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Brief Bio:
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For as long as I can remember, I have been intrigued with the feel and function of different spaces. Whether it was frequently rearranging my bedroom furniture as a child, or creating an engaging classroom environment as an educator decades later, I was interested in why some spaces simply felt or worked better than others. My personal interest became a scholarly pursuit when I began to study students' learning experiences on college campuses. I quickly realized that in order to grasp the complexities of diverse student experiences, I would have to understand how they navigated – both metaphorically and literally – campus spaces.

I looked first to the fields of geography, urban planning, and sociology for frameworks to understand the relationship between people and built environments, or human-made places such as buildings, neighborhoods, and campuses. The work of critical geographers, such as Doreen Massey and David Harvey, was particularly informative as they emphasized the fact that space is not neutral. Space is more than merely a backdrop or setting in which things happen. Space affects how people interact—and people and their interactions shape space. By applying this spatial approach to my research on college students, I discovered two key insights. First, a spatial approach offers language for students to easily discuss difficult experiences, such as racism or sexism. Second, by focusing on students' use of space and the meanings they associate with different spaces, we can gain deeper insight into the diversity and complexities of students' experiences.

To further explore the application of spatial approaches to higher education, I have delved into research from the fields of architecture, design, and campus planning for insights into how built environments affect social interactions. Recently, I launched a longitudinal study, the *Architecture of Belonging* project, which examines the relationship between campus spaces and

the development of student belonging. Student belonging is a sense of connectedness, the feeling that one matters, that is essential to college student success.

I have found that campus spaces are complex and often contradictory. A single space, or even specific elements of a space, can both foster and hinder student belonging, depending upon the individual. For educators, this means that we need strategies to capture how different students are experiencing spaces; we need ways to enhance and expand spaces that seem to facilitate belonging and perhaps most importantly, we need ways to effectively address spaces that seem to hinder belonging.

Architecture of Belonging: An Overview

Higher education researchers such as George Kuh, Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Carter, and Terrell Strayhorn, have found that a student's sense of belonging is closely linked to academic achievement, mental health, persistence, and overall well-being. Studies suggest that a variety of factors may contribute to the development of student belonging, such as opportunities for students to have positive interactions with diverse peer groups and institutional policies and structures. However, the research on other factors contributing to student belonging is still limited, and little literature focuses on the role of built environments. In order to understand their sense of belonging, my research focuses on the campus spaces that students choose to spend their time, as well as where they do and do not feel comfortable.

I began data collection for *Architecture of Belonging* in spring 2015, and I focused on residence life at West University (a pseudonym). As Dawn Johnson and her colleagues have found, residence life—or spaces related to on-campus living such as residence halls, dining halls, student unions and other communal spaces—is a particularly rich site for studying belonging, as

these spaces are strongly associated with a student's development of relationships and community.

While most research on college student belonging uses large-scale surveys, I opted for a different, more student-focused approach. I chose to use a combination of participant-created photo journals and interviews in order to uncover students' understandings of their belonging as well as their connections between belonging and spaces. This visual method enabled students to share their perspectives through discussion during interviews. Students submitted pictures in response to questions such as: "In which space(s) in your residence hall do you feel the most comfortable?" and "What does it mean to 'belong' in your residence hall?" Then I interviewed many of the students who had photo-journaled to gain further insight into the reasons they took particular pictures and to better understand the meanings they associated with different spaces. I analyzed the photographs on my own as well as with students during the interviews in order to find common themes and patterns. Three spaces – the Diner, the Walkway, and Marlow Hall – emerged as key sites that were experienced very differently by different students and seemed to be embody contradictions.

The Diner. The Diner is centrally located within West University's residence halls and serves as the primary eatery for residents. Many students viewed the Diner as "the hub of residence life." They also cited the Diner as a space that most represented their sense of belonging. One explained the significance of the space: "To belong is to have friends to eat in the dining hall with." The Diner facilitates student belonging by providing a location in which they can connect with friends. Moreover, the Diner actually signifies the fact that they *have* friends with whom to connect, and this served as indicator of belonging to students.

At the same time, a number of students held an opposite view of the same dining hall. Instead of facilitating belonging, the Diner was a space in which they did not feel comfortable. One student described it as "the most stressful place," while another student commented about having "to constantly be concerned about who to sit with." Even for students who preferred to eat by themselves, meals here sometimes became awkward. The persisting belief that the Diner is a communal and social space made students feel self-conscious about sitting by themselves. Several students who chose to eat alone had the sense that students eating in groups felt sorry for them or even felt pressured to include them. One student stated that the Diner "adds to belonging *and* isolates."

The Walkway. Right outside the Diner is the Walkway, an asphalt-paved path leading from West University's residence halls to the main campus. Lining the Walkway on one side is a large, multi-leveled parking structure. On the other side is a tall residence hall building. This is a high pedestrian traffic area and has the only entrance to the Diner. As a result, this is a place where student groups, particularly Greek organizations, set up tables to recruit members or promote events. While a seemingly innocuous space, many students referenced the Walkway as a place they did not feel comfortable. One photo-journaler captured an image of the Walkway and provided the following explanation: "This is the area between the dining hall and the parking structure. During mealtimes, a number of people loiter outside and chat or wait for their friends. I always feel very self-conscious walking through here." In fact, many students shared how they did not like walking through this space. One stated that students can "feel exposed" in the Walkway, while others shared how they felt judged by other students.

Marlow Hall. Just east of the Walkway is Marlow Hall, one of five residence hall buildings at West University, and the oldest. Interestingly, it was not the condition of Marlow

that was the topic of discussion, even though its age earned it the superlative "the worst building." Students actually spoke of it in a positive light, and it was the open door policy they highlighted. All the other residence halls on campus were constructed under more recent building codes, which meant that they have doors that cannot be propped open and will automatically shut. But because of its age, Marlow is the only residence hall with doors to students' rooms that can remain open, something many of residents prefer. They like to leave their doors open because it promotes interactions among others on the hall, making it the most congenial dorm. Having the ability to leave their bedroom or suite doors open indicated an invitation to say hi, or enter.

Identifying and Integrating "Spatial Cues"

Drawing upon a spatial approach not only has enabled me to gain insight into the diverse, complex experiences of students, but it has also made me aware of yet another possibility: the potential for change. Since space is socially constructed, space can be adapted. Similarly, if social relations and interactions are affected by space, then making changes to space can change interactions.

One way to do this is by integrating design principles that are intended to guide users toward engaging in particular activities. I call these design elements *spatial cues*. As the Diner, the Walkway, and Marlow Hall illustrate, a single space can both foster and hinder a sense of student belonging. Spatial cues signal to people ways of interacting that may not be part of existing practice. They provide guidance to users of the space, and that guidance may be explicit or implicit. For example, spatial cues can be explicit signage that directs movement and activity, such as directions or street names, or signage that implicitly draws people into a certain area, such as visuals with quotes or announcements. Yet, they also can be more implicit, such as plants

and landscaping, sounds and music, lighting, or artwork—even certain types of furniture like benches.

Without explicit direction otherwise, people tend to continue to do what they always have done. For example, Ingo Kollar, Florian Pilz, and Frank Fischer's research on learning spaces indicates that even when new classrooms are carefully designed and constructed, instructors and students rely on and revert to practices they have learned from the past. For example, educators might promote collaborative learning in class by arranging classroom furniture so students sit in small groups, and class activities may include frequent discussions in these groups. However, without ongoing efforts to foster collaboration, the class experience can easily revert to a default of lecture-based teaching in which students sit in rows facing the instructor. When efforts to change space are made, external prompts, such as clustered chairs instead of stadium-style seating, can enable users to more effectively and creatively engage with the space and one another.

So what is currently working and what kind of spatial cues could be integrated into spaces like the Diner, the Walkway, and Marlow Hall to better facilitate students' sense of belonging? First, the Diner does offer a central, consistent meeting place for students to connect with friends. This may be due to the fact that the Diner served as what George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Schuh, and Elizabeth Whitt called "socially catalytic spaces" designed to promote interaction. However, only two seating options were available in the Diner. The first was square tables that seated up to four people. Students who ate alone felt that the standardized table set-up highlighted the fact that they were by themselves, further adding to any uneasiness they experienced by peers who saw them eating alone. The second type of seating was counter-style

seating along sections of the wall near the Diner's entry; sitting here meant that one's back was to the rest of the room, which was unsettling for many of students.

If we want this space to enable students to feel comfortable in groups or when alone, students need a variety of seating options. This variety serves as a spatial cue, indicating that students were encouraged or "allowed" to be alone or with others. Simple changes like the addition of two-person tables and long, communal tables would offer options, and may reduce pressure or anxiety experienced by students. Long tables can serve as an invitation to join other diners or even to dine alone while still being near others. Counter-style seating also remains a viable option for individual diners, but now these counters could face a visual focal point other than a wall, such as a large window looking out onto campus, or televisions.

The Walkway is a space that also seems to hinder belonging just as much as it facilitates it. In a study of walkways on college campuses published in the *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, Majd Al-Homoud and Natheer Abu-Obeid found that spaces with pedestrian flow actually increased students' perceptions of interaction and decreased their perceptions of seclusion. The researchers concluded that these types of open public spaces foster group bonding, which contributes to students' sense of belonging and their attachment to the entire campus. While pathways may increase the potential for social interaction, however, existing research does not account for how these types of spaces cause discomfort and even hinder student belonging.

Much of the discomfort experienced in the Walkway came from feeling scrutinized by peers. Situated between buildings and a parking structure, the Walkway's environment provides little else to focus on, so the students focus on each other. One way to diversify students' attention is to incorporate spatial cues in the form of a greater variety of objects and landscaping

into the space. Urban planners such as Daniel Baldwin Hess, Hiroaki Hata, and Ernest Sternberg suggest providing a range of artifacts, which then serve as a range of focal points. For example, artwork, trees, colorful plants, benches, and informational kiosks in the Walkway can help all students, whether alone or in groups, feel more comfortable in that space. These elements serve as spatial cues that facilitate new practices such as providing gathering spots and spaces to share information, art, and ideas.

Finally, the students' reactions to Marlow Hall suggest that their sense of belonging and community can occur despite building conditions. Older buildings do not necessary mean that students will be dissatisfied. Similarly, new, innovative spaces do not automatically translate into students' sense of community and connectedness. Spatial cues like open doors can signify a sense of openness and spark a student's interest in interacting. Although the possibility for open doors and open door policies are determined by building codes, certain design elements that facilitate the open-ness and access can be integrated into residence halls, such as signs on residents' doors on which they can post details about themselves and their interests.

Implications for Educators

What can educators do with this information and how can they think differently about their practice? Although the Diner, the Walkway, and Marlow Hall are intriguing spaces on one campus, the intended takeaway for these examples is the usefulness of a spatial approach – that is, examining how students interact with and view different spaces, and how we can help shape their experiences. Consider which spaces students on *your* campus would choose to discuss. Which spaces do they seem drawn to, and why? Which spaces would students identify as facilitating or hindering belonging? What would these spaces help you better understand about your campus culture, programmatic needs, and areas for improvement? And how might your

responses to these questions compare with what students would say?

Despite our best intentions, even the most carefully designed plans require ongoing refinement. Educators need to develop ways to gather frequent feedback and insights from the people who use the space, and incorporate this information into ongoing examinations of campus spaces over time. Most importantly, students need to be in on these reviews. They are the ones who have the most experience with the range of campus spaces and can provide valuable feedback on what is working or not. Students can offer first hand insight into ways that spaces can be changed in order to better meet their needs, and ultimately, their sense of belonging. For example, if changes are made to the Diner, re-examining the space in another six months, two years, five years, will enable researchers and practitioners to know whether changes in space are making a positive difference. What may have worked for students at one point in time may no longer work as time passes.

Every institution is different, so educators should explore the concept of spatial cues at their institutions. Without serious consideration of space, many students' needs [and desires] will remain unknown and unaddressed. More than any time before, campuses must develop strategies to better understand students' diverse experiences and perspectives, especially those that desire to be more inclusive. Drawing upon a spatial approach and integrating spatial cues will help improve the process of developing students' sense of belonging and connectedness – a critical factor for student success.

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