



## **Intentional Campus Design in Nurturing Spiritual Development: An Environmental Analysis**

Lauren Heeren  
South Dakota State University

Katelyn Romsa  
South Dakota State University  
[katelyn.romsa@sdstate.edu](mailto:katelyn.romsa@sdstate.edu)

### **Abstract**

Creating campus environments for student learning has become a primary focus for higher education institutions. Many college students question their religious/spiritual beliefs during their college years. The need to nurture students' spiritual development in relationship to the campus environment is of high importance when supporting the whole student. This study analyzed the impact of college environment on the spiritual development of college students through the lens of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model at a private, Baptist college located in the Midwest. The findings illuminated several ways that higher education institutions can be intentional when designing their campus environments in response to today's diverse college students.

*Keywords:* campus environment, spiritual development, intentional campus design, diverse college students, campus ecology, campus physical design

Higher education institutions have the unique opportunity of being places where purposeful student learning occurs. As such, higher education professionals are privileged with the task of discovering how to best create communities that are intentional in their design and

promote learning interactions. Being purposeful, universities can generate, preserve, and transmit knowledge as well as nurture the development of the students they serve (Strange & Banning, 2015). The focus of this paper was to assist college and university professionals who wish to better understand how the campus environment shapes the experiences and spiritual development outcomes of their college students through the application of an ecosystems perspective.

Many college students question their religious/spiritual beliefs during their college years (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003). The need to analyze students' spiritual development in relationship to the campus environment is of high importance when supporting the whole student. The spiritual development of college students is an area that is often hidden in the field of student affairs (Love & Talbot, 2000). In a national study, 48% of first year college students stated that it was essential or very important that their colleges encouraged personal expression of spirituality (Astin et al., 2005). It was evident that many college students desired an exploration of spiritual development and may expect that their institutions assist them in their developmental process.

Higher education institutions endeavor to create a sense of belonging for all students, including students who may not be attracted to the spiritual features located on a college campus that appeal to dominant groups, or groups of people with power, privilege, and social status. To meet the needs of students, campuses must respond to the differing needs of students to achieve these goals. The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of college environment on the spiritual development of college students through the theoretical lens of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model at a private, Baptist college located in the Midwest, utilizing an analysis of qualitative observations of campus life. This study explored ways that higher education institutions can be intentional in the design of their campus environments to nurture spiritual development. Recommendations of ways this model may be useful at similar sized, religiously affiliated institutions are offered.

### Literature Review

Analyzing the ecological environment of college campuses with the purpose to achieve goals has been pursued from medieval to the present time. Using a communal model of learning



to build community guided the building of Oxford and Cambridge, as well as the layout of a green “quad” area on campuses such as Harvard and the University of Virginia (Strange & Banning, 2015). Many perspectives have aided those who work at institutions in informing educators on the relationship between students and their environment, but the ecological perspective of Banning and Kaiser (1974), introduced “the influence of environments on persons and persons on environments” (p. 371). Kaiser (1975) discussed how improving the quality of student life depended largely on improving the quality of campus environments. Moos (1986) also concluded that the arrangement of environments had an influence on human behavior.

Colleges and universities attempt to directly or indirectly establish conditions that will attract, satisfy, and retain students. Strange and Banning’s (2001) *Educating by Design* explored the idea of campus ecology, creating a framework that could be applied toward any institution type. Strange and Banning (2015) published *Designing for Learning*, which expanded their framework to assess existing environments and identify ways to improve or build new environments. They focused on pressing issues in higher education including universal design, learning communities, social networking, multicultural environments, virtual environments, online learning, and safety and inclusion (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Religiously affiliated institutions are colleges that have close ties to a denomination (Hirt, 2006). Ties may include “a formalized relationship with a religious organization, extensive support from a specific church, or a denominational focus in the mission or curriculum of the institution” (Hirt, 2006, p. 39). There were at least 23 religions and/or denominations sponsoring institutions of higher learning in 2006 and 25% of higher education institutions in America are religiously affiliated (Hirt, 2006).

### Method

The primary research question that guided this study was, in what ways did the key components of the campus environment (e.g., the physical setting, human aggregate, organizational environment, and constructed environment) at a religiously affiliated institution impact the spiritual learning and development of college students? This qualitative study took place at a private, Baptist institution located in the Midwest that values developing a culture for service, or seeking to develop “mature Christian persons for service to God and humankind in the world.” This institution has an enrollment of nearly 1,500 students, a placement rate of 98%,



over 40 academic programs, and a 14:1 student to faculty ratio. The purpose of exploring the campus design of this institution was to identify areas of strength and areas of needed improvement of the campus environment in relationship to the spiritual development of today's diverse college students.

### **Procedures**

Researcher observations for this study were performed over a seven-week period. Observations included job shadowing of several campus departments and employees, observing meetings with college students and faculty, interviewing staff and students, and participating in the everyday tasks of campus employees. The primary method of documenting the important details of the observations and events that took place occurred through field notes (Burgess, 1982). When observing the campus culture, setting, or social situation, field notes were documented by the researcher to remember and record the behaviors, activities, events, and other features of the setting being observed. These field notes helped produce meaning and understanding of the college culture, social situation, and phenomenon being studied.

### **Theoretical Framework**

When preparing the field notes for the study, several precautions were taken to prevent researcher bias. A regular time and place for writing field notes was determined. Field notes were written as soon after the observation as possible and were consistent in their structure (all field notes contained the date, time, location, and details of the main informants). The research question and Strange and Banning's (2015) theoretical framework guided what was documented.

Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model described four key environmental components to help higher education institutions in meeting their goals: (a) the physical environment; (b) the human aggregate environment; (c) the organizational environment; and (d) the constructed environment. The campus ecology model can be a useful framework for higher education professionals to identify possible barriers located in the physical environment, explore ways that campus environments can be more welcoming, accessible, and equitable for students, and assist in brainstorming ways in which collaboration among constituencies aids in creating campus environments that nurture student learning and development.



**Physical environment.** Strange and Banning (2015) explored the idea of creating a sense of place for those who inhabit the environment. A sense of place associated with a college or university may be an important deciding factor for prospective college students. When assessing the physical environment of the institution under study, there were many factors to consider, including the layout of the campus, arrangement, accessibility of departments and important offices, functionality of buildings and rooms, cleanliness of campus, the shape or design of the residence halls, and the perceived climate (Strange & Banning, 2012). These factors, including the symbolic meaning behind them, also played a role in the initial attitudes, perception, and decision-making for those visiting or considering enrolling.

The layout of the physical environment of the campus under study was small, which gave the university a small town, homey feel. The arrangement of the buildings on campus were near each other, giving easy access to students and visitors. This appeared to aid in positive student-faculty interactions and student-student connections. The small campus appeared to aid students in easily navigating campus, and where faculty and staff were near if they needed directions if lost.

When observing the campus artifacts, two sculptures stood out: a piece of the World Trade Center from 9/11 and Peter Washing the Feet of Jesus. These sculptures may have varying degrees of importance depending upon a person's religion/spiritual background and/or worldview. These sculptures demonstrated the university's allegiance to the United States and the importance of Christianity.

When analyzing accessibility, the buildings and offices across campus were in central locations, creating easy access for students. However, there were some problematic areas noted:

There are many hills on campus, which could symbolize an uninviting atmosphere to those with physical disabilities requiring them to be in a wheelchair. Also, several of these buildings do not have elevators, which can be challenging for students with disabilities. (Field note observation)

The institution offered an array of residential hall living spaces fostering opportunities for student engagement (including spiritual engagement) and academic success. There were five residence halls, and because of the large number of residents wishing to live on campus, a sixth



residence hall will be opened in the fall of 2017. Each residence hall had a space designated for weekly bible studies.

There was not an overall aesthetic of the campus, as many of the buildings were designed by different architects over time. A garden area arch with the university's original/foundational name highlighted the importance of the school's historical roots. Several other small garden areas and outdoor furnishings throughout the campus that made the campus look attractive and colorful. The overall perceived climate appeared inviting, but the underlying symbolism of the physical campus features could detract those whose spiritual values differ from those of the institution.

**Human aggregate environment.** Strange and Banning (2015) found that relationships have the potential to raise or suppress students' motivation to learn. The human aggregate environment includes an exploration of the collective personalities, styles, preferences, strengths, and engagement types of those living in an environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). As the character of an environment may be largely dependent upon the inhabitants of the environment, it is important to understand the differing types of students that live on campus and how they choose to interact with each other, faculty, and staff.

Several positive relationships were evident at the institution under study. Faculty and staff frequently collaborated and worked together with each other and with students, which encouraged students' motivation to learn. The institution had a peer mentor program where upper class students mentored first year students. Peer mentors acted as a resource, support system, and role model to new students. Being a peer mentor provided upperclass students with the opportunity to learn about first-year transition as well as to develop effective communication and leadership skills. The program in turn supported first-year students socially, personally, and academically as they transitioned to the institution.

Students' strengths and talents may influence how they interact with others, process information, and navigate an environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). The human aggregate of a campus includes an exploration of the collective personalities, styles, preferences, strengths, and engagement types of campus leaders and students. At this institution, there were many events and campus traditions that students could be involved in such as Olympics, Humans vs. Zombies, homecoming festivities, finals breakfasts, and well as over 50 service projects. The



Director of Student Activities, who oversaw 100 plus clubs and organizations on campus, aided in the success of these events and traditions. The director sent out weekly emails to all students announcing the activities occurring on campus during that week.

Identifying the strengths and talents of students and then aligning those with the campus environment to capitalize their strengths can increase students' motivation to learn. While attempting this, it is important to understand that institutions may indirectly favor certain strengths, talents, or personality traits over others. Students with specific personalities and/or occupational interests may indirectly be favored over other personality types because of the large number of campus involvement opportunities that attract their strengths and styles. At this institution, students who were academically gifted, strong communicators, and/or possessed dynamic leadership skills appeared to be favored by the institution. Students with extrovert personalities appeared more acclimated to the university because of the large role they had in dominant events that occurred within the campus environment. This may have reinforced their student engagement levels as well as their attraction to, satisfaction in, and success in their respective environment.

Students with extrovert personalities seemed to have a high degree of person-environment congruence, or the match between an individual's talents and the corresponding needs of the environment, because their personality matched the dominant type within the setting. Students with introvert personalities appeared to have a lower degree of person-environment congruence, because their personality did not match the needs of the environment, which may have led to feelings of disconnection. Students who were non-traditional and/or are unable to get involved due to life circumstances (having to work full or part-time, having family responsibilities, not having financial resources, etc.) may have struggled feeling connected.

The human aggregate environment of the residence halls also had a role in reinforcing the dominant features of the environment. There were over 600 students living on campus, most being first and second year students. Room assignments were made based on personality and preference tests, and residents were placed in communities with other students who had indicated similar interests. This institution believed in this philosophy because students who are assigned to living units according to similar characteristics tend to be "happier, have more friends in their



living units, and perform better academically” (Schroeder & Jackson, 1987, p. 50). From the field notes:

Having a room assignment based on personality and preference seems to create a positive environment for engagement, growth, and academic success within the residence halls. However, not all individuals may think matching students based on similar personalities and preferences is a good idea. Particularly for those who value diversity and the importance of getting along with and working through conflict with those who are different than you.

**Organizational environment.** Organizational environments are constructed and reconstructed to achieve specific goals (Strange & Banning, 2015). Organizational size may play a part in this reconstruction, as the university must keep up with the growing population in the environment by building new residence halls or adding more commuter parking. Exploring the organizational environment included four key factors and their role in the environment: (a) complexity, (b) centralization, (c) formalization, and (d) morale.

The organizational environment of the campus under study included a conceptualization of these four factors. The complexity of an organization refers to the division of work and responsibilities; structural complexity or the number of units or departments; and task complexity or intensity and number of tasks, knowledge, and expertise (Strange & Banning, 2015). At this institution, the division of responsibilities within and between departments had caused some role confusion about who was responsible for projects, with many people willing to take charge. There appeared to be a lack of structure at this institution, there were very few departments, and many departments worked together on projects. Task complexity was high because there were very few support staff given the small size of the campus.

Centralization refers to how decisions will be made and where the power resides in an organization (Strange & Banning, 2015). This institution used a decentralized model, having a horizontal leadership structure where many people and departments hold the power and employee’s opinions and decisions for valued (Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007).

Each person working in the Department of Student Development, even the student staff, has a part in making decisions. This seems to have a big impact in encouraging students





to voice their ideas and opinions knowing that they matter and are being heard across campus. (Field note observation)

Formalization refers to the importance of rules and regulations, the specificity of established rules, and the extent to which the rules are enforced (Strange & Banning, 2015). Students had access to the student handbook on the school's website and the policies and procedures were taken seriously on campus and in the residence halls. There were more rules than other universities in the area, mostly because there was a tobacco and alcohol ban on campus, as well as visitation hours in the residence halls. Many students viewed the university as strict, but there were few reported student conduct cases, with the most common being violations of visitation hours.

Morale examines the satisfaction of the members and participants in an organization (Strange & Banning, 2015). One well-intentioned program that the institution required was for all students to take two religion courses. These classes may have had unintentional consequences for those who identify as non-Christian, which could have led to their overall dissatisfaction of the institution. In contrast, the morale of several of the employees who were alumni of the institution appeared very high given their enthusiasm, passion, and commitment towards the institution's mission and campus community.

**Constructed environment.** The constructed environment emphasizes the subjective views and experiences of those inhabiting the environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). This includes the differing factors within physical, human aggregate, and organizational environments and how they are perceived. As "seeing is believing," students' perceptions are their reality of the environment. The same human aggregates can be perceived as welcoming and friendly by one person while simultaneously uninviting or hostile by another. Therefore, students should be viewed as constructivists, or able to influence, plan, and construct their own environment because students on a college campus play a significant role in altering the dominant features of the environment (Banning, 1986). "Students and their campus environment constitute a trans-active system, an ecosystem . . . any change in the campus environment is reflected in a change in student life" (Kaiser, 1975, p. 33). Any change in the physical, human aggregate, or organizational environment could have a domino effect on the student perceptions of the environment.



When investigating the constructed environment of the campus, many conclusions regarding student perceptions were drawn. With the large number of organizations and clubs on campus, some students may have felt that they must be involved on campus to fit in. Students who thrived doing hands-on activities may have felt academically out of place because most of the classes were designed for lectures. Students who were extraverted felt more connected to campus due to the dominant events that attract their personality types, whereas students who were introverted felt less connected due to their lack of involvement utilizing their strengths in campus events and activities. Students whose values aligned with the Christian faith most likely felt welcomed and connected to the campus environment, whose culture seemed to embrace and promote Christianity. Students lacking person-environment congruence at this institution were most likely non-Christian, LGBTQ, students with disabilities, commuters, and/or non-traditional students who were not able to get involved due to their life circumstances.

### **Discussion**

The observations from this study demonstrated ways in which similar institutions may design intentional campus environments that nurture spiritual development. The campus environment has the power to shape attitudes in subtle yet powerful ways. To promote spiritual development, professionals at institutions of higher education, religiously affiliated or not, should recognize the importance of the holistic development of college, which includes students' physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development rather than intellectual development alone (Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Many college students question the meaning of religion/spirituality during their college years when they are forming their multiple identities (Bryant et al., 2003). Although the primary role of higher education professionals at religiously affiliated institutions may be minister to students, they must work to balance the mission of the church and institution with the values of today's rapidly changing and diverse students. Intentional and unintentional consequences of well-meant programs must be examined to ensure that all students feel welcome on campus (Huebner & Banning, 1987). For instance, required religion courses that are meant to acclimate students to the university and its mission could have negative effects on students. Having alternative course choices such as World Religions or Exploratory Studies might acclimate



students to the university while allowing them the freedom to explore one's identity and spiritual development.

Student affairs professionals at all institutions, including religiously affiliated institutions, should have a commitment to the well-being and best interest of their students (Hirt, 2006). This includes looking beyond issues of comfort and stability in physical environments, such as creating safe spaces for students on campus and adopting a social justice lens. Campuses should work to create a sense of belonging for diverse students and students who do not fit the mold of the dominant features of the environment. This might include creating clubs centered around diversity, having ethnic food at the dining center, allowing students of any religion to use the prayer rooms in the residence halls. This might also involve reaching out to students with introvert personality types and encouraging their involvement in campus activities where their unique talents and strengths are capitalized. Creating access to resources and offices, providing opportunities for intentional interactions, and having strong faculty-student relationships may help to increase a sense of belonging for students.

Overall, campus administrators at religiously affiliated institutions should work to help students feel a sense of community on the college campus, while also nurturing spiritual development. Administrators should encourage a community that has an environment for free expression, engages in faculty and student teaching and learning, provides social and learning environments within the residence halls, fosters positive relationships among ethnic groups through student activities, celebrates the history and traditions of the institution, and aids students who are feeling alone on campus or depressed (Cheng, 2004). Feeling valued as an individual and being accepted as part of a community, as well as feeling connected on campus, may directly contribute to student's sense of belonging. To create a campus community that cares about the dignity of all college students, administrators must strive towards ensuring that students feel valued as individuals and accepted as members of the community (Cheng, 2004). Faculty and staff can help nurture students' spiritual development by being intentional in developing relationships with students by taking advantage of opportunities to minister, interact, engage, and connect with students both inside and outside the classroom.



### **Conclusion**

Creating campus environments for student learning is a primary focus for higher education institutions. Researchers have offered frameworks to help better understand the nature of a campus environment and the impact on students. This study illuminated several ways that higher education can help nurture the spiritual development of today's diverse college students by being intentional in the design of their campus environments through the lens of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model.



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