham 2004). Assuming students choose to enroll, they will then continue through two more phases: "encounter" and "change and acquisition." During the *encounter* phase, students enter into institutional society, become acquainted with new values and expectations, and reconcile previously held notions with the actual environment they experience (Latham 2004). During the final phase—*change and acquisition*—relatively long-lasting changes take place as students develop relationships, master the skills required for their mission, make requisite adjustments to their values and norms, and—presumably—perform successfully in their new role (Feldman 1981; Latham 2004).

Against this background, enrollment managers, admission officers, and student affairs professionals can facilitate effectual socialization through personalized attention and strong support programs. By taking a proactive approach to recruitment, engaging in dialogue, and developing relationships with prospective students and their families, admission counselors will not only tender an air of support, but they also will induce validation. Likewise, pre-college, first-year experience, and leadership programs—to name a few—help students integrate socially into the campus environment by introducing them to peers from similar and divergent academic and cultural backgrounds (Pulliam and Sasso 2016). Schlossberg (1989) reckons:

Institutions that focus on mattering and greater student involvement will be more successful in creating campuses where students are motivated to learn, where their retention is high, and ultimately, where their institutional loyalty for the short- and long-term future is ensured (14).

Implications and Discussion

Student perceptions of the institutional environment, as well as dominant norms and values embedded within the environment, influence how students think and spend their time (Kuh *et al.* 2006). While there is no

guidebook or "how-to" manual for building and sustaining campus environments that satiate the needs and desires of prospective and matriculating students, three key areas common to all institutions of higher education offer a viable starting point.

First, there is a need for effective ecosystems wherein the campus environment consists of all the stimuli that impinge upon students' sensory modalities (Kaiser 1978). Simply put, the campus should not only look pleasant, it should be pleasant. Moreover, college campuses should be conducive to student activity. The grounds should be inviting to visitors and members of the institutional community alike and should be navigable and safe. Buildings, open/green spaces, and pathways should facilitate and encourage social interaction as well as respite. Further, they should be user-friendly: habitually used venues such as dormitories, dining halls, classrooms, and student services should be centrally located and easily accessible.

Second, effectual programming and organized social opportunities that promote student engagement and active involvement are imperative (Cheng 2004). Astin (1984) proposes that the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to the college experience influences how they think and behave, affecting, in turn, their learning and development. Strange and Banning (2001) further Astin's theory, supposing that person-environment congruence is an indicator of a student's attraction to and satisfaction with an environment in which community is actually a measurable set of interactions between students and the campus environment (Cheng 2005). Research shows that students who interact with the campus environment and engage with the campus community not only report higher levels of satisfaction with the college experience but also get more out of it (Cuseo *et al.* 2007). For example, students are more likely to enjoy the college experience and persist to graduation if they reside on campus, belong to a fraternity or sorority, become involved in co-curricular activities (*e.g.*, clubs, student government, etc.), and/or take part in service-learning experiences (*e.g.*, community service) (Astin 1984; Cheng 2004; Cuseo *et al.* 2007). Likewise, student involvement

correlates positively with psychosocial development, cognitive complexity, individual and group competencies, and mature and meaningful relationship building (Foubert and Grainger 2006; Harrington 2014; Kuh *et al.* 2006). Active engagement also aids personal development as involved students tend to have increased levels of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Astin 1984; Tenhouse, n.d.). Thus, institutions can leverage a student's emotional, social, intellectual, and intrapersonal capabilities by providing resources that both encourage and advance active student involvement.

Last, sound student affairs practices, as well as logical and effective institutional policies, are requisite for optimizing the student agenda and cultivating a strong institutional connection. In a study by Cheng (2005), students commented on what factors of campus life either enhanced or diminished their sense of community. They expressed dissatisfaction with the school's services sector, complaining about residence hall maintenance, incompetent health services personnel, unfriendly security guards, and overpriced items in the bookstore. The intended topic of community gave way to students' discussion of student services for approximately one full hour. When the moderator reintroduced the question about community, one student retorted, "How can we talk about community without good services on campus? After all, this is the place we call 'home' for four years" (3). Astin (1984) calls attention to this topic:

Administrators and faculty members must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice (e.g., class schedules; regulations on class attendance, academic probation, and participation in honors courses; policies on office hours for faculty, student orientation, and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits. Moreover, administrative decisions about many nonacademic issues (e.g., the location of new buildings such as dormitories and student unions; rules governing residency; the design of recreational and living facilities; on-campus employment opportunities; number and type of extracurricular activities and regulations regarding participation; the frequency, type, and cost of cultural events; roommate

assignments; financial aid policies; the relative attractiveness of eating facilities on and off campus; parking regulations) can significantly affect how students spend their time and energy (523).

Students need to feel at home on campus and have their personal values recognized and respected (Cheng 2004). Without high-quality services—or routine and prudent assessment of said services—students are unlikely to feel a sense of community or form an attachment to the institution (Cheng 2005).

At face value, each of these action points presents institutional policy makers with strategies seemingly suited for long-term, macro-level implementation. Furthermore, execution of these strategies is contingent on the use of comprehensive assessment to identify institution-specific deficiencies. There are few sure-fire conventions for optimizing student-institution fit (Williams 1985). For this reason, enrollment managers, admission officers, and higher education marketers would be wise to analyze their current recruitment and retention practices with unremitting tenacity if they hope to enact change and/or improve effectiveness (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) contend:

Professionals in these areas have developed an intuitive sense of what works best for them, however, many times admissions and marketing personnel view all of their recruitment activities as influencing the selection of one institution over another. This means that they are directing their efforts at the choice phase, when in fact, the most critical phase is the search phase. The best way for institutions to expand their applicant pool is to reach students at the search phase (218).

Exigent shortcomings pertaining to enrollment are addressable at a micro-level. As stated earlier, the campus visit is a powerful stratagem influencing students' decision-making process. In essence, the campus visit is a sales and marketing device for prospective students, providing them with a highly personalized and "real" way to make a satisfactory college decision based on psychosocial factors (Nora 2004). Campus visits are, fundamentally, a decisive test of how students' perceive "fitting in"

once enrolled at a particular institution (Secore 2018). In this regard, the campus visit is a brief trial run at what life might look like should the student matriculate (Okerson 2016). To that end, enrollment managers heeding the advice of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) can potentiate both the search and choice phases quite easily by accentuating campus visits—specifically, the campus tour.

The campus tour has long been synonymous with campus visits, serving as the quintessential means of promotion for most institutions (Secore 2018). As stated previously, the campus tour is a ritual unto itself, providing prospective students the opportunity to engage with the campus environment at large. Students freely connect with the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution—evaluating and reacting to campus aesthetics and the community within. Where each institution is essentially *sui generis*, assumptions about the institution afford students the ability to acquire a “feel” for the institution. Likewise, the campus tour—as a formal campus ritual—responds to a basic human need to be part of a larger and distinct social entity (community) (Magolda 2001). In this way, students’ connection to a specific environment directly affects their response to the campus visit and tour experience, in turn influencing their attitude toward college choice (Kuh 2009; Okerson 2016). Plainly speaking, “The tour is the blind date of the admissions process. Looks matter a lot to the beholder, and first impressions do much to shape future actions” (Hoover, 2010, 37). Knowing this, enrollment managers and admission personnel should embrace the influential advantage a campus tour presents, as it tenders an opportune occasion to both display and propagate institutional character. By simply highlighting institutional strengths, and exposing prospective students to core institutional values and artifacts, enrollment managers, admission officers, and higher education marketers can seize what is perhaps the most powerful weapon in their marketing arsenals.

This sentiment also holds true regarding retention. As discussed above, all environments organically transform due to evolutionary progress and human intervention. Yet because change defines disposition, it is important to remember that a student’s life on cam-

pus does not exist in a vacuum, nor does it end with a campus tour. Rather, the tour is the genesis of the student-institution relationship; like any relationship, both parties enter into the affair not only with a predetermined set of needs and expectations but also with aspirations for a satisfying long-term arrangement. If an institution hopes to have success in keeping company with its students, “feelings” introduced during the search and choice phases—as during the campus tour—must remain present and somewhat consistent throughout the student-institution life cycle (*i.e.*, inquiry, enrollment, tenure, and alumnus). Otherwise, institutions risk mismatches in student-institution fit. Mismatches manifest themselves in the academic, social, and personal adjustment problems that many students experience on campus (Williams 1987). In turn, mismatches lead to dissatisfaction with campus life, poor grades, and a lack of motivation—culminating in attrition and, ultimately, withdrawal (*i.e.*, dropping out). The interdependency of student attributes and institutional characteristics is enormously consequential to strategic enrollment management as well as institutional policy promulgation—both of which are necessary for ecological and economic viability. Thus, macro- and micro-level measures tailored for effectual environment totality must always include the puissant and dynamic relationship between the student and the institution.

Conclusion

Students’ perception of an institution profoundly affects their decision to attend and/or persist at the school. What a student experiences and how they feel about it likely will determine their level of interest and enthusiasm for involvement. As Insel and Moos (1974) declare, “The ‘climate’ of environments in which people function relates to their satisfaction, mood, and self-esteem and to their personal growth” (186). Moreover, since situation-specific contexts bind culture, every institution’s culture is unique. As such, administrators, enrollment managers, admission personnel, student affairs professionals, and higher education marketers cooperatively hold the keys to unlocking the potential of their respective campus environments. By carefully evaluating current policies

and practices, institutions can measure their respective campus ecologies, climates, and cultures to ensure a favorable “total” environment. Continued assessment of student needs, desires, and beliefs provides impetus to develop, transform, and sustain environments that best

align the student and the institution. In summary, a supportive, inspiring, and sanguine atmosphere propagated by existing college community members will strategically position an institution for longstanding success in its recruitment and retention efforts.

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