

**IN THEIR OWN WORDS: A FOCUS GROUP APPROACH TO
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a focus group approach to the understanding of student perceptions of campus community. Using the Strange and Banning (2001) framework of community, the author argues that students' sense of campus community should be studied as it exists within the institutional environment. The results of the study include: 1) There is a strong connection between the quality of services and students' sense of belonging to the institution; 2) Students' full participation in campus life happens only when careful consideration is given to such factors as students' financial ability, their residential environment, and integration among different student groups; and 3) Committed to shared educational purposes, institutions should also be open to divergent definitions of community, leaving space for individual learning, growth, and creativity, thus cultivating an open and tolerant campus community.

KEY WORDS: college students, campus community, student affairs

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“One of the most enduring, yet elusive goals to animate higher education in recent years has to do with the concept of community-building” (Wiley, 2002), and important strides have been made in our understanding of community in college campuses. Two lines of research in this area merit special attention for scholars and practitioners.

The first group of researchers have cherished “the ideals of Oxford and Cambridge that shaped early colleges” (Toma & Kezar, 1999) and worked toward defining a common conception of campus community which emphasizes student development both inside and outside the classroom. These concepts were captured by Meiklejohn (1969) who called a college campus “a place, a group, a comradeship of those who follow learning as their guide and who welcome others in the same pursuit.” Lloyd-Jones (1989), a long-time advocate for creating community on campus, offers her definition of a campus community: “The condition of community is the binding together of individuals toward a common cause or experience.” Even in today’s much diversified campuses, such a definition “retains a favored status” (Toma & Kezar, 1999). Especially for traditional-age students, attending college means more than just obtaining an academic education. “They yearn for a sense of belonging, and the lack of it may prompt some to abandon either their institutions – or worse – their education” (Brazzell, 2001).

Instead of trying to reach a common definition of community that can be applied universally to today’s college campuses, the second group of researchers set out to find distinct characteristics that constitute a good campus community. Wells (1996) derives ten “overlapping and intersecting themes” of community through a thorough review of existing literature in the area. Strange and Banning (2001, p. 162), synthesizing Wells’ list, point out that communities should be recognized by their celebrated historic identities, their balance of interdependent roles and relationships, their norms and procedures for functioning, and their linkage to the large society.

The most widely accepted list of characteristics for community comes from Boyer’s (1990) landmark work Campus Life: In Search of Community. Boyer identifies six characteristics that should define colleges and universities. Specifically, every college and university should strive to become an educationally purposeful community, an open community, a just community, a disciplined community, a caring community, and a celebrative community (pp. 7-8). Boyer’s characterization of community greatly expanded the meaning of community to include the components reflecting today’s higher education environment.

Inspired by Boyer’s vision of community, researchers have developed a number of survey instruments to gain insight into students’ perceptions of campus community. McDonald and associates (2002) created the College and University Community Inventory (CUCI) and conducted a nation-wide survey of college students. What distinguishes McDonald’s contribution to the research on community are two features: first, his CUCI provides a comprehensive mapping of Boyer’s vision of community; second, his national study presents empirical evidence of students’ perceptions of community based on institutional location, size, and Carnegie classification.

Using another community scale developed by Janosik (1991), Cheng (in press) studied a private university in a large city. His findings indicate that a student’s sense of

community is closely associated with their feelings of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as an individual, and accepted as a part of community, and the quality social life on campus. The single most negative influence on community comes from students' feeling of loneliness on campus. Six areas are identified as important in community building: teaching and learning, open environment, student residential experience, intercultural programming, celebration of institutional history and traditions, and reducing students' feelings of stress and loneliness.

While studies within these two lines of research have been valuable, they have not completely filled the gap in our knowledge about the potential impact of the concept of campus community. A lack of a common, agreed-upon framework for community, compounded with "the constantly changing nature of the campus population" (McDonald, 2002, p. 171), makes it a daunting task to draw a baseline for further studies and to guide community-building work on campus. For instance, researchers have not been able to sufficiently explain the relationships between students' sense of community and such seemingly unrelated factors as the services students receive in residence and dining halls, or student involvement in campus social organizations and activities (Cheng, in press). This paper seeks to illuminate those connections.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Strange and Banning (2001) placed the concept of community in the context of a large educational environment. They postulated that the degree of person-environment congruence could predict an individual's attraction to and satisfaction with an environment. They regarded community not just as a conception or student perceptions, but as a measurable set of interactions between individual students and their college environment (pp. 52-53). They borrowed Maslow's (1968) classic model of human development and motivation, which maintains that the basic needs of all humans form a hierarchy, beginning with physiological, safety, belongingness and love needs, and progressing upwards toward needs of esteem and self-actualization. The assumption in Maslow's model is that human needs that are lower in the hierarchy must be met sufficiently before other needs can be addressed. Using Maslow's paradigm, Strange and Banning (2001, p. 109) proposed a hierarchy of environmental purposes and designs, wherein the need for environments that promote safety and inclusion may precede the need for environments that encourage involvement and community (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

The use of the Strange and Banning framework has implications for research methodology. To identify characteristics of campus community, authors of empirical studies rely on preconceived scales or inventories designed to capture the common understandings of community (Bell, 1993; Cheng, in press; McCarthy, 1990; McDonald, 2002; Schreiner, 1987). While surveys are a good for taking the "temperature" of a large population and pointing to general directions in areas that it probes, they are limited in two fundamental ways. First, the survey method is useful in extracting the factors contributing to the sense of community, but it is not always helpful in gaining in-depth knowledge about community, since granular understanding that arises from a survey is arrived at mainly through interpretation of questionnaire items. Second, most of the questionnaire items focus on students' higher-end needs (e.g., needs for member rights,

respect, diversity, individuality, etc.) and thus fail to explain the contribution of lower-end needs to students' sense of community (e.g., needs for good services in dining halls, residence halls, registrar, etc.). To address these methodological issues, qualitative research methods have special value for investigating complex research problems such as campus community.

With the application of the focus group method within the Strange and Banning framework of community, we no longer assume that students' sense of campus community can be identified with a long list of recognizable characteristics. Instead, we propose to study the concept of community as it exists within the larger institutional environment, not as it is captured *a priori* in a survey instrument. The qualitative method focuses on describing and interpreting student perceptions of campus community using their own words and without any preconceived restrictions on what community should be. The goal was to understand how students interpret their experiences and how these interpretations are related to their overall sense of community. This approach was appropriate for the study in that the purpose of having a strong community is to enhance the quality of student college life, thus all aspects of student life on campus should be taken into consideration. Framed in Strange and Banning's three-level hierarchy, the results of the focus groups should be sorted in such a manner to provide an action plan for student affairs administrators in strategizing and/or prioritizing programs and services on campus.

METHOD

The study was conducted in a private university in the city of New York where 95 percent of its undergraduate population lives on campus. For a long time, faculty, administrators, and students in the institution have struggled with the feelings about lack of campus community. In spring 2001, an enrolled student survey was conducted and the portion of the survey addressing community issues was analyzed and reported back to the campus community (Cheng, in press). While the report from the survey provoked discussions on community among administrators and students, it raised as many questions as it answered. Therefore, in spring 2002 focus groups were planned to further study students' sense of community. An email invitation was sent to a random sample of 800 currently enrolled undergraduate students, representing 15 percent of the entire undergraduate population. Forty-two students accepted the invitation and participated in four focus groups.

The focus groups were tape-recorded and a graduate assistant took detailed notes while the author was moderating the discussions. The researcher followed the focus group protocol by preparing a questioning route in order to increase consistency in the group discussion processes. Efforts were made to encourage open and honest responses by assuring students of complete and professional confidentiality.

The participants of the focus groups were asked three broad questions: 1) What was students' expectation on campus community before coming to this institution, and what reality about community have they discovered after arriving on campus? 2) What is the impact of New York City on campus community? and 3) What are the things happening on campus that have enhanced or decreased students' sense of community?

Given the purpose of the study as seeking in-depth understanding of issues rather than representation of opinions, the author decided to take a holistic and interpretative approach in data analysis, instead of employing coding, counting, and computers to assist with analysis (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997; Gordon & Langmaid, 1988). Data generated through focus groups were categorized within the conceptual framework of Strange and Banning (2001, p. 109). The author also followed Krueger's (1988) suggestion to set the preliminary report aside for a period before coming back to look for "big ideas" from the focus groups discussions.

RESULTS

Campus Safety

Strange and Banning (2001) place students' sense of security on the very bottom of their hierarchy. In focus group discussions students overwhelmingly approved the administration's good work to keep the campus safe and secure. However, one student pointed out that, while students may feel safe on campus, it does not necessarily mean that students are satisfied with the work of the security personnel. As a matter of fact, the attitude of some security officers toward students, in residence halls or in campus buildings, made them feel unwelcome. Two other participants of focus groups reported their unpleasant encounters with security officers in their residence halls, and they believe that these incidents, though isolated, had an impact on their sense of belonging to the campus community.

Student Services

When the discussions turned to service issues on campus, students shared their unpleasant stories about student services and some staff. In one focus group the discussion went so far off-track from the questioning route that the participants ended up spending at least one hour on the issues regarding services. When the moderator of the discussion asked the group to come back to address the "community" questions, one student said:

How can we talk about community without good services on campus? After all, this is the place we call "home" for four years!

Students pointed out the areas that require significant improvement: delay in responding to urgent residence hall maintenance requests, incompetence of health service personnel, overpricing of the university bookstore, and unfriendly campus security personnel. Students agreed that, without good student services on campus, they can hardly feel attached to the university.

Residence Halls

Students agreed that residence halls are the most important place for them to form a sense of community. Discussions centered on the role that resident advisors (RAs) have to play in their floors or buildings to promote a sense of community. What is

essential in this role, among others, is to create opportunities for interactions among residents in the residence halls. However, the functions of RAs differ significantly for people in different class levels. One student pointed out that

...freshman RAs play a big role in community, but after that you don't see them very often, [because] upperclassmen don't want an RA to tell them what to do.

Many students spoke with satisfaction about their relationship with roommates of other cultural and/or ethnic background, regarding this as the most important part of their social life on campus. Some suggested that reforming the way that students select housing and their roommates might lead to a better community in residence halls.

Diversity and Involvement

Students are satisfied with the active student life at this institution, as one student said that she was “amazed at the amount of clubs and programs [available on campus].” However, there is a common concern across all ethnic groups that, though there are many cultural, ethnic, and international student groups existing on campus, the interactions among them are minimal. When planning cultural events, most groups do not make efforts to involve students from other ethnic groups. Some students reported that, when attending cultural events sponsored by ethnic groups other than their own, they felt uncomfortable and unwelcome. One student explains why having groups and activities does not always create a sense of community:

There are all these different groups but I don't see them, I personally don't – I am not part of the groups, I don't really see them integrating too much amongst the groups, going to other's events or doing things together.

At the personal level, most students say that they have friends of other ethnic background, and they are quite satisfied with their diverse social interactions at this institution. Students call for more organized events that transcend individual cultures or heritages in order to bring all the groups together to celebrate diversity on campus.

Minority students did not show any major difference in their overall sense of campus community. Neither did they display any stronger sense of community through their association with cultural groups of their own ethnic background. Some Asian and African American students said that they made conscious efforts to avoid confining social interactions within their own ethnic groups; instead, they tried to participate in non-cultural groups and activities on campus.

Impact of New York City

Students are ambivalent about the impact of the institution's metropolitan location on campus life. Most students consider New York City a plus to their college experience, and do not believe that antagonism between the City and campus needs to exist. Because the institution advertises NYC as a major draw, students came with the expectation for the City to be part of their community. However, as one student states that:

Every one knows [that this institution] would be taking advantage of New York City, and I think the disappointment comes when you expect college to be the place where you make friends of a lifetime. And it's harder [at this institution] just because people are here for other reasons; not just to make friends, but for New York City.

Many students are also struggling with the high cost of the City, such as museums, theatres, bars, and other activities. Some pointed out that NYC actually divides students into those who have and those who have not. For instance, many students said that they love theatres in the City, but a night at Broadway costs around \$100, more than what they can afford. In addition, though there are good internship opportunities in the City, many simply could not afford to take these unpaid or less-paid positions even if these internships promise good job opportunities in the future.

Students argued that the institution's community-building efforts should always take into consideration the "NYC factor." Suggested ideas include having some large campus events in the City's museums, organizing NYC excursions with free or reduced fare, and involving students in NYC community services.

Expectations and Reality

Students were asked about their expectations of college life before coming to this institution. They made a distinction between what a "typical" college life was supposed to be in their mind and what they actually expected about life at this institution. For a "typical" college life, students listed such things as athletic events, fraternities and sororities, campus-wide social events, partying and drinking, etc. However, many said that, when they chose to attend this institution, they knew they did not choose for themselves a "typical" college experience. Instead, they chose the institution for its academic rigor, for New York City arts and cultural events, and for a diverse community that provides opportunities to interact with people of different backgrounds.

Are students happy or disappointed about their college life after arriving on campus? The groups seem to be equally divided. Since many students never expected to have a "typical" college experience here, they said that they got pretty much what they had anticipated.

I chose [this institution] because life didn't revolve around parties and sports. But I don't care. [This institution is] not really typical but what I was looking for.

This is an atypical school and that's why people came here. Why is it a negative [that] the community [at this institution] doesn't focus around sports and fraternities?

What some felt less prepared for, among other things, is the feeling of loneliness, especially when they face personal and academic difficulties. One student believes that

People who choose to come here are maybe more private than people who choose to go to other schools.

As a result, a sense of helplessness is experienced by some students on a regular basis, because most often when they are involved in a difficult situation, their problems

are too small to be brought to the psychological counseling service but too big to be solved by their small circle of friends.

Independence vs. Caring Environment

Students became very ambivalent about the idea of being independent when the discussion turned to the advising system at this institution. While they enjoy making a lot of academic and personal decisions on their own, they do sometimes feel being “thrown to the sharks” and wish to talk to an adult whom they can trust.

[This institution] made me more self-sufficient. I’m glad that people didn’t hold my hand through everything.

It’s not bad that [this institution] forces you to be independent, but some people need more direction.

Students complained about academic advisors’ not knowing them personally, but few thought that it would be a good idea for the advisors to call and check on them on a regular basis.

[This institution] is harsh with little of community, but harshness has better prepared me for the real world. You build your own community and [I] prefer it that way.

One student said that she even turned down an advisor’s proposal to have a lunch together because she did not have time neither the interest for this kind of interaction with an academic advisor.

Learning Environment

Students overwhelmingly approved the quality of academic programs of this institution and the active engagement of professors with students in the process of teaching and learning. Most of the participants agreed that it is the academic aspect of their campus life that ultimately defines this institution as a community. Specifically, students considered their professors the key to success of this institution as an educationally purposeful community. One student states that:

The professors in [XXX Department] are all very young and approachable. They all seem to love what they do and it has definitely rubbed off on the students. I had lost my drive to work hard in classes up until this year when I got the impression that my professors do genuinely care about me and are interested in the things that I do.

Students’ feelings about the institution become negative when they encounter professors who are perceived being less concerned with their academic success:

I love [this institution], and my overall undergraduate experience has been very positive. However, I do feel that undergraduate students are not priority to many professors, who would rather spend their time on research or grad students.

And the academics weigh heavily in the mind of students, as one student stated his priority very clearly:

I sometimes feel like the administration does not emphasize the basic areas of academics and instructor quality enough. “dining hall food” and “activities within residence halls” and the dozens of other things this survey [i.e., the enrolled student survey] asked me to evaluate are all very nice. But let’s focus more energy and resources on providing undergraduates an astounding education.

DISCUSSION

McDonald and associates (2002) concluded their insightful study on community with two perplexing notes. First, they found that the term “community” means “different things to different people and hardly ever the same thing to any two people” (p. 174). Moreover, “even though defining the term is a difficult task, achieving community is even more challenging” (pp. 174-175). This study responded to these challenges and, specifically, acted upon their recommendation to include student voice in assessing the sense of community on campus. “Any discussion of community without student involvement will be problematic because key constituents will not be represented in the community-building process” (McDonald, 2002, p. 175).

What distinguishes this study from many previous ones is that it does not simply let students pick from a menu of items that might have something to do with community. The researcher was willing to be open to any ideas that students might have in their mind on campus community. Using the Strange and Banning model as the conceptual framework, themes emerged from focus group discussions were sorted into three-levels of the hierarchy.

Sense of Security and Belonging

On the bottom of the hierarchy, we notice how strongly students feel about the connection between the quality of services and their sense of belonging to the institution. For students to feel safety and inclusion on campus, administrators have to keep a close eye on such areas as campus security, residence hall maintenance, dining services, bookstores, registrar, etc. Just like in most campuses, the institution studied here has separate functions of student affairs and student services. As a result, though student affairs administrators were interested in fostering community on campus, they had neither the jurisdiction over student services nor direct evidence suggesting any connection between students’ sense of community and such seemingly trivial matters as broken bathrooms or tasteless dining hall food. In the focus groups students made a strong argument about the linkage between services and their feelings about community, which is supported by the Maslow theory that needs lower in the hierarchy have to be met sufficiently before other needs in the hierarchy can be addressed.

Participation, Engagement, and Role-Taking

As we move up the hierarchy, it is interesting to note that the residence halls connect the first and second levels. Students called for good services in residence halls,

and they also yearned for an active residential life that involves students of different background on campus. While student engagement in college life has always been high on the agenda of student affairs administrators (Kuh, et al., 1991), the focus for this institution, as perceived by students in the focus groups, is somewhat different. Given that having a diverse student population is less of an issue at this institution, any programming aimed at building community on campus should focus more on encouraging integration among different groups.

For this institution, another important factor related to community is its metropolitan location. What has been known to student affairs administrators is how distracting the City can be to the campus community, but what was unknown to them is the City's dividing power among students with different financial means. Thanks to the theories developed by scholars such as Astin (1985), Tinto (1987), and Kuh (Kuh, et al., 1991), educators have long accepted the idea that "students learn from becoming involved" (Astin, 1985, p. 133). If relying solely on the survey results, administrators of this institution could happily report to their constituencies how satisfied the students are with the range of activities and programs available on campus. However, it was through focus groups that we learned about other dimensions of student involvement. Specifically, to ensure the full participation of students in campus life, programs have to be designed with careful considerations of such factors as students' financial ability, their residential environment, and issues concerning diversity and integration among student groups.

Development and Maintenance of Community

The full involvement of students in college life leads to yet another level in the Strange and Banning model: the development and maintenance of community. It was at this point we began our departure from the Strange and Banning approach to community. While the two authors continue their inquiry by searching for characteristics of community (Strange & Banning, 2001, pp. 161-179), we turned to students for their explanations of why community is always so elusive, as a concept, an idea, or an ideal in higher education. What we learned is far from conclusive, but the arguments are strong enough to provoke new thinking on community.

Perhaps the reason why community has been so hard to define is because it has always been, and will continue to be, an individualized concept, and it defies a uniform definition and its universal application to different educational settings. From the focus groups we learned that most students chose an institution to attend with very divergent expectations, and their actual experiences later in the institution varied from individual to individual. As a result, they define their sense of community in the institution according to the extent to which their expectations match with the reality. In light of this opinion, administrators engaged in community-building on campus may have to become more open to various versions of community held by different groups or sub-communities. In other words, in a community where individuality is respected, no one should feel embarrassed because of his or her ignorance about the winning football teams, just as no one should feel compelled to join certain clubs or play certain roles simply to earn popularity among the peers.

The study also revealed another reason for the difficulty in conceptualizing community on campus. There are many contradictory, and sometimes competing, concepts pertaining to community due to inconsistent institutional statements regarding their missions and educational philosophy. While most colleges promote the concept of community with a common vision and shared purposes, they also teach students to become independent and critical thinkers. As a result, students are sometimes as confused as their institutions. As adolescences, students yearn for independence, considering it the only way to develop their individual identities. On the other hand, being the first time away from parents and families, they also need a caring community that supports them when they feel lonely, have academic or personal problems, or struggle to “fit in.” The participants of our focus groups did not necessarily consider this contradiction as something bad. Instead, they regarded this as a process of personal growth and maturity. It is in this sense that Bogue (2002, p. 3) suggested that “a healthy community is one in which essential but often competing values are maintained in tensioned balance.” The lack of such a balance, according to Bogue (2002), “may lead us to seek the lowest common denominator of performance, in which mediocrity is not just tolerated but embraced.” The findings from our focus group discussions provide a strong support to this approach to campus community.

To tolerate divergent definitions of community and to encourage independent thinking among students should not run counter to any institutional aspirations for better campus communities. Committed to shared educational purposes, an institution should also leave space for individual learning, growth, and creativity, thus cultivating an open and tolerant campus environment. Students’ discussions on independence vs. caring community served a good reminder to busy student affairs administrators that, when following community advocates’ call for “binding together of individuals toward a common cause or experience” (Lloyd-Jones, 1989), they should never allow individualism to be completely taken over by the “togetherness” of campus community.

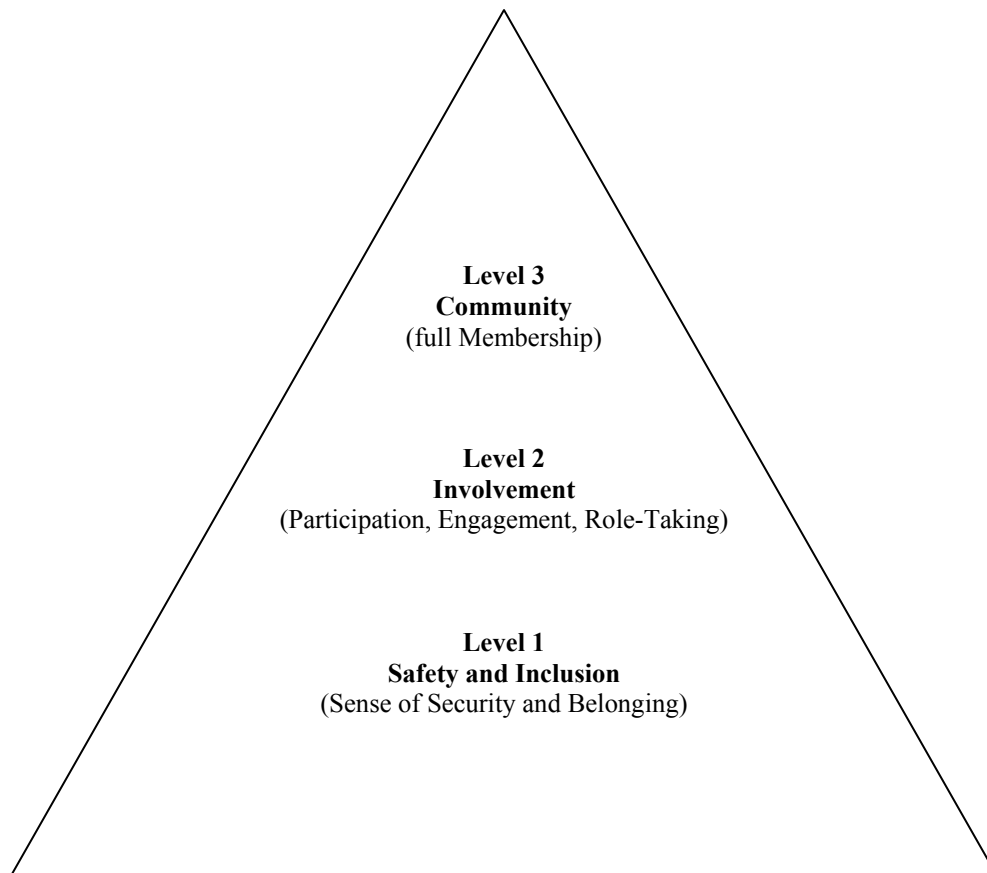
To build strong campus communities, where do we begin? The Strange and Banning hierarchy of community proved to be a useful tool in helping researchers sort various functions of academic affairs, student affairs, and student services on campus and prioritize community-building efforts according to different levels of students needs. One lesson learned by talking to students has to do with the importance of collaboration among administrative and academic departments on campus. In other words, no matter how hard student affairs administrators try to build community, their efforts are bound to fail if student needs for basic services are not met. The same can be said about the relationship between faculty and administrators, or “those who profess, and those who arrange” (Matthews, 1997, p. 36). As rightfully pointed out by Wiley (2002), “even the best-run student affairs programs cannot create campus communities—no more than campus communities can be built solely on the basis of classroom interactions.” Therefore, it takes concerted efforts from all campus constituents of an institution to establish whole learning experiences for students, which ultimately leads to the top level of the Strange and Banning hierarchy, i.e., students’ sense of full membership in the campus community.

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Figure 1. A Hierarchy of Learning Environment Purposes



Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 109.