

Organizational Theory, Higher Education, and the Impact of Organizational Culture and Physical
Space on Student Access and Success Initiatives at Villa Maria College

Alissa Kowalski

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Dr. Veres

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Higher Education Organizational Theory

Organizational theory is the basis for analyzing and understanding how organizations interact with stakeholders, the environment, and other organizations. There are innumerable theories related to organizations, several areas on which to focus, and select perspectives that are often utilized as a lens for analysis. When considering higher education as an organization, any combination of theories, focal areas, and perspectives may be applied. However, utilizing a mainly symbolic, sometimes post-modern, perspective as outlined by Hatch (2018), the areas of organizational culture and physical space can be understood as two interdependent features of higher education institutions, particularly when considering issues of accessibility, equity, and student success. Within an organization, the symbolic perspective explains how and why organizing decisions are made and how they connect to the culture and values of certain institutions (Hatch, 2018, p. 18). Where someone attends college matters, as “each option comes with separate and unequal costs and outcomes” (Iloh, 2018, p. 228). Higher education organizations should be actively improving their policies and procedures while examining how their organizational culture and physical space can either reinforce or contradict their overall missions and goals in relation to these issues.

The first step to improving higher education accessibility and equity is understanding that these institutions are complex organizations with detailed paradigms and beliefs tied into their missions and principles. Paradigms, according to Hatch (2018), are worldviews that shape how an organization makes decisions and conceptualizes their values. In other words, all organizations are “defined by their paradigms, that is, the prevalent view of reality shared by members of the organizations” (Simsek & Louis, 1994, p. 671). This is important to remember since “a particular dominant paradigm, structure, strategy, culture, leadership, and individual role

accomplishments are defined by this prevailing world view” (Simsek & Louis, 1994, p. 671). In response to the current demand for diverse and racially inclusive learning, higher education organizations are working to inspire a paradigm and culture shift. This can be a difficult concept as organizational culture is often deeply ingrained in the leadership, policies, and goals of an institution. The physical space of a higher education institution can be modified to reflect these beliefs, but might also be a barrier as it is sometimes easier to adjust an organization’s culture than a location.

Higher Education in Western New York

There is certainly no shortage of higher education institutions in the Western New York area. There are approximately 30 colleges and universities in New York State within 100 miles of the city of Buffalo, not including higher education institutions with multiple locations, trade and professional schools, or satellite colleges for purely online institutions (*Best colleges*, 2021; *Colleges near*, 2021). With such a high concentration of educational organizations all vying for the same population of resources (students, faculty, and staff) it is necessary for institutions to set themselves apart in one way or another. They often attempt to do this by offering specialty programs, providing scholarship opportunities, or relying on the prestige and name-recognition of their organization.

Particularly for smaller, private institutions, the culture, beliefs, values, and physical space can all be selling points that might entice students to attend their institutions over a large, public university. These aspects are “a way to classify the organization in relation to other organizations, and consequently, a way to perceive and interpret information about what the organization is” (Stensaker, 2015, p. 108). By comparing the cultural systems of higher education organizations and viewing how they utilize their space, potential students can infer

certain values and beliefs and compare them to their own values and beliefs. In this way, “familial, educational, spatial, financial, political, technological, and community context, can all influence whether a prospective student believes college or a particular college is right/possible for them” (Iloh, 2018, p. 238). In other words, not only does the college or university need to be accessible to the potential student, but their values need to align with the values of the higher education organization they are interested in attending.

Villa Maria College is a small, private, Catholic institution located in Western New York on the border of Cheektowaga and Buffalo’s East Side. Celebrating sixty years as an institution, Villa has utilized Felician core values and developed a “culture of innovation, student-centeredness, and flexibility” (Giordano, 2021a, p. 3). Serving a student body of roughly 500 students, Villa is focused on ease of access, student success, and individualized education (*About us*, 2021; Giordano, 2019, p. 4). This is accomplished through a robust organizational culture and a creative use of limited physical space as organizations can “increase a resource’s value by using it flexibly, in unexpected ways” (Fugazzotto, 2010, p. 246). These focal areas, combined with an active focus on being the “premier student-centered institution in Western New York” (*About us*, 2021, para. 1) and the creation of new, innovative programs, set Villa Maria College apart from other higher education organizations in the surrounding area.

Overview of Villa Maria College

Villa Maria College was founded in 1961 by Felician Sisters with the goal of training other sisters as educators, originally granting associate’s degrees in Arts and Applied Science (Monnin, 2021, p. 8). It wasn’t until 1965 that laywomen were welcomed to attend the college, and it took three more years for the college to open their doors to anyone other than women (*Mission*, 2021). The college has consistently added new, in-demand degree programs, both as

two and four-year programs, in addition to a select number of certifications. As of 2021, Villa Maria “offers its students 18 different majors, 26 minors, and 2 certificate programs in a wide range of academic programs” (Monnin, 2021, p. 8). From the very beginning, Villa Maria has used the Felician tradition to identify three core ideals and five core values that act as guiding principles. The core ideals are truth, charity, and unity and connect to the core values of respect for human dignity, compassion, transformation, solidarity with the poor, and justice and peace (*Mission*, 2021). These ideals and values are incorporated into organizational and individual decisions throughout the college community, and a core value is chosen to be the focus each academic year.

Since 1972, Villa has been accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, a set of seven standards and fifteen requirements that must be renewed every eight years with a midpoint check in to ensure institutions are meeting the expectations (*Accreditation*, 2021). Middle States accreditation covers mission, ethics and integrity, student learning experience, support services, institutional improvement, and leadership and administration. The most recent Middle States approval occurred in 2018, and the accompanying visionary plan spans 2014-2024 following several of the same standards as the Middle States accreditation (*Mission*, 2021). These standards work in conjunction with Villa’s core values and student-centered focus, which is built into the organizational culture at the college, guided by the College President in a manner that is “transformational, meaning that it is responsive and adaptive to promoting change in the institution and its relationship with the surrounding environment” (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 671). Dr. Giordano credits the evolutionary nature of a young institution as a strength that has allowed Villa to “remain nimble, to innovate, and, most importantly, to be responsive to the changing needs of our students” (2021, p. 3). Maintaining

core values and educational standards as a guide while also encouraging transformation and innovation has allowed Villa Maria College to remain dedicated to the Felician mission and student success.

After serving as the third college president for 40 years, Sister Marcelle Marie Garus retired in 2018 and Dr. Matthew Giordano was appointed as the first layperson president of Villa Maria College in 2019 (*Mission*, 2021). In his inauguration address, Dr. Giordano reiterated the values and missions of Villa Maria, emphasized the importance of the Villa Way, and spoke to the dynamic and diverse student body. He summarized his approach to leading the organization when he stated, “higher education exists to change and improve lives. By providing students the opportunity to learn more about themselves and their world, higher education sets them on the road to a better life” (2019, p. 4). By shifting the focus away from typical higher education markers of success – institutional income, SAT scores, and faculty research publications, to name a few – Dr. Giordano highlighted the ways in which small schools can make a real, tangible difference while also reiterating the strong culture that unites Villa Maria’s students, faculty, staff, administration, donors, and stakeholders.

Villa Maria is dedicated to the mission and values outlined by the founding Felician Sisters. The current student to faculty ratio at Villa Maria College is 9:1, with small class sizes, an open enrollment program, and multiple policies in place to support a “higher percentages of Pell grant recipients, of African-American students, and of students with learning differences than most, if not all, of the private colleges in Western New York” (Giordano, 2021a, p. 5). Combined with these organizational culture values, there are also facilities dedicated to supporting students, including an art and woodworking shop, an athletic center, a dining hall called the Villa Bistro, the Sister Mary Josette Food Pantry which serves both the college and the

surrounding community, and the Paul William Beltz Family Art Gallery which features exhibits from faculty and staff, current students, and local high schools (*About us*, 2021). Regardless of the strong institutional culture and creative use of space, Villa Maria does face a variety of challenges, particularly when it comes to one major college standard: graduation rates. While the national graduation rate for students seeking a bachelor's degree is currently 46%, Villa Maria's rates from the 2009-2011 cohorts was at 34.17% (*About us*, 2021; Hanson, 2021).

Overview of Organizational Theory

Culture, physical space, and encouraging access, diversity, and equity all factor into higher education organizations. In higher education, "excellence and accessibility...are not only compatible, they are synergistic" (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p. 72). Education must be accessible for excellence to occur, and characteristics related to organizational culture and the physical space contribute to how well a higher education institution is functioning. Although it seems obvious, "by excluding huge proportions of the population, the nation excludes the experience, ideas, intelligence, and ambition of those millions." (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p. 72). In other words, organizational culture and the physical space in which it is situated should act as conduits to improve higher education access rather than barriers.

Organizational culture is dependent on a shared understanding of values, beliefs, and actions that unite stakeholders within organizations, including higher education institutions. A shared vision is made up of whatever values the organization deem important, often dictated by "social principles, goals, and standards that members of a culture believe have intrinsic worth" (Hatch, 2018, p. 206). With a shared vision or core values in place, higher education organizations can create a more efficient institution since these values "define what cultural members care about most and help them determine their priorities" (Hatch, 2018, p. 206). This is

often related to why someone chooses to be involved with an organization as “organizational identity can be said to be intrinsically linked to organizational culture, in that identity is merely an expression of cultural understandings” (Stensaker, 2015, p. 104). This shared culture can take the form of mission statements or strategic plans, giving the organization a guide by which to make decisions.

Within physical spaces, there are innumerable factors to consider beyond the tangible, constructed area or an organization. Hatch (2018) introduces the idea of space versus place, in which the symbolic view of a physical structure is more focused on the experiences and meaning of a place (p. 254-5). The design of a physical space and the interpretation of the use (or misuse) of said space can sometimes be at odds, which can then cause challenges within an organization. On the other hand, organizations are also becoming more creative with their resources by “not focusing solely on efficient space usage” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 291). In higher education institutions, particularly small institutions with limited space and resources, “built space morphs with usage” (Hatch, 2018, p. 256). While a physical space might originally have a completely different established purpose, the actual usage of an area can force a shift in the practical use and understanding of what it means to use space efficiently.

Reviewing relevant literature as well as materials from Villa Maria College, highlights the importance of organizational culture and physical space when discussing values, mission statements, equity, accountability, and space usage. These all play a vital role in determining success within a higher education institution. Utilizing a mostly symbolic perspective – outlined by Hatch (2018) as the concept of truth being socially constructed and ever-changing – while exploring higher education organizations places value on the importance of the connection between these two areas (p. 18). This additionally allows space for questions and creative

decision making about equity, access, and the weight of organizational choices within higher education institutions.

Organizational Analysis

The various aspects of organizational theory, social structure, technology, culture, physical structure, and power structure, all impact how decisions are made, how organizations function, and whether they succeed. Organizational culture and physical space are particularly important for higher education institutions like Villa Maria College. Villa's institutional goals are summarized on their website within the following:

Villa Maria College is a diverse and inclusive community where individuality thrives, everyone has the freedom to be themselves, and students are defined by their potential—not their financial status. At Villa, we teach the skills that are necessary to do well in the classroom, pass on the College's long-held values and ideals of doing good in the world, and lend all the support we can to turn aspirations into realities, potential into promise.

(About us, 2021, para. 2)

As a higher education institution, Villa Maria College is greatly influenced by organizational culture relating to the mission, values, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, as well as the physical structure of the buildings, academic spaces, and even the administrative spaces. It is important that these two aspects in particular – culture and space – are examined together because “[m]ission statements dictate the core activities of an organization, and physical space can define its operating territories” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 286). When these focus areas are working cohesively, Villa Maria College can achieve the goals outlined in their mission statements, press releases, and other communications, benefiting their students and the overall community.

Culture

Organizational culture is comprised of the shared values, beliefs, and expectations of an organization that influence how it functions. Hatch (2018) explains that these shared values “define what cultural members care about most and help them determine their priorities” (p. 206). At Villa Maria College, the shared values consist of a dedication to student success, a commitment to the mission, and innovative policies to improve access and equity. In higher education institutions, “organizational culture encompasses a collective understanding that unites and strengthens the association between students, faculty, staff, and administrators on their identity” (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 671). Organizational culture at Villa Maria College can be seen within the implementation of the Villa Way, mission and inclusion statements, DEI and accessibility programming, innovative changes to ease the burden within the admissions process, and the development of a program to distribute free textbooks and supplies for all students. These initiatives require the backing of employees and administrators, as well as the support of students and stakeholders.

Mission, Core Values, and the Villa Way

The culture of Villa Maria College is guided by the mission, core values, and the Villa Way. All of the policies relating to access, equity, and easing the burden stem from these beliefs and the idea that “mission communicates and organizes people around common purposes. From mission flows strategy, organizational structure, and mechanisms for gauging performance” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 288). The common purpose outlined by the mission is “to provide students with a rigorous and enriching educational experience” (*About us*, 2021, para. 3). The educational experience includes “empower[ing] students to realize their intellectual, creative, professional, and spiritual potential” and using the “five core values as a guide to ensure that every decision

made is done in [the] students' best interests" (*About us*, 2021, para. 3). One of the first tangible actions supporting the mission and core values was the opening of the Sister Mary Josette food pantry to serve students, employees, and the community in 1987 (*Mission*, 2021). The food pantry was the first to be located at a college in Western New York, and continues to serve the community today. The mission is incorporated into the Villa Way, the core values, and the overall institutional culture and represented not only in writing, but also in the actions of the Villa Maria community.

Each academic year, Villa Maria highlights one of the five core values to explore and celebrate with events, speakers, and an annual Service Day. These events not only reaffirm the college's commitment to their mission and values, but are also a source of community building that adds to organizational culture. Service Day adds to organizational culture by bringing "a diverse group of people together with a set of common goals. It is based on the ideals of commitment and shared responsibility" (Griggs & Stewart, 1996, para. 3). Organizational culture, combined with community building, encourages higher education to expand their worldview beyond the physical borders of their institution. For the Fall 2021 to Spring 2022 academic year, the celebrated core value was respect for human dignity. Students, faculty, and staff spent a Saturday in October volunteering at a variety of not-for-profits in the community, mainly located in the East Side of Buffalo surrounding the college. In total, 130 members of the Villa Maria community completed 330 hours of volunteering to celebrate the core value (*130 members*, 2021). Higher education institutions with a focused mission like Villa Maria College use these guiding principles "to provide a platform for strengthening relationship between other stakeholders (i.e. students, faculty members and community members) involved in a service learning project" (Salem et al., 2019, p. 585). Having stakeholder buy-in reinforces the

organizational culture of any institution, and the willingness of faculty and staff to participate in an optional day of service on a weekend highlights the strength of the shared values (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 287; Stensaker, 2015, p. 106). This act of community building around the core values adds to the diverse culture and unites people with a common goal while supporting the overall organizational culture and shared customs of Villa Maria.

These values, ideals, and guiding principles combine to form what is known throughout the organization as the Villa Way. This connects back to Hatch (2018) and the concept of organizational culture in that the Villa Way creates and outlines a “shared framework or context of belonging” (p. 193). It is an application of the mission described as “the guidelines that dictate how we behave as part of the Villa community” (Giordano, 2019, p. 6). Community, in this context, is used to encompass not only students, faculty, and staff, but also the organizations where graduates will be employed, the East Side of Buffalo surrounding the campus, and the entire Western New York region. In his inauguration address, Dr. Giordano (2019) summarized his dedication to supporting and implementing the Villa Way throughout his presidency when he explained:

For the sake of our community, we need the Villa Way. To fulfill the promise that Buffalo Schools and Say Yes provide to our city’s children, we need the Villa Way. For the East Side of Buffalo to continue its momentum as part of the Buffalo Renaissance, we need the Villa Way. For the prosperity of Cheektowaga, Erie county, and the region, we need the Villa Way. To help bring about the spiritual renewal of the world, we need the Villa Way. (p. 7)

Organizational culture is often guided by leadership in higher education institutions and “should embody the ability to inspire others to believe in an achieve a worthy goal” (Karkouti, 2016, p.

411). By combining existing core ideals and values into a dynamic, unified framework of action called the Villa Way, there is a clear expectation of the organizational culture and a direction for stakeholders to live the mission, be it participating in the Service Day, donating to the Student Emergency Fund, running a 24-hour animation competition, or staying late to prepare facilities for an event the following day (Giordano, 2019, p. 6). The organizational culture is such that stakeholders are dedicated to the students and the success of Villa Maria College, and act with the Villa Way and core values in mind.

DEI, Achieve, and Accessibility

The concept of the Villa Way is present in the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility policies, programs, and beliefs at Villa Maria College. The core values, particularly respect for human dignity, compassion, and justice and peace, guide the organizational culture and decision making within these initiatives as valuing diversity will “strengthen institutions and increase their likelihood of continued success due to its reliance on associations between groups” (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 672). These policies have the “potential to transform the institutional culture and pedagogical practices in higher education” (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002, p. 55). Strategic plans, mission statements, and core values, while necessary and important, cannot stand on their own, independent from organizational outcome; the goals outlined on paper need to match up with the organizational culture and actions of the institution. If they do not, then the organization should reevaluate their values, beliefs, and missions to make sure they are in alignment and be held accountable (Brown, 2017). Villa Maria College is active and outspoken about the shared beliefs behind diversity and accessibility, and highlights the organizational culture in a multitude of ways.

The core value for the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 academic year was justice and peace. This core value aligned with some of the most profound acts of injustice and unrest in the United States with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery and the resulting protests around the nation. Rather than remain silent, Dr. Giordano not only issued a statement, but also directly sent his message to the entire Villa Maria community, including the Board of Trustees, speaking out against the injustice. This is important for organizational culture as sometimes, “[d]espite their awareness and concern, many administrators are reluctant to publicly bring attention to marginalizing campus issues for fear of political backlash or job loss” (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 676-7). By bringing attention to Villa Maria’s demographics, missions, and organizational culture in relation to important issues of injustice, Dr. Giordano created a unified response that encourages a “collective responsibility for combating prejudice and discrimination through a gained understanding of these issues during education, training, and engagement with others” (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 671). The protest movement was not ignored as the organizational culture demanded a response to show support for “students and staff members [who] can recount their lifelong experiences with institutionalized oppression and discrimination” and highlights that Villa Maria “reflects the disproportionate racial makeup that characterizes and contributes to the racial and class disparities that have always afflicted our country” (Giordano, 2020, para. 9). Instead of acting as if the unrest did not make its way to Villa Maria College, the organization was open about how these concerns were present in the microcosm of a small, private college with a diverse background. This act of leadership and support for the organizational culture encouraged future changes within the college to better represent the core values in forward thinking DEI and accessibility initiatives.

One of the major results from this occurrence was the rejuvenation of Villa Maria College's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee, who have since been working on a variety of projects related to creating a DEI dashboard, including demographic reporting for students and staff, strategic hiring, advocating for person-first language when discussing students with learning differences, and the creation of a new inclusion statement to accompany all job postings and onboarding documents (D. Schier, personal communication, December 8, 2021). Although many of these beliefs are informally represented in the organizational culture, and many of the practices are embedded in documents throughout the college materials, but there is a need for a unified, substantial representation of DEI values and practices front and center on the Villa website. These initiatives, among others, are at the cabinet level with anticipated approval this academic year (D. Schier, personal communication, December 8, 2021). Particularly in higher education organizations, "diversity promotes a positive attitude toward accepting, tolerating, embracing, and ultimately respecting differences." (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 671). An annual event that was developed because of the shared organizational culture's increased need for action surrounding DEI initiatives is the Unity Walk. Students and administrators created the Unity Walk to symbolize "reject[ing] all forms of hate and dehumanization. It also symbolizes [Villa Maria College's] responsibility to creating and sustaining an environment that values individuals regardless of identity" (*Unity walk*, 2020, para. 1). This is a core belief in the organizational culture of Villa Maria College, and members of the community volunteer to represent these ideals not only in the DEI committee, but throughout their daily expressions of the core values.

One tangible and measurable development that stems from the strong organizational belief in support of equitable and accessible education has been the creation of Villa Maria's Achieve Program for students with learning differences. While all higher education institutions

are legally required to provide accommodations, the Achieve Program “goes above and beyond what’s required by law to help students with learning differences succeed” (*About Achieve*, 2021, para. 3). A vital part of Villa Maria’s mission is not only respecting, but also celebrating diversity in all forms. The organizational culture at Villa supports the idea of “changing society and environments to accommodate people who live with impairment, rather than changing individuals with impairment to accommodate society” (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1485). In this way, the Achieve Program provides students with resources and practical skills to encourage success, but also relies on the support and buy in from the organization and its stakeholders. Achieve works with students, faculty, and staff to create plans that will help all parties communicate effectively and work towards the common goal of educational success. Beyond that, the Achieve Program works with students to develop skills they will need to succeed in their chosen career paths which is a vital component of developing inclusion education (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1484; Lipka, 2018, p. 144). For an institution to be successful, “[d]iversity must be continuously cultivated. The elite college must change, adapt, and grow right along with its changing student body” (Jack, 2019, p. 182). Recognizing, encouraging, and celebrating the diversity and uniqueness of the student body is built into the organizational culture and core values of Villa Maria College, and the institution is always working to find new ways to support students, beyond what might be expected or what is necessitated by law.

Admissions and Easing the Burden

Regardless of the financial assistance available to students in the form of scholarships, financial aid, and loans, there is still a substantial barrier for potential students, particularly minority, first-generation, and low-income students, to overcome in the form of unexpected costs and navigating the admissions process. In other words, higher education institutions need to

consider “both the perception and the reality of opportunity. While there is an array of higher education offerings, for many underserved populations these options aren't available to them” (Iloh, 2018, p. 238). The Financial Aid department reports that “Villa Maria College awards grants and scholarships to 96% of its students and 99% of students receive some form of aid” (*Financial aid*, 2021, para. 1). Beyond that, 75% of students at Villa Maria College are Pell eligible, with nearly half of the students having an expected family contribution of zero (Giordano, 2021b). Villa Maria College, along with a handful of other higher education institutions in the Western New York area, “provide full last-dollar tuition scholarships” for an unlimited number of Say Yes students, which is done at “considerable cost to the college” (Giordano, 2021b, para. 3). This dedication to financial assistance, regardless of the impact on the college, something Villa Maria does to follow the Villa Way and support the original mission of the institution.

The organizational culture has resulted in creative solutions to remove college barriers and misconceptions by easing the burden of paying for tuition, SAT and ACT tests, deposits, application fees, textbooks, and supplies. Admission at Villa Maria College does not depend on submitting an application fee, completing the SAT or ACT, and applying by a specific deadline (*Admissions*, 2021). Flexible and rolling admissions options are important because “they alter the structure of opportunity [and] many students might find these spaces as viable pathways” (Iloh, 2018, p. 233). This adds to the mission of a student-centered institution by working with students who are often exploring college as an option for the first time, or searching for a higher education institution that will work with them and their needs. A recent initiative that began in the Fall 2020 semester to make college more affordable and accessible for all students was including free textbooks and supplies as part of the cost of tuition, the only college in Western

New York to do so. Elizabeth Kerr, the Assistant Vice President for Academic Success was quoted as saying, “Students and faculty alike are excited to start learning on day one, knowing everyone has equitable access to the materials” (Schober, 2021, p. 14). In this way, the organizational culture is again united in easing the burden on students and focusing on education, student empowerment, and inclusive education.

All of these endeavors are centered around “creating a welcoming and engaging culture for students for whom going to college is an ambitious and risky proposition” (Giordano, 2021b, para. 5). Higher education organizations are dependent on the application, retention, and graduation of their students, but the shared ideologies present throughout the organizational culture encourage Villa Maria stakeholders to find mission driven, equitable, accessible solutions. Because “[e]nrolment statistics play an important role in promoting equal access to knowledge by all sectors of a society” (Gibson et al., 2018, p. 69), policies within the Admissions and Financial Aid departments are constantly being reevaluated to provide as much assistance for students as possible, all because of a shared organizational culture committed to supporting the diverse student population attending Villa Maria College.

Physical Structure

As previously stated, Villa Maria College is one of many higher education institutions located in Western New York. While the physical space of the college is limited, it is utilized in a creative manner that works with the goals of student-centered and innovative education. Place, from a symbolic perspective, refers to the “experiences of and interpretations given to a particular space” (Hatch, 2018, p. 255). For higher education institutions, this can take the form of how buildings are designed, where offices are placed in proximity to others, and even how the classroom spaces are distributed among the programs. Considering the amount of physical space

the college started with, just nine acres of land and one structure, the expansion that has happened in the sixty years since its establishment is impressive as the college now spans 16 acres of land and utilizes the space of seven buildings (Monnin, 2015). For higher education institutions, particularly those like Villa Maria College that have limited funds, physical space is a resource that needs to be utilized strategically in whatever way can best benefit the organization and represent the goals and values of the institution (Fugazzotto, 2010). Physical space and how it is utilized is a “visible and concrete manifestation of taken for granted ideas and ways of doing things” (Woolner et al., 2018, p. 227). Because of this, it is important to understand how Villa Maria College utilizes its space, how classrooms and offices are assigned, and what these choices imply about the organization.

Buildings and Offices

Due to its humble beginnings as a teacher college for Felician Sisters, the physical space on the campus is somewhat limited and must be utilized creatively, as the college was originally housed in a single building that would become the Main, Library, and Music Buildings along with the connected auditorium and dining hall (Monnin, 2015). As the organization grew, so too did the need for new facilities and a reorganization of facilities and offices. To meet these needs, Villa Maria created their art shop in 2007, purchased the Villa Maria Athletic Center in 2009, and finally obtained Felician Hall in 2013 which now houses offices, the health sciences, and fine arts studios (Monnin, 2015). The added physical space is advantageous to the institution, but even more advantageous is that they are “imbued with meaning and significance by inhabitations and users” (Hatch, 2018, p. 255). Developing the art shop provided fine arts and interior design students a space to work on sculptures and furniture making, the athletic center allowed students a space to work on their health and fitness while also symbolizing the revival of the athletics

program, and adding Felician Hall to the organization created a significant expansion for offices like Financial Aid and Admissions, the Achieve Program, and the health sciences majors. Having these spaces “identified with certain functional areas seems to symbolize the validity of those units” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 293). These initiatives did not have the benefit of a dedicated space for expansion previously, but are now provided areas on campus the students, faculty, and staff can make their own.

Within the buildings, the organization of offices is very intentional and relies heavily on proximity to not only other offices and spaces, but the students and individuals using those spaces most often. Proximity is defined as “the nearness of people to one another—and how it affects human interaction in both instrumental and symbolic ways” (Hatch, 2018, p. 245). Many faculty offices are located next to the classrooms dedicated to their majors, providing direct access for students seeking assistance or advice. In some instances, the faculty office is even directly within the classroom, as is the case with the faculty supervisor for the art shop and the OTA/PTA faculty advisors. This openness “foster[s] types of interactions, and shape[s] workflow” (Stephenson et al., 2020, p. 800). While not a true open concept physical layout, the proximity creates an open-door policy that encourages students, faculty, and staff to interact on a consistent basis (Hatch, 2018, p. 248). In this way, even though the physical structure cannot necessarily be remodeled, the space is modified to benefit the organization.

The key concepts of proximity and openness can also be seen within staff offices, starting with Villa Maria’s upper administration. Unlike other higher education institutions that might have secretaries for each office and department, there are only two offices with secretaries at Villa Maria College, and they are the President and Vice President of Academic Affairs. While a post-modern perspective might question the power dynamics and inequality of only certain

offices having secretaries, these offices still follow an open-door policy and are located centrally on the campus (Hatch, 2018, p. 311). The offices are not used to control or intimidate, but are instead following the same symbolic conditioning as other spaces on campus (Hatch, 2018, p. 251). This is continued in the intentional use of space for other offices, including the two Academic Coaches who manage first year advising and academic support. The offices are located directly in the Student Success Center which houses tutoring, computers for independent use, a collection of free basic school supplies, and is nearby the counseling and career services offices. Student foot traffic is high in this area, and having these offices in the tutoring center removes some of the stigma surrounding tutoring, as students are required to visit the Student Success Center for a variety of reasons. The space of the Success Center, like other offices, is enabling actions and collaboration rather than controlling it (Stephenson et al., 2020, p. 797). In this way, the organization of offices, be it faculty, staff, or even the president, are influenced by proximity and often implement an open-door policy to encourage communication and collaboration.

The dining hall, while often cited as the heart of the institution, is original to the college and still features the orange and white tiled floors. As a non-for-profit institution with limited funds, Villa Maria College “cannot afford to buy and sell space regularly, nor to make frequent physical changes to it” (Fugazzotto, 2010, p. 248). However, in a recent announcement, the college shared that grant funding and private donations are covering the costs to renovate the space (*Dining hall*, 2021). There are many places on campus that could be updated, but choosing a place that is deeply connected to student experience and campus life showcases that administrators understand what is important to students, and want to improve the spaces they are using. Fugazzotto (2010) argues that “much of the value of space, resides in qualities that cannot

be bought and sold” (p. 248). In this way, it is not only a much-needed facelift for the dining hall, but also the symbolic representation of support for the students who, from a business standpoint, are the organization’s paying customers (Hatch, 2018, p. 255). Additionally, by having the project covered by grants and donations coming from outside of the college, it validates the organization by showing support not only of the decision to remodel a physical space, but also the institution as a whole.

Classrooms and Academic Spaces

In addition to renovations and acquisitions of major physical structures on campus, Villa Maria also maintains updated facilities for individual departments and programs. This, again, is a way to validate the program and its stakeholders in a tangible way (Fugazzotto, 2010). There is a recital hall, recording studio, and practice rooms for music industry majors, dedicated computer labs for animation, graphic design, computer software, and game design students, a dark room for photography majors and minors, the Paul William Beltz Family Art Gallery which features the work of both students and faculty, as well as clinical spaces for occupational therapy (OTA) and physical therapy (PTA) students (*Academics*, 2021). Even though physical space is limited on a small campus, each major is provided a space to study and hone their talents, which also encourages community building between students and faculty. This is valuable for the organization as “the configuration of physical space [can] pave the way to new opportunities for communication, sharing of knowledge, learning, and change” (Sailer, 2013, p.118). As an organization, Villa Maria values collaborative learning and the physical space supports this focus in how they allocate space to each major. Additionally, for students, faculty, staff, and even individuals visiting the college, “space has symbolic value in conveying the validity of academic

programs” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 293). Having dedicated physical spaces with updated resources highlights Villa Maria’s tangible support of their academic programs.

The classrooms, in addition to being updated with new technology for each major, are also kept below capacity. Villa maintains a 9:1 student-faculty ratio which eliminates the need for oversized lecture hall spaces, and encourages student-centered pedagogy and teaching methods (*About us*, 2021). Classroom spaces are outfitted with tables and chairs which are easily reorganized by instructors to fit the needs of the class, the lesson, or their preferred teaching style. This type of physical space “encourages instructors to adopt an active learning pedagogy and increases the positive effects of the pedagogy on student learning” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 291). Having the flexibility within the teaching space, as well as a small class size, is important for comprehensive learning and promotes engaged learning within the physical space (Lund Dean & Wright, 2017, p. 653; Young, 2017, p. 80). Art studios have recently been relocated to the converted chapel space in Felician Hall, which allows for more flexibility and reorganization than even the traditional classroom spaces. These adjustments to more open and flexible spaces encourage student engagement and make collaborative lessons easier to implement (Lund Dean & Wright, 2017, p. 661). In this way, Villa Maria utilizes the physical space to support community building within majors, collaborative experiences within classrooms, and creative pedagogy from faculty.

Summary of Findings

As a higher education institution in Western New York, the success of Villa Maria College depends on how well it functions, how it interacts with stakeholders, and how successful it is at promoting and achieving its mission. Rather than continuing to have a traditional mindset about how an organization *should* run, new structures for organizational learning idealize how an

organization *could* run (Fillion et al., 2015; Caldwell, 2012). That often involves renegotiating the culture of the institution, reexamining how physical space is utilized, and identifying where there is room for improvement. Organizational culture and physical space are two vital aspects of organizational theory, particularly for higher education institutions. It is necessary for these organizations to be aware of how the two can work together to sustain an institution's overall mission and goals.

For Villa Maria College, the strong organizational culture lends itself to supporting the mission, values, and DEI initiatives that encourage and ensure a student-centered learning environment. The challenges of limited space are overcome by focusing on dedicated classrooms and labs for all programs and departments, symbolic open-door policies across all levels of administration, and small class sizes that allow for reorganization of space within the classroom. The five core values and the Villa Way “bring structure and culture into tangible form, and physical space makes mission imperatives—and thereby structure and culture as well—even more concrete” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 294). Because of this combination of unified organizational culture and the creative use of physical space, Villa Maria College can achieve the goals outlined in their mission and act as a truly student-centered institution, allowing it to stand out in an area with a multitude of other higher education options.

Implications

Higher education institutions are complex, but so too are the individuals who attend and support these higher education institutions. The actions of individuals within an organization will impact both the organization itself and the other members and thus, successful organizations have a shared vision, or a unifying idea of what they hope to achieve and how they hope to achieve it (Fillion et al., 2015; Caldwell, 2012). For higher education organizations, this is often

represented by a mission statement, core values, or initiatives. The physical space of an organization can act as a tangible reminder of this vision as well since “physical space also has great communicative value [and] does not simply enable the enactment of mission-related activities; it becomes a constitutive element of institutional activities” (Fugazzotto, 2009, p. 291). Implementing meaningful change to the culture or the physical space of an organization can be extremely difficult, and often depends on stakeholder buy in to be successful. Luckily for Villa Maria College, there is a strong organizational culture and the “faculty and staff have a passion for [the] mission” (Giordano, 2021b). Because of this passionate and dedicated faculty and staff unified by the mission and goals of the college, Villa Maria was ranked #8 out of 52 on a list of best colleges in the north for social mobility (*Villa Maria College moves*, 2021). For a small school with limited resources, an accomplishment like that speaks to the organizational culture and meaningful use of space, showing how much impact higher education institutions can have on student success, although the graduation rates do not necessarily reflect this. Moving forward, Villa Maria College should continue to examine the interplay of culture and space utilization with an awareness of how and why their decisions, policies, and values impact issues of equity, access, and inclusion within higher education organizations.

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