



REACHING PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS WITH Landscape Design

by David Vinson

A 2018 study (“The Significance of Campus Visitations to College Choice and Strategic Enrollment Management”) found that campus appearance plays an instrumental role in the decision-making process of prospective students, particularly during campus tours. It is striking, then, that a 1986 study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT) came to the same conclusion, noting in fact that for 62% of prospective students, campus appearance was the most influential factor when deciding where to enroll.



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The two studies are separated by 32 years, a period in which higher education has undergone seismic changes, both technological and cultural—and yet, despite these changes, the value of campus appearance to prospective students is as great as ever. The pair of studies reinforce what we already know about first impressions—they are critical. Students expect campuses to be clean, sensibly designed, and landscaped with precision. They are drawn to notable architecture as well as a variety of spaces fit for studying, relaxing, and socializing. Campus appearance works as a powerful recruitment tool, not least of all because prospective students anticipate spending the majority of their time on campus grounds. Moreover, campus appearance influences the perception of the institution and the educational experience it offers.

The size of the campus, the variety of landscapes therein, and then the traffic itself—the daily usage by students, faculty, and staff—all inform the daily as well as seasonal strategies necessary for keeping any campus clean and beautiful.

Landscaping Objectives and Strategies: Taking Note from Howard University

Landscape design at its best reflects the institution's core values just as it satisfies students' desires for beautiful, versatile campus-based outdoor spaces. The obvious starting point is to understand, preserve, and enhance design intent. As such, Howard University (Washington, D.C.) serves as a fine case study.

Starting with a single building in 1867, Howard University has since expanded to 258-acres and over 115 buildings. Its original site was chosen on a hilltop that offers panoramic views of the nation's capital; to the east, it is bordered by the McMillan Reservoir, which supplies the majority of the city's municipal water. The campus' major expansion following WWI was the product of collaboration between landscape architect and horticulturalist David Williston and architect Albert Cassell. Cassell created the campus master plan, including Frederick Douglass Hall and Founder's Library, both National Historic Landmarks. Since then, at

the figurative "center" of the campus is the Main Quadrangle (known otherwise as "The Yard"), which was redesigned with precise cross-paths and tree placements. The hillside east of the Main Quadrangle is terraced, with stairs leading down to the Lower Quadrangle. The two spaces are set off from the rest of campus by a gorgeous brick and wrought iron fence with entrance gates designed by architect Louis Fry, Jr.

With careful planning and maintenance each year, Howard University has managed to enhance design intent by using sound horticultural practices, incorporating color into the landscape, and using plants to announce the seasons. And because the University is located in the heart of urban Washington, D.C., it has prioritized the implementation of a clear, well-defined perimeter. To do so creates a sense of unified space, one unique to the campus itself. For instance, nearly half of campus housing is located along the campus perimeter. Over the past several years, these areas have been transformed by vibrant, new green spaces that border the housing

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structures. The “campus perimeter” project, along with streetscape improvements throughout the campus, have reinvigorated the University’s brand image. Such measures are conceived with an “economy of intervention,” so that each landscape improvement aligns with the University’s green infrastructure, one whose design calls attention to the widespread problems of air pollution abatement, stormwater management, and urban heat island effects.

Another landscape project at Howard University concerns the enhancement of connectivity and walkability with high-quality walkable spaces and strong pedestrian connections throughout the campus, most notably on the east-west and north-south axes, those which link to public transportation throughout the city.

Additional Strategies for Improving Landscape Design

According to research (See Rodney H. Matsuoka’s “Student Performance and High School Landscapes: Examining the Links”), when students are around engaging landscapes, they tend to perform better academically and enjoy improved mental health. What follows are a few suggestions for improving landscape design on campus, those which may indeed contribute to the greater well-being of students, not to mention faculty and staff, as well:



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Students expect campuses to be clean, sensibly designed, and landscaped with precision. They are drawn to notable architecture as well as a variety of spaces fit for studying, relaxing, and socializing.

1. Add plenty of greenery. Vegetation is not only aesthetically pleasing, but it absorbs carbon from the air, which means campus air is cleaner and fresher. Other benefits include noise reduction as well as more opportunity for students to engage with green spaces.

From large green patches of grass to pathways lined with planters, there are ample ways to make campuses greener. Refrain, however, from planting vegetation that requires too much maintenance. It would be best to stick to native plants for this reason.

2. Bike-friendly pathways. Many college students are greatly reliant on their bikes for transportation. This occurs for a number of reasons ranging from a lack of on-campus parking to a means of exercise. Campus

landscaping, as such, should accommodate cyclists, offering bike paths that are accessible all over campus. Bike racks at building entrances are an additional necessity.

3. Safety after dark with landscape lighting. Lighting is another important element of college campus landscaping because students may frequent campus after dark. Line all pathways with lighting fixtures and keep in mind that variety offers additional aesthetic value.

4. Create collaborative outdoor group spaces. Group collaboration is an important aspect of the higher education experience, one that translates well to the workforce thereafter. It is key to create spaces for students

to collaborate on projects, study for exams, and/or socialize. Add outdoor seating areas near frequented buildings such as libraries or cafeterias. Moreover, planting trees to such spaces provides shade and adds further ambiance.

5. Keep sustainability in mind. The way in which a college campus is landscaped reflects the mindset of the university, which can in turn impact students and their behaviors going forward. For instance, to add recycling bins promotes the mindset of recycling. Use recycled materials wherever possible, and opt for long-lasting fixtures and landscaping elements to reduce personal waste.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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