

9-1-2022

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Ryan Theroux

Curry College, ryan.theroux@gmail.com

Derek Furukawa

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Recommended Citation

Theroux, R., & Furukawa, D. (2022). Conceptualizing the Campus Culture: The Significance of Cultural Artifacts. *New York Journal of Student Affairs*, 22(1). Retrieved from <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/nyjsa/vol22/iss1/2>

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NEW YORK JOURNAL
STUDENT AFFAIRS {OF}

New York Journal of Student Affairs
Article

Volume 22, Issue 1, 2022

Conceptualizing the Campus Culture: The Significance of Cultural Artifacts

Ryan Theroux, PhD, Curry College

Derek Furukawa, PhD, University of Hawaii

(First published online, September 1, 2022)

Abstract

Cultural artifacts convey meanings and messages to members of a campus community that provide insights into the culture of a college. Artifacts may include physical, behavioral, or verbal phenomena that one identifies in the culture of an institution. While studies of culture on college campuses have been conducted through anthropological, organizational, and academic lenses, it is still unclear how cultural artifacts are categorized within higher education literature and why this may be important. Based on a review of literature from multiple disciplines and institutional examples, the authors present a categorization and conceptual framework of cultural artifacts found on college campuses. They consider the implications of artifacts conveying multiple meanings and how this may influence how students learn about the culture and their college choice.

Keywords: cultural artifacts, campus culture, college choice



The heroes of the university, the smell and beauty of the tree-lined campus, the iconic and distinctive school colors, the Homecoming bonfire, and the inspiring words of the alma mater. These are just examples of the fabric of campus culture found in the form of cultural artifacts. These artifacts may resonate with those who are part of campus communities, past, present, new, and old. While not all members of a campus community will be able to recite the words of their campus alma mater, when they hear or read these words, there are special meanings attached. The words may elicit feelings of campus pride, honor, warm memories, and a deep affinity for an institution and its culture. Cultural artifacts are the tangible expressions of an institution's culture that communicates meanings and messages to members of the campus community (Kuh & Hall, 1993; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Manning, 2000).

For others in the campus community, an artifact such as an alma mater may have no connotation at all. Faculty, staff, and administrators may view the alma mater as nothing more than a commencement tradition that occurs once a year. Even so, this would still be an example of an artifact as it is embedded in the campus culture. Some artifacts may be verbal, behavioral, physical, or have multiple pieces of all, but they are affective because of the emotions, feelings, or actions that can be evoked when members of a campus community come across these expressions of culture (Theroux, 2012). Cultural artifacts convey multiple meanings to members of a campus community even if they are experienced similarly such as participating in a campus tradition or walking through the halls of a historic building; students may have different perceptions of what the tradition means or what the building means to the history of the institution (Strange & Banning, 2015).



Categories and Examples of Cultural Artifacts

Cultural artifacts can be described as “the phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture” (Schein, 2004, p. 25). Kuh and Hall (1993) referred to three categories of cultural artifacts found on college campuses: 1) physical, 2) verbal, and 3) behavioral. Examples of cultural artifacts found at colleges include an institution’s physical setting or architecture, traditions or rituals, language, symbols, heroes and heroines, and institutional history, also referred to as saga (Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Cultural artifacts are present at all colleges even if they are not referred to as artifacts. Since artifacts are not always labeled as such, the authors have developed a list of key terms, definitions, and examples associated with cultural artifacts on college campuses discussed below.

Affective Artifacts

A category of cultural artifacts that encompasses the sentiment expressed by an institution’s architecture, physical setting, traditions or rituals, language, history or saga, and symbols. An example of an affective artifact is an institution’s alma mater, which may convey a special meaning to community members (Theroux, 2012).

Architecture and Physical Setting

Refers to a physical artifact, which may include campus buildings, campus landmarks, quadrangles, location, and geographic terrain (Strange & Banning, 2001; Thelin & Yankovich, 1987). The Alma Mater statue at Columbia University is an example of a physical artifact (Columbia University Archives, 2022).

Behavioral Artifacts

A category of cultural artifacts that encompasses the traditions or rituals students participate in as groups that connect the past of an institution to the present (Masland, 1985). An



example of a behavioral artifact at a college campus is the Alumni Candlelight Induction Ceremony at St. Bonaventure University. On the Friday before commencement, graduating students take part in a candlelight induction ceremony to welcome them to the Alumni Association and reflect on their college experience (Weaver, 2019).

Heroes and Heroines

Refers to influential individuals, past or present, who have made major contributions during the lifetime of an institution (Kuh et al., 1991). An example of a hero and hero is Ezra Cornell, who will forever be linked to Cornell University as one of its founders (Penner, 2013).

Institutional or Campus Culture

The values, beliefs, and assumptions of an institution shape its character (Kuh & Hall, 1993); Williams College celebrates a tradition that captures the beauty of a New England fall day. One Friday in October, the president cancels classes as students are awoken by bells playing the school's Almer Mata and then celebrate Mountain Day by taking a hike and participating in other outdoor activities on campus (Van Wyck, 2022).

Institutional History and Saga

Refers to an artifact in which key events of an institution's history, including its founding, are recorded, and expressed to members of the campus community (Clark, 1972). An example of institutional history and saga is the story behind the construction of the Cathedral of Learning building at the University of Pittsburgh. The tower was built in the wake of deep financial struggles facing the school and several times the construction was almost stopped until a relentless university president and strong financial support from the local community carried the project to fruition (Fedele, 2007).



Language

Refers to stories, myths, and terms (Schein, 2004; Strange & Banning, 2001) that only members or insiders of the campus community understand. An example of language is University of Rhode Island students and alumni refer to each other as “Rhody Rams” (Woodward, 2002).

Multiple Meanings

Refers to cultural artifacts that may express more than one meaning to campus community members (Theroux, 2012). An example of an artifact with multiple dimensions is the John Harvard statue found at Harvard University, which can be considered a physical, behavioral, verbal, or affective artifact (Siliezar, 2019).

Physical Artifacts

A category of cultural artifacts that encompasses an institution’s architecture or physical setting which sends nonverbal messages about campus culture (Strange & Banning, 2001). An example of a physical artifact at a college campus is the blue football field at Boise State University, which is recognizable even outside of the campus community (Geigner, 2016).

Symbols

Refers to physical, verbal, or behavioral artifacts that communicate meanings and messages to members of the campus community (Kuh et al., 2005). An example of a symbol is the Van Wickle Gates at Brown University, a physical structure that serves as an entrance to the campus and suggests special meaning. While the side entrance of the gates is always open, the center gates are opened only twice a year: Once at the beginning of the academic year to admit students and then a second time at Commencement to graduate students (Mitchell, 1993).



Traditions and Rituals

Refers to behavioral artifacts that institutions use to communicate their values (Kuh et al., 1987). An example of a tradition and ritual is the Oozefest at the University of Buffalo, an annual mud volleyball tournament that is one of the largest such events in the country that includes more than 1500 students, alumni, and volunteers (Weaver, 2019).

Verbal Artifacts

A category of cultural artifacts that consists of words and phrases used by the campus community that have special meanings to members such as “terms of endearment” (Kuh et al, 1991, p 84). An example of a verbal artifact is the phrase, “The U,” which members of campus communities use to refer to their universities and sports teams such as the University of Miami Hurricanes (Schwartz, 2014).

Evolving to Convey Multiple Meanings

As campus communities continue to grow with new members, it is not a surprise that some of the same cultural artifacts found on campus may conjure different meanings for different people. As human and social environments change, it is possible that the context of what artifacts represent changes as well, both positively and negatively (Strange & Banning, 2015). The authors had previously analyzed college welcome speeches from the late 2000s to identify cultural artifacts and categorize them as physical, verbal, or behavioral (Theroux & Furukawa, 2008). Over time, the meanings of the cultural artifacts may have changed or been omitted in the way that campuses conveyed the importance of said artifacts. Examples of these situations were found in articles found in higher education news. This review of the welcome speeches found specific examples of where multiple meanings take place in the areas of traditions, symbols, heroes, and heroines (Theroux & Furukawa, 2008).



For traditions, the Texas A&M Aggie Bonfire was a university-sponsored event until an accident in 1999 killed 12 and injured 27 during the event (Tang, 2000). Shortly after the university announced that the bonfire was canceled, a group continued the bonfire separately from the university to continue the tradition (“Off-campus,” 2002). Though the tradition continued, the university’s role changed.

Symbols have also come under changes over time. This has been seen with multiple institutions whose athletic mascots have had a strained relationship with the institution. One such school is the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, whose mascot has gone through revisions over time (Gordon, 2021). During the early years of the institution, they chose the name Rebels as a reflection of the school rebelling to create an institution that was separate from the existing University of Nevada campus in Reno (Moehring, 2007). At that time, students came up with a mascot named Beauregard Rebel who was a wolf dressed in a confederate soldier uniform. The students voted to retain the Rebels name in the 1960s and it was in the early 1980s that the institution decided to eliminate Beauregard Rebel in favor of a more generic Western trailblazer character called Hey Reb. The institution retired the mascot in 2021, but decided to retain the Rebels name (Gordon, 2021; Svrluga, 2020).

The same fate as mascots also appears with the heroes and heroines of an institution. Several institutions have made changes to remove symbols tied with racism on their campuses (Bohanon & Stewart, 2020). This included the removal of confederate soldier statues and the elimination of some namesakes on campuses. It reflects the context of social justice advocacy that experienced a boom around 2020 (Banks et al., 2020).

Cultural Perspectives of Artifacts

To further explore the typology of artifacts found at college campuses listed above, this study describes three cultural perspectives that are commonly used when considering culture in higher education: 1) anthropological; 2) organizational; and 3) academic. Each of these perspectives offered a clear disciplinary lens for examining cultural artifacts and helped to show the complexity of campus culture, meaning that a college's culture cannot simply be described from only one perspective (i.e., anthropological). Understanding the roots of a cultural artifact such as a tradition or ritual from an anthropological, organizational, and academic perspective may provide members of a campus community a deeper sense of its importance (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Anthropological Lens

Cultural artifacts are often identified as an anthropological concept, but they have also been studied in the disciplines of sociology, linguistics, psychology, and organizational culture (Peterson & Spencer, 1990). An anthropological perspective of culture looks at the concept by using patterns to transmit meanings in symbolic forms from which people develop attitudes and knowledge toward life (Geertz, 1973). Higher education researchers have found this perspective applicable to the study of cultural artifacts on college campuses (Kuh, 1993; Kuh et. al., 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Magolda, 2003; Manning, 2000; Tierney, 1991). Through an anthropological lens, researchers have been able to study the roots of rituals and ceremonies that have lasted for decades by spending time with one's culture (Geertz, 1973; Manning, 2000).

An anthropological approach to culture allows for the interpretation of cultural elements such as events, actions, and behaviors (Morgan et al., 1983). Interpreting these elements on a college campus can help provide an institution with an in-depth understanding of its culture. Kuh



and Hall (1993) suggested that using this approach to understanding higher education institutions and student affairs professionals helps identify the key values of a college that support its mission, but “is a complex, challenging undertaking that requires an unusual blend of skills and attitudes as well as sensitivity, courage, and awareness” (p. 15). While anthropological research can be considered intrusive, studying human nature and everyday experiences can provide rich insights into an institution’s culture including prominent cultural artifacts (Manning, 2000).

Organizational Culture

Schein (2004) provided an organizational culture perspective of cultural artifacts by describing them as existing at the surface level of one’s culture, which includes “phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture” (p. 25). An organizational perspective considers cultural artifacts as observable and tangible (Davis, 1984; Morgan, 2006). Despite discernible and human characteristics, cultural artifacts are difficult to interpret partly because they may communicate different meanings to different people (Sathe, 1985; Schein, 2004; Weick, 1976). Like the anthropological perspective, higher education researchers have found the organizational culture perspective relevant to the study of cultural artifacts in higher education as this lens provides insight into the mission and vision of the institution and the values driving it (Kuh et al., 1987; Tierney, 1988).

While the concept is rooted in several disciplines, culture has increasingly appeared in research studies of organizational behavior (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Saffold, 1988). Studies of culture in organizations attempt to capture and interpret these characteristics (Cameron & Quinn, 1999). The study of organizational culture facilitates a social interpretation of an organization’s actions or behavior (Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Smircich, 1982) and a sense of what an organization means to its members (Peterson et al., 1986; Smircich,



1983). Understanding the meanings of cultural artifacts is one-way members can learn more about their organization and its culture.

Tierney (1988) provided another perspective on organizational culture in which he noted, “Researchers and practitioners alike often view culture as a new management approach that will not only cure a variety of organizational ills but will serve to explain virtually every event that occurs within an organization” (p. 2). Tierney (1988) created a framework of six concepts that make up an organization’s culture: 1) environment; 2) mission; 3) socialization; 4) information; 5) strategy; and 6) orientation leadership. When studying an organization, these six areas provide helpful reference points around which organizational culture can be considered.

Peterson and Spencer (1990) offered another framework for studying the culture of organizations, asserting that “Culture in organizations possesses three main characteristics: 1) it emphasizes a unique or distinctive character of the organization; 2) it is deeply embedded and enduring; 3) it is not easily changed” (p. 6). Regardless of their age and institutional type, colleges pride themselves on having a distinct character. Proof of the deeply embedded and enduring impact of the collegiate experience rests with the alumni who give time and money to their institutions (Worth, 2002). Faculty, staff, students, and administrators understand the culture of a particular academic department, group of students, administrative unit, or institution may not be easily understood and may be difficult to change. New college presidents must be aware of this challenge when taking their posts and trying to establish relationships within the campus community (Lasher & Cook, 1996).

Throughout all these different frameworks and perspectives, Schein (2004) continued to study organizational culture. Schein discussed three levels of culture: 1) artifacts; 2) espoused beliefs and values; and 3) underlying assumptions. While Schein’s (2004) work concentrated on



the first level, artifacts, the two other levels of culture are important in understanding the influence of organizational culture on human behavior. Espoused beliefs are the second level of culture and consist of the values a group desires to have instead of its current set of beliefs (Schein, 2004). While a group of students may have a common belief regarding a particular issue affecting the campus, their actions may be different when faced with an actual situation (Argyris & Schon, 1978). The third level, underlying assumptions, are the certain beliefs and values that are implemented and accepted by a group which, in turn, guide and influence behavior (Schein, 2004). Such assumptions may influence the way group members feel about, perceive, and think about certain things (Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schon, 1974). Schein added, “Basic assumptions, like theories-in-use, tend to be non-confrontable and non-debatable, and hence are extremely difficult to change” (2004, p. 31). In a higher education environment, spirited debate is often the foundation for learning and change, though institutional changes may be slow due to history and tradition (Thelin, 2019). Regardless of community members' roles as faculty, students, or student affairs practitioners, there are basic assumptions that guide and make up the institution's culture.

Academic Culture

In considering the applicability of the anthropological and organizational lenses to higher education institutions, it is the academic culture perspective that resonates most with those that work in a college environment. Researchers have referenced cultural artifacts within the spectrum of academic and institutional cultures (Bergquist, 1992; Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Birnbaum, 1988; Chafee & Tierney, 1988). Noting the increasing popularity of studies of culture in organizations, these researchers have identified multiple cultures in higher education . While the studies have focused on academic and institutional culture issues such as leadership and strategy, cultural artifacts have been mentioned. Unlike anthropological and organizational



studies, cultural artifacts have not received consideration in the research of institutional cultures. This may be attributed to the emphasis placed on the processes of the academy in such studies rather than its institutional make-up and character (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008).

Studies of campus culture, also referred to as institutional culture in higher education literature, have encompassed topics such as institutional history, campus traditions, values and assumptions, ceremonies, myths, heroes and heroines, policies and practices, symbols, and interactions among members (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Kuh & Hall, 1993). Chaffee and Tierney (1988) referred to campus culture in a socially constructed context, which in turn shapes the character of higher education institutions (Kuh & Hall, 1993). Without students, staff, faculty, and administrators socially interacting with one another, there is not a human environment or campus culture (Strange & Banning, 2015). Furthermore, an engaged campus community is a socially active one in which all members contribute to the culture of the institution (Kuh & Hall, 1993).

Kuh and Whitt (1988) discussed the uniqueness of colleges in which institutional culture consists of subjective values, assumptions, and beliefs. Kuh and Whitt (1988), along with Morgan (2006), noted that colleges have several cultures because of the diverse groups that comprise the campus, including faculty, students, administrators, and staff members. Despite various attempts to study campus culture, a lack of research exists (Chait, 1982; Dill, 1982; Tierney, 1988). This lack of research may be attributed to the amount of time required to study an organization's culture in detail (Schein, 2004).

Outsiders are unable to interpret and understand the meanings of an institution's culture, as well as the cultural context in which a college operates (Kuh & Whitt, 1988), and while outsiders have this difficulty, some researchers suggest that insiders overlook culture because it



is ingrained in their lives (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Morgan, 2006). An institution's culture, although very much a part of participants' daily lives and values, is overlooked and taken for granted by some because it is woven into their experience (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988). Strange and Banning (2001) provided an example in which certain features of the campus are taken for granted by insiders. They described poorly worded signs as physical artifacts on college campuses that can confuse new students. "An Admissions Office sign next to a Graduate School sign at the same entrance location gives a confusing message" (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 22). New students may be confused by the signage and, in turn, be unsure where to seek the services they require.

Using organizational culture as a framework, scholars have developed and analyzed specific cultures at colleges. Bergquist (1992) found four distinct cultures in higher education: 1) collegial; 2) managerial; 3) developmental; and 4) advocacy. Along with these four cultures, Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) added the virtual and tangible cultures. Through interacting with one another, these cultures shape the character of institutions. Based on this argument, they addressed the importance of faculty, staff, administrators, and students understanding the role of these cultures at their institutions. Case studies were constructed to demonstrate how each culture could contribute to improving institutional orientation leadership, decision making, and interpersonal communication. Ultimately, Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) made the case that for colleges to implement successful changes or policies, the individuals at these schools must take all six cultures into account to provide effective orientation leadership to enact such changes.

Building upon Bergquist's (1992) work, Kezar and Eckel (2002) studied the use of institutional culture concerning change strategies and processes in higher education at six institutions. While acknowledging that earlier studies of cultures focused on their impact on



organizational life, Kezar and Eckel (2002) noted a lack of research about how culture affects change strategies and processes. Toma et al. (2005) pointed to the importance and strength of a united institutional culture. Regardless of how an organization's culture may influence change strategies and processes, Toma et al. (2005) were more concerned with the strength of an institution's culture.

Impact on College Choice

Institutional characteristics, inclusive of cultural artifacts, are identified as components of a campus environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Since campus environment is a factor in college choice, it is important to consider how they are communicated, along with their underlying meaning, to incoming students through important moments such as campus visits and new student orientation (Theroux, 2012). Communicating the institutional characteristics by way of personal interaction with campus representatives serves as a key factor in the decision to choose to attend that institution (Furukawa, 2011). The consistency of how cultural artifacts are celebrated or omitted by campus representatives can have a direct impact on perception by prospective students (Birch & Rosenman, 2019). For example, if a student tour guide talks about the importance of wearing their school colors to a group of prospective students and points out examples on the campus tour of other individuals wearing these colors as proud symbols, this may be influential on how the students perceive the college (Theroux, 2012). Prospective students may look to such artifacts as clues into the campus culture and develop a better understanding of what the institution and its members value.

Though the impact of the communication of cultural artifacts on college choice can be identified, there is an additional need to pursue further study on current contexts of college recruitment and college choice to comprehend the levels of its impact. Since the meaning of



cultural artifacts can change, campuses need to be aware of how that may affect the existing way of communicating these items. In some cases, a fresh look at the interpretation of an artifact's meaning can result in the need for change for that cultural artifact (Svrluga, 2020). Since many of these changes are still underway, it will be helpful to gather the changes to cultural artifacts and identify the themes for the removal or adjustment of those cultural artifacts. It will take more in-depth exploration to also include how campuses have changed their verbal communication of artifacts' meanings to prospective students. Ultimately, cultural artifacts influence college choice, but the way they are communicated may be a more impactful area of study.

Conclusion

While there have been studies of campus culture through anthropological, organizational, and academic lenses, there has been a gap in the higher education literature about the multiple meanings of cultural artifacts and how they could be identified and categorized. If student affairs practitioners are aware of the cultural artifacts at their campuses and understand their meanings, they will be able to shape their programs and services in ways that engage and connect with students. This awareness and understanding will allow staff, administrators, and others in the campus community, to reinforce the values of their institution by highlighting key cultural artifacts such as traditions, rituals, symbols, language, and architecture. Although Kuh and Hall (1993) provided a reference point for the study of cultural artifacts, there is no clear labeling process for classifying artifacts into appropriate categories. This literature review attempted to address this issue by considering categories of artifacts such as physical, verbal, affective, and behavioral.



For future research, the authors would like to interview student affairs personnel and student leaders at their institutions and potentially other four-year colleges to discuss their perspectives of cultural artifacts at their campuses. Specifically, we would like to share our typology of artifacts found at colleges with the student affairs personnel and student leaders, along with our breakdown of cultural lenses and perspectives presented in this article. Through in-depth and focus group interviews, we would ask the individuals to identify the key cultural artifacts at their institutions and how they would label these using this typology and considering what the most relevant cultural lens is for the artifacts.



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