Student Development Theory: Using the Campus Ecology Approach

For Student Success

Shannon Fischer

Siena Heights University

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Introduction

Many students are faced with a multitude of information when they first step foot on a college or university campus. There are so many things that they have to learn, and that is before they have even stepped foot in a classroom. There are many tested theories that revolve around student success using an ecological approach. One theory, the campus ecology theory, is a conceptual framework that focuses on the relationship between students and their campus environment (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Additionally, this framework allows campuses an opportunity to encompass students and their development and to develop and modify the campus environment to promote student learning and encourage lasting student relationships by bringing them together through the sharing of similar interests.

Foundations for Campus Ecology

This theory was introduced by James Banning and Leland Kaiser in 1974, and is part of the overall ecological approach to student development. The theory of campus ecology combines human ecology and developmental ecology and focuses mainly on development of the college student. By combining the two, it brings together the relationship between the student and the offices of student affairs at the university (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). There are six theoretical foundations for campus ecology. They are the behavior-setting theory, the subculture approach, personality types, need X press = culture theory, social ecological approach and the transaction approach. This paper will focus on the integration of the six approaches as it relates to a campus design that focuses solely on student success while also achieving four main goals: inclusion, safety, involvement and community building.
CAMPUS ECOLOGY: AN APPROACH FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Inclusion

One of the main things that affect student behavior is the environment in which the student lived in prior to attending their college or university. Because of the diversity of a student’s background, it is important for college staff to create an environment where students can be equally included in campus activities. Think “welcome week” and the number of ice breaking activities that new students participate in.

One of the questions that institutions should be asking are “do students, faculty, and staff have opportunities and spaces to connect with others on campus around their common interests, values, and experiences (Strange & Banning, 2001)?” This creates an opportunity for students to begin networking with others. Because of the diversity on college campuses today, it creates an even greater opportunity for students, faculty and staff to interact with others that do not hold similar interests and they can begin to learn about other cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds. Feeling welcome is the first goal in creating a cohesive campus environment, the second is safety.

Safety

One of the main things that students and parents take into consideration when selecting a college or university is the safety of the campus (Chekwa, Thomas, Jones, Valerie, 2013). It is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that they have provided the safest measures possible to prevent crime and criminal acts. However, all of the campus policies and police in the world will not completely prevent crime and criminal activities. This is where the campus ecology theory meets its second goal. By encouraging student interaction from day one, students begin to build relationships. Even though students do not completely and fully know those that they are
interacting with for quite some time, the fear of the unknown is removed and the students can then focus on the things that really are indicators that their safety is being compromised. As Strange and Banning (2001) asked “are differences of interests, values and experiences accommodated in caring and supportive ways?” This should be a clear indication that the university cares about their students. When students feel safe, they are likely to become involved in campus activities.

Involvement

According to Astin (1999), involvement is defined as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (p. 518).” In using this definition in theory, a student who is very involved is one that spends time studying, participates in on campus activities, interacts with students and faculty and really embraces the university experience. This is important to the Campus Ecology theory because if we follow the definition, then when students are involved, they are contributing to their environment and creates that important relationship between student and university.

In order to measure the success of this goal, Strange and Banning (2001) asked “are decision-making structures and practices facilitative of participation?” So if the definition of involvement measures the amount of energy the student contributes to their experience, then the answer to this question is yes. The final goal to the Campus Ecology theory is community building.

Community Building

Strange and Banning (2001) asked “do symbols, traditions, and other cultural artifacts reflect and celebrate the community of the whole as well as the community of the various parts?”
This would be an indicator that the students are finding common ground and are becoming more comfortable in identifying those things that they can have in common with others. What is great about community building at a college or university is similar to what makes up great communities that we, as adults, live in; the diversity in the culture, race, ethnicity, beliefs, sexual orientation, gender and marital status. It lays a foundation for them to ask questions, learn about others and respect that we are human beings with unique features that make us who we are.

One of the recent initiatives in many college campuses today are the development of communities within the college or university. These groups are developed to bring together students who have the same interests, either academically or educationally, or engage in the same recreational activities or hobbies. Studies have shown that there is a positive impact on student learning and student success when students are exposed to others with the same interests and they can collaborate with each other on project development and completion. Additionally, when students are introduced to those with like interest’s, they fell more embraced within the campus community and are more likely to engage with those around them (IHEP, 2011). While researching this topic, I came across many institutions that use this framework in their student affairs function. One of the ideas that followed this framework is used at Fairfield University (www.fairfield.edu). Fairfield incorporates living, learning communities, or mentoring communities into their student’s daily activities and creates an environment where students are included, safe and involved while building communities.

**Mentoring Communities**

These communities are themed and students can choose whether or not to join them. At some institutions that have similar programs, the themed communities are required during your
first semester at the university. The success of Fairfield’s program is measured by the amount of participation from year to year and what is encouraging for students is the ability to “move up” in the community. For example, the first year, the student is a new member and is paired with a 2nd year student who will be their primary mentor. The second year students are paired up with first year students and the third and fourth year students are mentors to a larger number of mentees. This gives them the ability to gain experience within the community and to have the needed support of their peers. It also is an excellent leadership skill development opportunity for students and it creates certain personality strengths that can carry them into their professional careers.

Mentors can help enhance the student experience and assist in engaging in educationally-purposeful activities. Serving as a mentor also helps student mentees strengthen their ability to recognize their skills, abilities and interests and assist with development and achievement of their goals. While this model is just one of many at many universities across the country, they are all based upon the Campus Ecology Theory and how to best create an environment where students feel comfortable because that is one of the key indicators of student success.

Conclusion

It is through the combination of many different approaches that student success is measured. In today’s world, taking into consideration the diversity of the student populations, it is critical that students are encouraged to interact and network with others. It is also a way for students to understand the level of support they will receive from the university staff. By following the guidelines set forth in the campus ecology theory and tailoring them to a specific campus, the measure of student success is even greater.
References


Fairfield University - Mentoring Communities,

http://www.fairfield.edu/lifeatfairfield/campuslife/housing/livinglearning/spohomore/ignatianresidential/mentoringcommunities/