



A Sense of Purpose, Place, and Community at Sacred Heart University

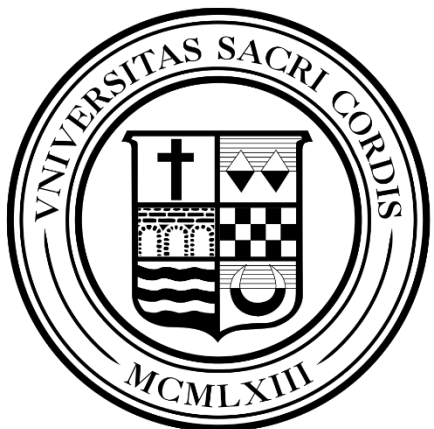
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Purpose

Institutions of higher education are created with purpose and place in mind: the complexities of collegiate environments influence student learning, success, behavior, and attitudes, and in turn students shape the environments which they inhabit (Renn & Patton, 2011). Certain aspects of colleges are more functional, welcoming, and inclusive than others, and in turn facilitate learning and nurture student development to a greater degree. Strange and Banning (2015) address the nature and assessment of academic environments, examining the process of person-environment interaction through the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed forces contained therein. This project describes how this integrated framework of campus environments relates to Sacred Heart University (SHU).

History of SHU

Founded in 1963, SHU is a Roman Catholic university, with its main campus located in Fairfield, Connecticut. It is a coeducational, private, independent university, claimed to be the second largest Catholic university in New England, and the first Catholic university in the U.S. to be lead and staffed by laity (Sampath, 2016). With a strong school spirit and great pride in its mission and values, SHU welcomes to its grounds individuals of all faiths, preparing its students to "live in and make their contributions to the human community" ("Mission Statement", n.d., para. 1) through an intellectually challenging and personally supportive community invested in creating a student body that is caring, compassionate, and socially just.



Physical Environment

A picture tells a thousand words: Boyer (1987) believes that the physical attractiveness and general appearance of a college campus can serve as a critical first impression to visitors. SHU is certainly an uplifting and inspiring place to visit — neat and clean, with well-manicured grounds and wide open spaces, and attractive buildings with generally modern designs. In addition, the campus is completely smoke-free ("Smoke-Free Initiative", n.d.).

The physical location of SHU's myriad buildings, walkways, and signs, offers visitors an enjoyable and stress-free experience. Navigating the campus is generally easy, with some exceptions:

- many areas do not appear amenable to those with physical disabilities
- only some external signage exists
- internal signage is poor

These issues may increase wayfinding difficulties.

Formal classrooms and informal learning spaces that include the Ryan Matura Library, residence halls, Holy Grounds Coffee House, and Joseph's Bagel and Grill, together with large outdoor areas, encourage student engagement, initiate a sense of belonging, and help build community (Strange & Banning, 2015). The physical environment at SHU also supports a sense of place through designs coated in SHU's school colors.

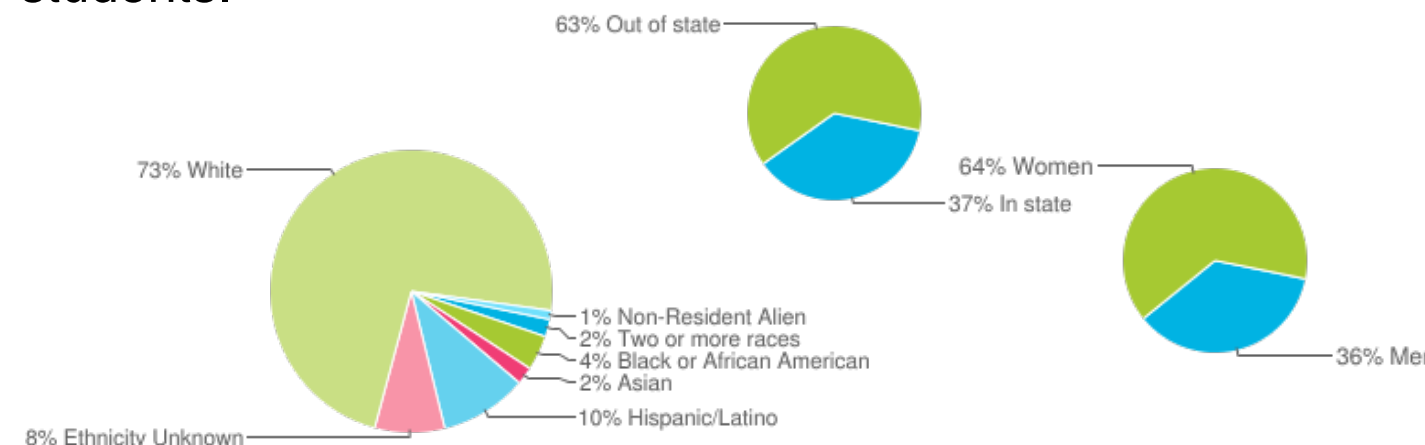
With unprecedented growth over the past three years, SHU's physical environment permits students to feel included, engaged, safe, and an important part of the SHU community — all critical to ensuring a sense of place is achieved (Strange & Banning, 2015).



Human Aggregate

The human aggregate dimension of Strange and Banning's (2015) framework reflects the characteristics of the individuals who inhabit a physical environment — collective characteristics that can be considered an institution's "campus personality" (Wallace, n.d.).

According to 2016-2017 data, SHU caters to over 8,500 students.



With its strong emphasis on leadership and service to the community, Astin (1993) would consider SHU to comprise students who are predominantly Social Activists and Leaders, two of seven identified college sub-types. Social responsibility plays a large role in not only SHU's mission and values, but also in its curriculum, through volunteerism, community service, and mission work ("SHU Points of Pride", n.d.).



Leadership can be observed throughout the campus in:

- athletics
- performing arts
- Greek Life
- LLCs

The collective characteristics of the students at SHU embody SHU's mission and values in assisting in the development of individuals who are "compassionate in heart [and] responsive to social and civic obligations" ("Mission Statement", n.d., para. 2). But despite an overwhelming sense of community and a feeling of being welcome on campus, the human aggregate at SHU is highly differentiated — a campus personality that provides a stable impression, and which can exert a powerful influence on the attraction of similar student types, whilst also turning others away (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Organizational Environment

With purpose at its heart, the organizational environment of a college includes its reporting and decision-making structure, and dictates who is in charge, who determines the goals and objectives to be achieved, the rules and regulations to be followed, how resources will be allocated, and how individuals within the organization will be rewarded — each complex component vital to maintaining order (Strange & Banning, 2015).

SHU believes that people are its most important asset (SHU, 2016a). Collegial in its leadership framework, SHU's Board of Trustees act as the "legally chartered governing body of the University" (SHU, 2015, p. 6). The Board maintains complete authority and responsibility in matters of governance, and the welfare of SHU and all its interests. The Board, in turn, selects SHU's President, who is responsible for the overall day-to-day management and control of SHU, as well as the establishment of rules, regulations, procedures, and policies for academic programs and other operations. With guidance and recommendations lying in the hands of those above, faculty are supported by six College Deans, whilst administrators are separated into departments based on credentials, knowledge, and expertise (SHU, 2016b).

EMPLOYEE TRIFECTA



A dynamic institution with a low degree of centralization and formalization, SHU encourages innovation and creativity, together with collaboration in the sharing of ideas through open, forthright communication and mutual respect (SHU, 2016b).

Morale at SHU is high: its organizational system is owned by every individual within it, offers an equitable compensation strategy, and in turn provides a powerful learning and developmental environment for its students that encourages meaningful engagement, and supports academic advancement, and holistic growth and development (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Socially Constructed Environment

The socially constructed environment of a college campus recognizes the consensus with which individuals perceive that environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). These socially constructed perspectives also impact the behavior, attitudes, and experiences of a college's inhabitants (Moos, 1986).

SHU focuses its efforts on promoting the culture, mission, and values, of the school, together with an environmental press toward the creation of community and service to others. The sense of community SHU creates amongst its inhabitants is perhaps the largest socially constructed component of its environment.

"Our strength is in the personal attention we provide each prospective student, current student, and alumni member."

K. O'Sullivan, Executive Director of Undergraduate Admissions

SHU is also full of campus pride: from the sports fields to the bookstore, and from the academic buildings to the bathroom décor, SHU is tastefully color-coded in red and white, adding to the pervasive SHU spirit found throughout the campus. Annual traditions and rituals also play a significant role in portraying a campus's socially constructed environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Some of SHU's most popular traditions include At the Chapel, "Crazy Train", and the President's Gala ("Traditions", n.d.), traditions that continue to attest to the cultivation of an attitude of community and care within SHU's inhabitants, and which have a powerful effect in connecting individuals with the SHU campus (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Conclusion

Strange and Banning (2015) believe students deserve an educational environment that is nothing short of "affirming, energizing, challenging and productive" (p. xvi). Through its physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed environments, SHU is certainly one of those environments. Deeply rooted in its tradition and mission, and in turn in the students it serves, SHU has shaped an educationally sound campus environment that interacts effectively on numerous levels to collectively produce a community of learners that embrace care and compassion. SHU's students are enthusiastic and engaged, and welcome the constant sense of safety, belonging, and support, they perceive on their way to achieving academic success, and holistic growth and development.

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