

Reflection on Four Environmental Perspectives

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The first time I stepped on the campus of Albright College in Reading, PA I decided that was where I wanted to get my college education. The beautiful landscaping, even in the dead of winter, incredibly friendly people (faculty, staff, and students), and a dedication to serving the community are the reasons I ultimately was so elated with my decision to attend Albright College, but I did not understand it then. In 2008, I just thought it was the right place for me, and that was all I needed. As my college years progressed, I came to understand the factors which made Albright the right place for me. I can now look back at my experience in terms of four environmental perspectives and have an even fuller understanding.

### **Physical Environment**

I often tell people that Albright is three square blocks, and that is barely an exaggeration. The academic buildings are contained in a space that students can traverse in less than a five minute walk and not have to cross traffic. This promotes a lot of interaction between students, faculty, and staff. However, it does discourage interaction with the closest part of the community. I think Penn State is actually very similar to the proximities of buildings at Albright. Most of the academic buildings are fairly condensed. However, there is a difference in the way residence halls are situated. At Albright they are completely separated from the academic buildings, but on Penn State's campus they are not, which does promote social-academic interactions.

Albright is an excellent example of environmental probalilism because of the trademark red Adirondack chairs. They are clustered in different areas, some clusters larger than others, and some chairs alone. These spaces are always filled with students on nice days, facilitating conversation, and in some cases even classes. Often these chairs are moved to the residential area of campus because students enjoy studying and socializing in them so much. This is one of

the many indicators that the outside space at Albright College is made for socializing in both casual and scholarly ways. Penn State has areas similar to this, but not nearly on the same scale, and that is something I miss. Last year, when working on a group project, the best place to work outside which we could think of was by the pillars outside the library, which did not prove to be a comfortable place to spread out our books.

As a student affairs professional I see outdoor spaces as extremely important to the ‘feel’ of an institution. The landscaping, campus layout, and outside of buildings are the first impression of a university. They are the majority of what potential students see, what every student experiences on a daily basis, while they may only see the inside of one building in a day, and these things can easily encourage community and interaction.

### **Human Aggregate Environment**

The physical beauty and proxemics at play on Albright’s campus were not the only things that initially drew me to it, but also the type of people and the community there. The interesting thing about human aggregate environment is that the physical, organizational, and constructed environments play a huge role in the types of students who choose to attend an institution. Therefore, it is a collaboration of these other three perspectives that so largely influences the human aggregate environment. Having a campus that can be traversed in five minutes or less, a single academic building which houses the education, history, languages, and English departments, and a class which is so small that you can literally know everyone when their names are called at graduation, attracts students who are looking for a tight knit community. In this way, Albright is a very consistent campus; there are few students who rebel against the existence of a community. However, I still think that there is differentiation on campus. One example of that is the offered majors, Albright is well known for theater and arts, but also

surprisingly well known for the biology department and pre-medicine and pre-dentistry programs. This creates a human aggregate environment of students with a wide variety of career and scholarly interests, but who are almost all interested in a small, tightly knit community.

This is not to say that a student cannot have a small community experience at an institution such as Penn State, because they can but in a different way. There are small majors, special living options, and organizations which can provide a small and bonded environment for students. The difference between these two institutional environments in this way is that the majority of the Albright Community is bonded as one, while there are multiple Penn State Communities, unless it concerns football.

### **Organizational Environment**

One of the largest transitional issues for me moving from Albright College to Penn State University had to do with the size, but not the sheer mileage of campus or number of students. Rather, I was, and am still, dazzled by the size of the organizational structure. At Albright, the organization can be captured in a one page flow chart, while I have seen more than a dozen organizational flow charts depicting various offices at Penn State. The more important difference (more important than the size of the power structure and administration) is the need for a larger organizational structure. Penn State grew and developed into the size institution it currently is, and with that the administration and organizational structure needed to grow, it could not be static. Conversely, Albright has maintained its' relatively small size and therefore can also maintain a smaller organizational structure. In my opinion, this allows Albright to be more dynamic overall. I think that the size of Albright created a less formalized power structure and multiple examples of this come to mind. First, I referred to approximately 75% of my professors by their first name, could feel comfortable approaching the President (also by his first

name) on campus to chat, and professors felt comfortable adjusting campus policies to enhance class discussions. Graduate school produces a different power structure, as we also refer to many of our professors by first name, but my observations of undergraduates here at Penn State suggests a different power dynamic wherein professors and instructors are referred to as doctor, professor, instructor, etc., but very rarely their first name.

### **Constructed Environment**

One of the first examples the text used to discuss constructed environment was the developmental transcript at Adams College, which I have had described to me in the context of the University of Pittsburgh. This type of practice contributes to the constructed environment of an institution by promoting involvement. By providing students with a developmental transcript it is sending the message that these things are just as important as your academic achievements. I think that Penn State also sends this message with the abundance of student organizations and their promotion and support for those organizations. At Albright College we had an Experience Event requirement. This mandated that we attend sixteen 'experience events', events approved by a committee which found the event to be scholarly in nature, in order to graduate. These experience events were typically held in the evening hours. I believe that this sends a very similar message as developmental transcripts; that there is more to learning and growth in college than classes. However this requirement sent a very different message to commuter students. The general feeling among this population of students was that the experience event committee did not consider that we had off campus jobs, lived up to 40 minutes away, and may not want to or be able to stay on campus for an event at eight o'clock in the evening. This is a prime example of how a constructed environment can be subjective. For some, these events were fun and non-burdensome to attend, and to others it was a tedious task that was often

inconvenient and resulted in having to attend a great deal of events in the last months before graduation. There are very few people in higher education that would argue the importance of co-curricular involvement, but I think some institutions do more to promote this in their students than others. In my opinion, these schools value co-curricular involvement more and it is therefore a bigger part of the constructed environment at those institutions.

One of the more complex issues with constructed environment is the subjective nature of it. In the book it talked about how the different sources of press (academic, administrative, student) can be a function of various sub environments. That made me think about how each sub environment influences campus environment, and how that can be perceived by different groups of students. Above, I talked about commuters as a group within the college population. Another group of students to consider is diverse students, which can obviously be broken down into many other groups. However, the subjective view of the campus environment of the majority population on campus will not necessarily be the same as the subjective view of the many other populations on that campus. If the institution does not consider this, the campus can become a hostile environment from a minority perspective. I think this can be very difficult to consider though, especially for people who do identify as part of the majority. This goes back to human aggregate, if the administration and faculty is not diverse, they will have a difficult time creating and supporting an environment which will be perceived in a positive light by diverse student populations.

### **Conclusion**

One of the things I have reflected upon after finishing readings on each of these environmental perspectives is how it applies to the type of institution where I want to work. As I wrote this reflection, I was also thinking about how important it is to work at an institution where

I am happy with the environment, and would have been as a student. If I cannot grow and feel satisfied in an environment I think it would be incredibly difficult to encourage students to grow, learn, and be successful in that environment. I was lucky to have done my undergraduate work at an institution where the environment was just about perfect for me. Now I am fortunate to have the knowledge to consider what parts of that environment did and did not support my growth. The landscape, the small space, the community, and community involvement will be things I look for in my next environment. However, I am also recognizing that I will have a different perspective as an employee rather than a student, and that especially the organizational environment may have a completely different impact on me as such.