

**Campus snapshot:
Assessing the campus environment through a student lens**

Jacqueline Pizzuti-Ashby & Donna G. Alary

University College of the Fraser Valley

Paper presented at the Association for Institutional Research Conference

Seattle, Washington
May 2008

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study represents perceptions of students regarding campus environment and campus life at University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV), a public four-year university-college located in British Columbia, Canada. Employing a unique methodology, referred to as reflexive photography, student participants were asked to photograph and journal about spaces on campus they thought represented the institution's uniqueness, in addition to what they liked about the campus, and what they observed should be changed. These three categories were created to determine: 1) symbolic images of the campus environment and campus life that reveal the institution's identity; 2) services, programs, or spaces students enjoy; and 3) areas that create barriers to a student's academic experience. Analysis of the participants' photographs and journals indicated five interrelated themes: student support services, student space, venues for self-expression, the physical environment of the campus, and its physical growth. The results of this study were presented to policymakers as recommendations to the planning and development of the institution's academic and physical environment.

INTRODUCTION

From architecture to accessibility, the campus environment impacts student perception and behaviour and becomes part of their academic experience (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980 & 1991; Tinto, 1987). Research indicates that it is this experience between student and environment that can contribute to or hinder the process of integration and retention (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980 & 1991; Strange & Banning, 2001). As illustrated by Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1987), the social and academic integration of students within their campus environment is an instrumental component in their persistence and goal attainment (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980 & 1991; Strange & Banning, 2001).

In Educating by Design: Creating Campus Environments that Work, Strange & Banning (2001) assert that it is through the functional and symbolic aspects of the environment that students form impressions and based on those perceptions assess, navigate, and integrate within their surroundings. The functional, or physical, factors of an environment influence and determine students' physical direction, routine, and sense of opportunity (Bennett & Benton, 2001; Moos, 1979; Strange & Banning, 2001). Consequently, the functional aspects of the environment also provide symbolic, or non-verbal, messages affecting students' perceived sense of belonging and value (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Strange & Banning, 2001).

How students interact and integrate within their environment requires an assessment method that will permit them to define their own experience (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Methods such as journaling, essays, portfolios and comment sections in surveys provide an opportunity for students to respond to their environment through their own voice (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Tinto's (2000) article, "Looking at the University through Different Lenses" discusses the use photography as an alternative method in understanding the student experience and perception of campus environment. Tinto (2000) explains:

Beyond providing us differing views of ourselves, these lenses, archaeological and photographic, serve to remind us of the importance of keeping our discourse in higher education open to multiple, and sometimes quite foreign, perspectives. The inclusion of differing views and voices is not just a desirable state of affairs, a valued social goal; it is absolutely essential if we are to more fully understand how collective actions in the university influence, perhaps unintentionally, our individual behaviors and those of our students (p.3).

The Office of Institutional Research at UCFV has historically used quantitative methods to measure students' expectations, perceptions and outcomes. The drawback to quantitative research is that it begins with a hypothesis or assumption in mind and uses the information gathered to support or refute it. In contrast, qualitative inquiry "allows the ideas or the categories to arise from the data rather than placing a pre-existing framework on the data...[Participant's responses] capture meaning in the form of feelings, behaviour, thoughts, insights, and actions rather than in the form of numbers" (Mayan, 2001, p.5).

Thus, Institutional Research undertook a qualitative study with the purpose of providing students the opportunity to voice their perceptions and catalogue their observations of campus environment and campus life; and to offer UCFV policymakers insight on how students assign meaning and integrate within their academic surroundings.

This study uses the qualitative methodology of reflexive photography. Reflexive photography encourages participants to integrate within their surroundings through photographing and journaling issues that are significant to them (Collier & Collier, 1986). Student participants were asked to photograph and journal about the spaces on campus that represented the institution's uniqueness, in addition to what they liked about the campus, and what they observed should be changed. These three categories were created to determine: 1) symbolic images of the campus environment and campus life that reveal the institution's identity; 2) services, programs, or spaces students enjoy; 3) areas that create barriers to a student's academic experience.

Subsequently, participant focus groups were arranged to discuss the impressions participants had of their campus environment and the process of using reflexive photography as a means of capturing their perceptions. The study concluded with a discussion between policymakers and student participants regarding the development and future vision of the campus environment.

REFLEXIVE PHOTOGRAPHY – BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Developed and refined by visual anthropologists and sociologists, reflexive photography is a phenomenological qualitative process of inquiry (Becker, 1995; Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 1986). The use of reflexive photography as a methodology in studying the perceptions of post-secondary students is fairly recent. The methodology has been used as a perception elucidation technique to better understand the impressions of first-year students and first-year minority students at their universities (Douglas, 1998; Harrington & Lindy, 1998; Harrington & Schibik, 2003).

The theoretical frameworks of individual-environmental interaction and symbolic interactionism provide an understanding of how students behave and assign meaning to their campus environment (Attinasi, 1989; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Douglas, 1998; Harrington & Lindy, 1998; Harrington & Schibik, 2003; Strange & Banning, 2001). Individual-environmental interaction theories hypothesize that a person's behaviour is influenced by their interaction with their environment. The theory of individual-environmental interaction applied to post-secondary institutions provides researchers a theoretical base for understanding how students integrate within their campus surroundings (Moos, 1979; Strange & Banning, 2001). How students assign meaning to their environment is described through the theory of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is explained as the process in which an individual assigns meaning to objects, events, people, symbols, or phenomenon in their environment as a product of their social interaction with others (Blumer, 1969; Hewitt, 1997; Mead, 1934).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

During the fall term of 2006, Institutional Research used posters and email announcements to recruit students as participants for the study. Students interested in partaking in the study were asked to attend a one-hour presentation that explained the purpose of the study and the process of using reflexive photography as a means of gathering their perceptions. Following the presentation, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire.

Student participants were each assigned a disposable camera (colour, 27-exposure, built-in flash) and corresponding journal to record their responses. The journal instructed participants to categorize their subject matter under three headings: images that represented UCFV, what they liked about UCFV, and what they observed should be changed at UCFV. An “other” category was also provided for participants who felt that the pre-selected categories were not applicable to their specific issue. Participants were encouraged to provide their thoughts and reflections on their photographs in addition to suggestions or solutions for resolving issues that involved desired changes to the current campus environment. Participants were given two weeks to complete the project.

Student participants took a total number of 261 photographs resulting in 60% of the 432 frames of film available for use. Of the 261 photographs taken, one had been underexposed and the other photo unidentifiable. Participants that did not use all 27 available exposures stated that they had completed the components of the study to their satisfaction.

Following the submission and processing of all student participants’ cameras and journals, focus groups were organized to reunite students and discuss their findings, and the process of using reflexive photography as a method of gathering information. During the focus groups, each student selected photographs that best represented her or his perceptions of the campus. The data collection and analysis took eight weeks to conduct.

A dialogue between student participants and the university’s senior administration campus planning group was arranged to present the results of the study and to encourage discussion between students and policymakers regarding the transitions and growth of the campus environment. The campus planning group was created in 2006 to recommend, support, and guide the institution’s planning, growth, and development by setting standards for space utilization and renovation, as well as cultivating the institution’s identity and ensuring that campus projects align with the academic, financial, and strategic goals of the institution.

THE SETTING

Presently serving over 6,700 (full-time equivalent) students annually, the University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV) has experienced great growth and change over its 30-year history. It was first established in 1974 as the Fraser Valley College (FVC). As a public two-year vocational institution, FVC provided community access to post-secondary education through the development of a series of campuses throughout the region. In 1991, FVC was granted university-college status and renamed

UCFV. As a university-college, UCFV became a four-year, degree granting institution providing both a comprehensive liberal arts education and vocational/trades programs.

In July 2006, UCFV submitted to British Columbia's Ministry of Advanced Education their application for full-university status. As of 2007, this commuter campus will have completed its first student residence building that will house approximately 200 students on its grounds. Academically, UCFV has begun developing master's level programs with the first students completing in 2007.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 20 students, enrolled at the university-college, volunteered to participate in the study during the 11th week of the 2006 fall term. Of the 17 participants that completed the campus snapshot study, 11 or (65%) were female and 6 or (35%) were male. Seventy-one percent (71%) of the participants were under 24 years of age. Five participants indicated they were international students. All participants worked individually except for two students, one female and one male, who participated in this study as a group.

Student participants were enrolled in a broad range of programs including visual arts, science, business, criminology, and computer information systems. The participants were at various stages of their academic programs ranging from first year to graduate level. Eleven of the 17 participants indicated they had a credential goal of a bachelor's degree.

As a group, the participants indicated that they spent an average of 28 hours per week on campus. Ninety-four percent (94%) of the student participants spent the majority of their time, approximately 12 hours per week, in class. Studying and working on campus followed second as activities that student participants engaged in while on campus. Nine of the 17 participants identified that they were active in one or more campus groups, associations or clubs.

In protecting the participants' identity and responses, their names were replaced with pseudonyms. The pseudonyms were either chosen by the student or provided on behalf of them. The 11 female student participants were given the pseudonyms: Joanne, Katie, Linda, Bernice, May, Tara, Jane, Mia, Dreamer Roi, Grace, and Romashka. The six male student participants were given the pseudonyms of Jeff, Sam, John, Graham, Kent, and David.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The qualitative approach of reflexive photography provides the platform for five main themes on campus environment and campus life to emerge. These interrelated themes include *student support services*, *student space*, *venues for self-expression*, *campus physical environment* and the *campus physical growth*. Of the five predominant themes, *student support services*, *student space* and the *campus physical environment* ranked the highest as what students enjoyed most about the campus. Participants identified and suggested the majority of changes on campus to occur in the areas of the

campus physical environment, student support services, and the campus physical growth. Student participants identified aspects of *student support services, campus physical environment, student space* and *venues for self-expression* as images that most represented the institution.

Student Support Services

Student support services encompass the academic, technical, and social support programs provided by the institution as well as learning resources and tools. This category also includes the perceived friendliness, professionalism and accessibility of staff and faculty. Twelve of the 17 participants identified and categorised *student support services* as representing a positive image of UCFV, or as an area needing change. This theme was identified as one of the leading images representing UCFV.

Student support services were described by several participants as very helpful in assisting them with their daily student needs. Kent, a business student, cites, “It’s the library where I study mostly. It’s even open on Saturday and Sunday to support students. Awesome!” Several resources were highlighted that include both academic and technical support departments and centres.

The staff and resources at the Writing Centre are very organized and helpful. While I have only had to use this service a few times myself, I have observed the staff with other students; they are very patient and approachable.

- *Bernice, criminology student*

Adding convenience for students around campus, these people from the Information Technology Services not only help with wireless connection problems but also anything related to IT. Nonetheless, wireless internet is a big help from UCFV.

- *Kent, business student*

Jane, a criminology student, agrees, “Wireless access at UCFV. Student’s love it. They can work anywhere. One step closer to a full funded university.”

Socially, participants valued the organised student activities, campus events, and personalised service provided by departments, individual faculty and staff.

Being an international student, I’m really proud of this department [International Education]. It helps international students adjust to UCFV, the community and Canada. It enhances students’ satisfaction with UCFV experience [and it] provides great service and excellent activities. - *May, psychology student*

As one of the top three frequently identified themes requiring change, participants commented on aspects of *student support services* that include the need to update and replace technological tools and to increase the accessibility of electronic resources and technology in each classroom as well as throughout the campus. Joanne and Jeff, computer information systems students, express that “Having smart classes [classrooms

equipped with computers, monitors, and internet access] is great, with TV, computer, etc. It would be greater to see smart classes in every classroom.”

Student Space

Areas on campus that provide an informal space for students to study, for programmable activity, and for casual discussion, define the theme of *student space*. Thirteen out of 17 participants photographed and noted areas on campus that provide an informal area for them to study or meet with other students for conversation. *Student space* was identified as a theme at UCFV and, along with *student support services*, as the predominant image that represents UCFV.

Participants described *student space* on campus as providing a relaxed atmosphere that allows them to “escape” from the stress of classes and work. Joanne and Jeff, computer information systems students, describes, “Great place [University House] to relax and hang out with friends during school hours - especially between classes – offers many services and organises events. Plays a big part in ‘Student Life’ at UCFV.”

Participants acknowledge the campus pub and the lounge areas located around campus that provide couches and extra desks to study. These were highlighted as important spaces to preserve, maintain, and expand. This sensitivity to the design of the environment is expressed by science student, Mia, who states, “UCFV offers more than desks for studying, the Quiet Zone in the library and University House make studying much more stylish and comfortable.” David, a business student, cites, “Second floor of the Library, I always take my laptop with me and sit here and talk with my friends.” John, a geography student, identifies the campus pub:

Casey’s on Campus is a nice addition to the Abbotsford campus. Although not having late hours on Friday’s or on the weekend, it is nice to have a pub for student use. The food also gives a nice alternative to cafeteria selection at reasonable prices.

Participants described *student space* as needing change if they felt the existing area could no longer accommodate the growing use of the area. Graham, a general studies student, emphasises, “UCFV should be mindful of study space. Study space should mirror campus growth.” Several participants wanted to see these spaces and their amenities expanded to offer greater student utilisation.

Venues for Self-Expression

A work from a student of the Visual Arts Department, it could be found on a wall in the hall of the first floor. No wonder we are free to express ourselves at this place, UCFV. Also a sight of beauty. - Mia, science student

Venues for self-expression included areas that were designated to support student’s opinion, voice, or artistic expression. Ten out of 17 participants identified these *venues of self-expression* as the student art gallery, the display of student artwork throughout the campus, the student newspaper, and student radio station. As the third

most frequently commented on and photographed theme representing the image of UCFV, participants emphasised that these *venues for self-expression* enhanced UCFV's diverse community and culture by using art to communicate student perspectives. Romashka, a general science student, took several photographs of student art pieces and notes, "...UCFV students are very talented and creative with their artwork being displayed every week..." Grace, a science student, elaborates:

I love walking through here [Student Art Gallery]. I think that art makes any place more beautiful and interesting, therefore, having this place available to all students, especially the non-art-oriented student, is very important. It lets me appreciate my peer's view of this school, this community, this world.

Participants described the theme self-expression as needing change if they felt that the area for expression was limited in its support of other forms of self-expression or limited in physical space.

The only reason that this should be changed is to make it bigger. A great place for student exhibitions as well as visiting artists. Almost always filled with colourful paintings and other artwork, which helps to construct a warm environment at UCFV. That is why we think this should be expanded. It will make UCFV look better, contain a warm environment and also give students more opportunities to express themselves.

- Joanne and Jeff, computer information systems students

Areas and symbols that encourage self-expression on campus were valued and perceived by participants as the institution's support of the individuality and identity of its student population. The student newspaper was identified as an image representing UCFV because it provides a place for students to voice their opinions and views of campus life. Criminology student, Bernice, comments, "Sports, academics, current events, theatre,...everything can be found in the student paper. A student paper is a must for any college or university, and UCFV's paper is of good quality."

Campus Growth

The *growth* of the campus was defined as the institution's population growth, physical growth and the construction of its new facilities. The addition of new student residences, the expansion of the gymnasium, the institution's application for university status, and the increasing challenge to find parking and utilise campus resources were areas of *growth* identified by 10 of the 17 participants.

Growth was also a predominant theme as it concerns students' ideas for change on campus. Several participants expressed the growth on campus as a "symbolic" step in attracting a more diverse student population and as being recognised as a university. Tara, a general arts student, describes, "The building of residences represents UCFV growth. There aren't many (if any?) schools with dorms in the Fraser Valley. I hope this encourages a more diverse student body and attracts students from out of town." Mia highlights, "The picture [of the student residence] is the symbolic movement of UCFV's

initiation to become a university. Living on campus has become an option [now] for many students, especially international students.” Dreamer Roi, a social services student, states, “Building on will benefit students now and in the future.”

Students expressed concern and challenge regarding the *growth* of the campus and its affects on the natural environment as well as the increasing competition for resources and parking on campus.

With the expansion of the gymnasium, it can be very difficult to find parking. Even before the construction parking was an issue. As the school population grows the school should anticipate these needs and find a way to minimize the affect it has on students.

- *Katie, business student*

The little preserved pond between buildings is a nice, a peaceful walk as heading toward classes. Unfortunately isolating a pond creates a change in the environment of species living in it. It’s a difficult decision for UCFV who wants to expand and become a university but is sitting near agriculture land. However, as UCFV expands environmental benefits should be kept in mind.

- *Mia, science student*

Campus Physical Environment

UCFV is surrounded by gorgeous trees and landscaping. Sitting outside on campus is very enjoyable in the summer and fall semesters. Many colleges and universities are simply a building crammed into a small space. In contrast, UCFV is nicely spread out and has an amazing view of Mt. Baker.

- *Bernice, criminology student*

The *campus physical environment* was defined as the university’s setting and includes its greenspace, facilities and rural landscape. *Physical environment* was identified and categorised by 13 of the 17 participants as enjoyable and representing the image of UCFV, or as needing change.

Every morning when I walk from the car on the hill to school I see the field and behind it, the mountains. I always admire how beautiful the mountains look in the morning (when you can actually see them). I am not a BC native and, therefore they are something that always catches my attention. I love the fact that I get to see them almost every morning at school. - *Grace, science student*

Participants discussed changes to the *physical environment* of the campus if they felt that the environment and facilities needed upgrading, maintenance, or expansion. Sam, a business student, comments, “This often inaccurate tower clock is set permanently at 9:25 on two faces. One face has the hands completely gone. This iconic view which first greets visitors should not be a point of ridicule.”

Several participants highlighted the beauty of the campus surroundings and expressed their interests and concerns about preserving UCFV’s natural setting. Linda, a

visual arts student states, “We students want to preserve the natural beauty, not obscure the view of the mountains behind the buildings.” UCFV’s geographical location, physical size, and layout were noted by several participants of this study. They concluded that UCFV’s layout made resources and facilities accessible to students and provided “community atmosphere.”

DISCUSSION

The perceptions of students on *student support services*, *student space*, *venues for self-expression*, *campus physical environment*, and its *physical growth* have provided direction to the future planning and development of campus environment – most notably, the importance of academic support, individuality and creativity of students, and preserving the natural beauty of the campus, while at the same time accommodating an ever-growing student population, attracting national and international students alike. In addition, the study revealed that the identity of the campus is perceived as moving towards university status.

Students also identified concerns about the growth of the campus and the increased competition to access student learning resources, student space, and parking. Accompanying these concerns were students’ suggestions and ideas on remedying the issues they raised.

This study provided a venue for students to discuss the transitions and growth of the campus with each other and with institutional policymakers. The dialogue bridged a communicative gap between students and administrators and, as a result, has fostered new relationships and a better understanding of the campus environment and those that inhabit it.

Results of this study and its subsequent recommendations have influenced institutional research, enrolment management, and campus planning by offering these committees and departments greater insight into our students’ perspectives and expectations. The campus planning group expressed a greater understanding of students’ perceptions of the campus environment and has implemented several ideas that emerged from the results of the study and discussion with the student participants.

These implementations include incorporating more *student space* and student lounge areas for informal discussion. A “learning commons” area that will physically cluster *student support services* in one accessible location is currently under development. *Venues of student expression* have been noted as valuable and are to be expanded and promoted. The physical beauty of the campus and its library building, identified as images representing the institution, have been designated as areas to be preserved, maintained, and enhanced.

Additionally, there is a heightened awareness of the impact the growing student population is having on current students in regards to increasing the competition for campus resources, student space, and parking. Priorities for the campus planning group include developing strategies to address these issues and to effectively communicate these plans to the student population.

CONCLUSION

Institutional Research at UCFV concludes that the reflexive photography study as undertaken by this department successfully met certain targeted objectives as shown in this paper. This study provided a qualitative method to understanding students' perspectives, it involved students in defining their own university, and most importantly it brought both policymakers and students together to discuss the vision of the campus.

Therefore, it is recommended that this study be repeated following the completion of the student residence building, as follow-up to the growth and development of this campus and its goal of providing students greater opportunities for social and academic integration.

REFERENCES

- Astin, A. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Attinasi, L. (1989). Getting in: Mexican American's perceptions of university attendance and the implications for freshman year persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 60(3), 247-277.
- Banning, J. (1997). Assessing the campus' ethical climate: a multidimensional approach. *New Directions for Student Services*, 77, 95-105.
- Becker, H. (1995). Visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism: It's (almost) all a matter of context. *Visual Sociology* 10(1/2), 5-14.
- Bennett, M. & Benton, S. (2001). What are the buildings saying? A study of first-year undergraduate students' attributions about college campus architecture. *NASPA Journal*, 38(2), 159-177.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism*. London: University of California Press.
- Chickering, A. & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Collier, J. & Collier, M. (1986). *Visual anthropology: photography as a research method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Douglas, K. (1998). Impressions: African American first-year students' perceptions of a predominantly white university. *Journal of Negro Education*, 67(4), 416-431.
- Harper, D. (1986). Meaning and work: A study in photo elicitation. *Current Sociology*, 34(3), 24-46.
- Harrington, C. & Schibik, T. (2003). Reflexive photography as an alternative method for the study of freshman year experience. *NASPA Journal*, 41(1), 23-40.

- Harrington, C. & Lindy, I. (March 1998). The use of reflexive photography in the study of the freshman year experience. Paper presented at the 1998 Annual Conference of the Indiana Association for Institutional Research, Nashville, IN. Retrieved October 15, 2006, from ERIC Document No. ED429473.
- Hewitt, J. (1997). *Self and society: A symbolic interactionist social psychology*. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon.
- Mayan, M. (2001). *An introduction to qualitative methods*. Edmonton: Qual Institute Press.
- Mead, G. (1934). *Mind, self and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Moos, R. (1979). *Evaluating educational environments*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palomba, C. & Banta, T. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pascarella, E. & Terenzini, P. (1980). *Predicting freshman persistence and voluntary dropout decisions from a theoretical model*. *Journal of Higher Education*, 51(1), 60-75.
- Pascarella, E. & Terenzini, P. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Strange, C. & Banning, J. (2001). *Educating by design: Creating campus environments that work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tinto, V. (2000). Looking at the university through different lenses. *About Campus*, 4(6), 2-3.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University Chicago Press.