Banning’s Theory on Campus Perspectives and Design

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Table of Contents

[Perry’s Theory on Intellectual and Ethical Development 3](#_Toc125459631)

[Analysis 3](#_Toc125459632)

[Synthesis 4](#_Toc125459633)

[Reflection 6](#_Toc125459634)

[References 8](#_Toc125459635)

Banning’s Theory on Campus Perspectives and Design

This essay aims to analyze James Banning and Leland Kaiser’s ecological perspective and model on campus design. The theory and its historical context will first be defined and explained. There will then be a deeper dive into its strengths, weaknesses, limitations, as well as the implicit biases this theory might carry. A critical reflection will be made based on other more modern theories, and the implications, and the current application of such theory on Student Affairs professional in the current world.

# Analysis

Banning’s theory first sets the background of three perspectives: the unenlightened perspective, the adjustment perspective, and the developmental perspective. The unenlightened perspective of an institution is that not all students are meant to succeed in college. Under this perspective, it is natural that some students are going to fail under this environment, and will drop out of the institution. Thus, students failing this system becomes almost a landmark of the efficacy of the institution. Furthermore, institutions will almost invest in “weeding out” those students deemed unfit by the system, and increase the greater educational benefits to others.

The second, adjustment or counseling perspective goes further than the first stage. While acknowledging that some students will be struggling in college, this perspective suggests that we should provide care and counseling for them so that they can also be given a chance to adjust, benefiting from the larger educational environment. The third perspective goes a step further into the assumption that college is a place for development rather than weeding out unfitted students. Thus, students need to go through a phase of transition to be ready for development.

Banning and Kaiser purposed a new perspective where the impact of environment and peoples is a two-way street, focusing on the transactional relationship between students and their environment. They then discussed the steps and level of implementation of a design process that allows the transactional experience for the students and environment. The model starts with the selection of educational values and translation of those values into specific goals. The model then proceeds to design the environment with mechanisms to reach those goals. The model continues the design process with gathering students’ feedbacks, and redesigning the environment based on those feedbacks.

# Synthesis

Banning and Kaiser’s theory purposed a then bold framework in accessing the campus environment. Prior to this theory, many focused on the one-sided effects of students on the environment, or the environment on the students. The focus on educational values, translating that into specific goals and designs, and the evaluation and redesigning based on those evaluation was a novel concept that involves a lot of the modern concept of student-centered assessment.

The first piece of strong characteristics of this theory is the focus on the community’s educational values. For public institutions that are aimed to serve the state or the city, it is crucial that the community members to have an input on the educational missions the institutions ought to have. Afterall, those institutions are educating the future generations of those who will reside in and contribute to those communities. This will lay the foundation of a positive feedback loop where, as the community evolves and the demographics of such community changes, their feedbacks to the institution will change, and the education missions and goals can change, reflecting on the campus climate design.

Another piece of strength is the assessment of students’ perception of, and behavior based on campus design. If done well, this allows campus leadership in further understanding the experience of students, and its alignment with the tangible goals and intangible missions of the university.

However, this ancient theory, in student affairs’ definition of time, comes with its flaws in modern days. The assessment, first and foremost, comes in very elementary level: Banning and Kaiser only purposed to measure the whole student body with mean score of their personal alignment. The treatment of the student body as a whole comes with many aspects of its flaw: it inherently ignores marginalized population, failing to represent their voices and experience all equally. This failure then, categorically invalidates all the assessment done as the results are inherently inaccurate for marginalized students. It is also fair to argue that the community’s demographics and needs do not necessarily align with the needs of their institutions, as a public institute often serve students outside of the community who might share different goals and missions in their education journey, such as out of state students and international students.

Another key assumption this theory made is the credibility of the missions and their translation into tangible goals. It was assumed that, first, all missions will be accurately and equitably represented by the community, and second that all of those missions will translate into goals without a loss. Thus, it is crucial that one examine and utilize this theory in combination with others, such as the Critical Race Theory. An example would be Cabrera et al’s Critical White Analysis of Campus Ecology, indicating that “we cannot treat everyone’s perceptions equally. Instead, beliefs about inclusivity and safety need to be contextualized by an individual’s relation to systemic power, privilege, and marginality.” (Pg. 130) Thus, it is important to not only critically assess the campus perspective, but also critically assess their perception of those perspectives based on individuals’ intersecting identities under the context of systemic racism and discrimination.

# Reflection

The intentionality of a design of campus is seldom examined as, for many students, those architecture and perspectives of campus were present before they even got there, and will most likely remain long after their departure. Nevertheless, campuses continue to expand. I argue, based on my experience, that this theory remains relevant. However, it is important to not be blinded by this sole theory. My alma mater, the University of Washington Seattle (UW) has built several new buildings in recent years. And many of the design directly and indirectly reflect UW’s priorities.

For example, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donated to, and named the newsiest Computer Science building for the relevant programs at UW. The study rooms, auditoriums, laboratories, and even the stairs are named after donors and significant individuals or organizations that contributed to the building. While one can argue about the fulfillment of educational missions through this building, the privileges these buildings bring to certain groups of students over others. Only Computer Science students, who are majority white, male, and privileged in multiple aspects, have access to those facilities and to even enter certain parts of the building. The naming of those facilities would further the idea of wealth and class disparity for some students. My friends and classmates have always complained about the sense of elitism between students who can access that building over others. Under Banning’s theory, while one can argue that the Bill and Melinda Gates Center for Computer Science at UW achieves the goal and interest of the greater community, it is easy to see the lacking in such campus perspective through the lens of Critical Race Theory.

Banning’ theory is a great starting point when it comes to designing a campus, whether it is the literal architecture or the metaphorical architecture of the curriculum. However, it is not the theory to use as the foundation. When building a campus perspective for a diverse campus, it is important to consider the community’s input. In assessment, focusing on marginalized students’ experience with a special light on intersectionality of students’ identities is crucial in making meaning out of these assessments. For example, purposefully assigning and destinating spaces for those students could make students feel more safe, belonged, and capable of succeeding in the university.

In conclusion, the ancient theory of campus perspective design by Banning and Kaiser provides an excellent starting point for the consideration of higher-level missions, and how those translate into the experience of all students in their day to day. However, it lacks the fundamental understanding of critical assessment of the student body.

References

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