

A multi-level modern building interior with people moving and sitting on stairs. The scene is captured with a long exposure, creating a sense of motion. In the foreground, a young man in a red and black plaid shirt sits on a wide staircase, looking down at a device. To his right, a young woman in a dark red top and black pants sits on the same level, talking on a mobile phone. In the background, two other people are blurred as they move up and down the stairs. The architecture features white walls, glass railings, and multiple levels, suggesting a university or corporate office environment.

Servicescape in

For the last 14 years I have worked in the Facilities Department at the University of Hartford. Prior to working in facility management (FM), I spent 10 years in progressively responsible positions in student affairs, including many years in campus housing, the final one as assistant director of residential life at the University of Hartford. In this role I was responsible for addressing residents' concerns related to room assignments and living conditions. In the interim between working for student affairs and FM, I was employed by a property management company, renting apartments and managing repair contractors, apartment applicants, and tenants. This company managed

mostly residential properties, and most of the work involved dealing with issues arising from facility failure: a leak, no heat, an elevator bulb burnt out, snow removal, etc.

In each of these professional settings it was obvious that the physical surroundings influenced individuals' experiences. As facilities professionals fully understand, whether on-campus or in the community, if people have clean, safe, and comfortable accommodations, they are much more pleasant and easy to deal with. The opposite is true as well: When something goes wrong, it is almost impossible get beyond the issue. No tenant or campus resident wants to hear about the holiday window decorating



Campus Facilities

By Jason Farrell

contest when their shower only runs cold water. Beyond the residential experience, the influence of the physical facilities is evident in other business functions of higher education as well. The message is clear that in order to effectively teach, organize events, or socialize, the physical campus has to be able to support all types of activity.

The notion that campus facilities influence user experiences is a well-studied subject. Results have demonstrated that built environments at colleges and universities are key contributors to student decisions to enroll in and remain at particular institutions, to higher levels of student satisfaction and learning, and

importantly, to student perceptions of service quality. All of these measures seem to support the critical components of the business model in higher education: to attract and retain high-quality students, provide value, and ensure a first-rate experience.

WEATHERING CURRENT CONDITIONS

Given the current landscape of higher education, it may be beneficial for institutions to examine ways to further tap the potential the physical campus can present. Issues at the forefront include an increasingly unsustainable cost model—reports have indicated that the growing cost of a degree has outpaced the



SERVICESCAPE

emphasizes the physical environment in which a service function or process takes place.

growth of income in the United States. In addition, the long-term financial burden of student loans has fast become the country's largest source of unsecured debt. Further complicating the challenge, for-profit higher education institutions are growing the fastest, and online institutions have the highest enrollment, suggesting that families are choosing to spend increasingly limited education dollars in more varied ways. Also notable is a substantial and growing amount of deferred maintenance at brick-and-mortar campuses. Various reports estimate the total U.S. need to be as high as \$36 billion. Taken together, these factors may have the potential to disrupt the operations of individual institutions, along with the entire higher education industry.

The ability for the industry to adjust to these changing conditions is likely key if it is to remain a viable option for those looking to gain and grow skills and knowledge. Ultimately this boils down to institutional effectiveness at successfully competing for high-quality students and employees (i.e., faculty and administrative staff).

Michael E. Porter's 1985 work, *The Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*, supports the idea that singular components of an organization, such as the physical campus, can potentially add to perceptions of differentiation and lead to a competitive advantage. Such a strategy of differentiation through strategic management of the physical campus could be a way to achieve an advantage and weather the current conditions.

INTRODUCING SERVICESCAPE

The idea of the physical facility (or built environment) influencing its users in service industries is reinforced in an area of study known as the *servicescape*. Introduced by Mary Jo Bitner in 1992, the model encompasses the total configuration of environmental dimensions in a service setting and emphasizes the interconnectedness between the physical environment in which a service is delivered and the mood, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors of those operating within it. Specifically, Bitner maintained that distinct servicescape elements could influence internal responses (i.e., emotional, cognitive, or physiological) of either customers or employees. In turn, the way an individual responds to the collection of various elements ultimately influences their behavior.

Bitner categorized environmental elements into three distinct groups: ambient conditions (e.g., air temperature, sound levels, odors); spatial layout and functionality (e.g., room/building adjacencies, seating styles, walkways); and implicit and explicit communicators (e.g., quality of finishes, artwork, visible deferred maintenance). These elements are thought to influence individuals' reactions and lead them to exhibit approach behaviors (i.e., attending, joining, or affiliating) or their opposite, avoidance behaviors (i.e. *not* attending, joining, or affiliating). Emphasized in the servicescape narrative is the idea that this influence extends beyond customers and includes all those operating in the service

environment, such as employees and visitors, influencing each in a unique way.

The influence of environmental elements of the servicescape has been studied across service industries with a level of physical complexity similar that to a college campus, such as casinos, golf courses, and restaurants. In each study, elements of the servicescape were found to influence attitudes and behaviors. One study in particular found that positive experiences with cleanliness (an example of an implicit communicator) led to approach behaviors such as increases in tip sizes in restaurants and repeat bookings for a taxi service. In sum, elements of the servicescape in a service firm have been found to contribute to differentiation, lead to positive choices by customers, and affect employee behaviors.

UTILIZING THE MODEL

Recent research conducted utilizing the servicescape model at the University of Hartford took this very approach to try and gain a better understanding of the scope of influence the physical facilities had on users, and attempted to identify which particular elements were most influential. The study comprised nearly 900 volunteers drawn from the population of approximately

8,500 students (full-time, part-time, graduate and undergraduate), faculty (full-time and adjunct), staff, and administrators.

Participants completed a researcher-developed, online questionnaire asking them to rate their agreement with whether or not particular elements of the physical campus influenced their experiences. Those that completed the questionnaire were asked if they would be willing to take, then email a photo of a campus element that influenced their experiences. A subsample of that group were invited to take part in an individual interview to describe their photo and discuss the specific influence that element had on them. In addition to the questionnaire responses, the data comprised over 60 photos and 20 interviews.

The study results indicated that the campus's built environment influenced a majority of the participants, which supported the findings in the previous research noted earlier. Specifically, interviewees talked about personal reactions (both positive and negative) to elements of the campus servicescape that ranged across emotional responses, cognitive responses, physiological responses, and outward behaviors. One participant noted that the condition of the campus lawns made her "happy," and another described feeling "comfortable and safe" because of the upkeep and appearance of the grounds.

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Additionally, participants speculated about the influence they believed campus elements had on current and prospective students as well as employees. Describing the condition of a public bathroom in a campus building, one interviewee lamented that “if parents or [prospective] students . . . go in there, they’ve got to think that this university doesn’t care about the buildings at all.” In line with Bitner’s framework, there were some notable differences in the questionnaire scores between students and employees on various scales.

OF PARTICULAR INFLUENCE

In addition to the broad influence reported by participants, the data analysis also indicated categories of specific elements that had a particular influence. Unsurprisingly, respondents noted overwhelmingly that examples of items in poor condition, generally related to cleanliness or level of maintenance, influenced their experiences. Additionally, people reported that decorative elements outdoors influenced them very positively.

Bitner categorized such elements as implicit communicators and suggested they have a particular importance in forming first impressions and communicating norms and expectations of be-

havior. Importantly, elements in poor condition were described by interviewees as significant signals to current and potential community members. One participant agreed that visible “maintenance issues create an impression on what [visitors] should expect with the rest of the university.”

Other prominent themes of individual elements that emerged from the study were the influence of pedestrian and vehicle travelways, along with the functionality of academic spaces. One interviewee described the university walkway system, as “effective,” while another suggested that they were successful in “comfortably moving [people] between the network of buildings” on campus. Conversely, in some cases, the walkways and roadways were identified as presenting challenges for people with differing abilities, with one interviewee referencing her photo and stating, “Look, a crosswalk that goes nowhere,” and another suspecting a lack of sensitivity in a decision to “take out the ramp and put a set of stairs in.”

With respect to academic spaces, respondents shared mostly negative experiences and identified elements of the facilities that did not meet their needs. One participant described the functionality of one classroom as “undermining the educational

experiences of students” because she perceived the furniture as uncomfortable and the technology outdated. Another reported feeling “cheated” out of higher education due to a particular classroom’s condition. Students also talked about the problem of current classroom spaces being insufficiently outfitted to accommodate small group projects, coupled with a lack of effective spaces for out-of-class team assignments, noting that “we just go find space off-campus, at Starbucks or something.”

While the specific findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other institutions, the results have implications for campus administrators as well as FM departments. Administrators may do well to establish a culture that encourages a community of shared stewardship of the physical facilities. Related to this study, participants identified visual cues across campus in the form of both decorative elements outdoors, and elements in poor condition that influenced their experiences. Both sets of elements were described as influencing current campus stakeholders and potential new students and their families. While FM departments are tasked with upkeep and repair,



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given the reported importance of campus elements, it seems to make sense that everyone becomes invested in the physical environment.

In addition, university administrators may want to consider opportunities that could result from strategically managing the servicescape when prioritizing resources and developing strategic plans. Specifically, they could attend to the connection that appears to exist between the campus facilities and the teaching and learning process.

At the University of Hartford, both students and employees reported that, among other things, their experiences were influenced by maintenance and cleaning issues, and that classroom functionality affected their academics. As each campus is unique, administrators could conduct similar examinations of the servicescape at their own campuses to better target funding of deferred maintenance issues and rehabilitation projects. In short, campus administrators could consider the role of the physical facilities as a more instrumental piece of organizational strategy.

THE FM STAKEHOLDERS

Specifically related to FM, operations may wish to consider the perspectives of various groups of stakeholders (i.e., students, employees, visitors) when making decisions, such as those related to daily work priorities or targeting funds set aside for the rehabilitation of spaces. They could establish systems that capture these viewpoints to positively influence the experiences of people visiting, working, and going to school there.

Additionally, facility departments could emphasize procedures to regularly inspect all campus areas to identify and repair items

in poor condition before community members notice them. The effectiveness of such efforts will be determined by how efficiently the identified work is processed and how thoroughly it is completed. As reported by participants, such elements can influence the experiences of current students and employees, and can present a more inviting campus to potential students.

Lastly, FM departments could consider prioritizing capital projects and renovation work that best addresses areas that most influence the experiences of campus stakeholders. While regular campus inspections and the stewardship of facilities staff can address the visual cues, the functionality of the campus involves longer-term projects and planning. By incorporating many perspectives, FM staff can more effectively determine areas of focus and maximize positive influence on students and employees.

In sum, faced with current pressures, higher education institutions, particularly tuition-driven ones, may gain a competitive advantage if they can better understand stakeholders' perceptions of how various elements of the built environment influence their campus experiences. A university's servicescape could serve to differentiate or distinguish the organization from similar entities, if university administrators and FM staff apply this information to planning and designing campuses, and managing their facilities. ☞

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