

The Power of the Unspoken Law

Universities and colleges around the world spend thousands of man-hours, as well as millions upon millions of dollars on one specific aspect of their institutions. No, it is not the education or safety of the students, nor is it even the organization of extracurricular activities for the student body; it is the aesthetic qualities of the campus. Lehigh University, one of the top educational institutions in the nation, is just as guilty of this obsession with image as your local community college. One prime example of this emphasis on a strong visual appeal, and the ideas that this appearance fosters, is the Lehigh University Center front lawn. Nothing on campus is more manicured and diligently maintained as this seating area and community center. More important than the overall appearance of the lawn is the viewer's reaction to the campus because of this pristine space. These appealing signs of the lawn range from the majestic flag pole in the center to the extremely inviting feeling of comfort given by its highly emphasized sense of nature.

While there is no doubt that current students benefit from living in such a beautiful environment, they are clearly not the prime reason for maintaining this specific aesthetic perfection. If students were the target audience, then an area used more often would receive such high attention. Rather, the impressive aesthetic appeal that the University imparts through its front lawn is aimed at prospective students and their parents. Without even knowing it, a student can determine that they want to attend Lehigh University based on nothing but a feeling given off by the campus; this feeling may not even have any grounds in reality. Lehigh University's brilliant use of semiotics in its front lawn is primarily a means of enticing prospective students to apply to the school, thereby ensuring a promising incoming class.

Everything from the ground up is manicured beyond belief in order to connote feelings of a sense of home to academic prowess to natural beauty. When a student looks at a campus, be it

the first time, the second time or the thousandth, he or she does not critically assess every aspect of the university deliberately. Instead, certain things about the appearance of a school set off hundreds of unconscious reactions that will forever inevitably shape the student's overall opinion. These instantaneous reactions that we experience, while often very difficult to articulate, unknowingly and powerfully direct our impression of the campus as a whole. Subconscious gut-reactions like these are the exact reason that Lehigh University, and countless universities and colleges like it, devotes such a high amount of time and spending on aesthetic features that seem as unrelated to education as the condition of the grass around campus.

What is important to realize, however, is that such visual aspects, or signs, of the campus merely suggest a feeling; viewers must extract particular meaning from these feelings for themselves. While the semiotic hints that Lehigh University's front lawn portrays may seem to overtly send a specific message, it is not the sign that brings meaning to the viewer, but rather the viewer that derives meaning from the sign. Because of this discrepancy between what we perceive and the reality behind subtle – and yes, sometimes not very subtle – hints, the reader of these signs is likely to believe that their interpretation of the symbols is more accurate than reality. In this way, something as simple as the presence of large, shade-providing trees in the front lawn can be read in the most extreme case as “a sign of the university's sense of community and the all encompassing support system that, analogously, watches over the student body, shielding it from the innumerable dangers of the unknown”. This might seem like an extreme overstatement of an aspect of campus that has no bearing on the true wellbeing and safety of the community, but in the eyes of the university this is the ideal reaction. The inherent security of the student body that is suggested by this symbol is a strong appeal to the parents of prospective students, who are just as likely to make these misjudgments as their teenage

counterparts. No student or parent would look at the front lawn of the university center and be able to explicitly articulate its message; but unfortunately, that is exactly what goes through many students' minds without them being conscious of it. The inherent danger lies in the subtle manipulation of these signs, and students must be aware of such influence. The false impressions that students derive from signs go completely unnoticed, and they could subtly corrupt one of the most important decisions of a person's life.

One obvious example of an attempt at symbolism on the Lehigh front lawn is the enormous flag pole in the center of the yard that proudly boasts the Lehigh University flag which is trumped only by the flag of the United States of America. These two very strong symbols in combination allude to the fact that not only are the residents of the campus very patriotic, but are also united by a strong sense of pride in their university. Of course, these feelings of loyalty to their country and community are not at all *provided* by this monument, but are merely suggested. The flag pole is not the only symbol of unity on the front lawn; the large letters that spell out "LEHIGH '09" directly in front of the university center suggest a remarkable amount of pride in one's graduating class. The six-foot white letters on the background of brown woodchips proudly display the graduation year of the current senior class as a constant reminder to all students of their imminent transition into a successful adulthood (and of course in the school colors). The senior class's graduation year does not, however, only signify their graduation, but it also attempts to convey a message of the unity of that class that comes from their mutual membership in the family that is the Lehigh University graduating class of 2009. The sign sends the clear message to prospective students that they too could become a member of one of these exclusive groups in order to ease the transition into a life without your immediate family. This

juxtaposition of exclusivity and simplicity of entrance is one of many transparent ploys used to attract students.

When one first glances at the lawn, one of the first and most prominent feelings is an overwhelming sense of comfort given off by the meticulous arrangement of natural, as well as manmade aspects of the environment. The first and most noticeable of these facets of design is the multitude of large trees and shrubberies. What would otherwise be a very harsh location, surrounded by bulky stone buildings with wrought iron, is softened a great deal by the extensive presence of trees and bushes. In addition to the welcoming attributes of the greenery, there are several arrangements of Adirondack chairs scattered across the lawn to provide clearly designated places to read and converse with friends. This tranquil appearance helps to emphasize the social and recreational aspects of Lehigh's campus and downplay the otherwise unavoidable role of academia that prospective students would almost always prefer to ignore. As well as the overall appearance of the university center front lawn, the surrounding buildings and sights serve to instill in onlookers a strong sense of prestige.

From the five story stone University Center and the gothic style Packard Lab (both of which are covered in ivy as a subtle hint to the barely sub-ivy ranking of the university) to the modern, streamlined construction of Fairchild-Martindale Library (made of almost all concrete, stainless steel and glass), the view from the university front lawn highlights the aesthetic prowess of the campus. A brief glance in any direction displays educational landmarks that have stood the test of time, insinuating in their age a certain intellectual nature that serves to attract students interested in tradition as well as strong academics. Also visible from the north side of the lawn down memorial walk (which itself does not fail to impress) are the state of the art laboratories

and Taylor Gymnasium which attempt to further conjure a sense of the balance between academics, athletics and socialization.

The most significant key to the success of this symbolism is that the university never overtly states any of these messages; rather, the semiotics of the campus convey such sentiments on their own. Were a university to tell prospective students that their college had for example “strong traditional values, an emphasis on education – but a conscious acceptance of active socialization -- and an ingrained sense of pride in their community,” any remotely intelligent individual would tune it out and disregard it as merely an idealistic sales pitch. The inherent power of the impression that the campus gives off, however, is that the viewer is the one to generate meaning from the symbols, and therefore is much more apt to believe in that meaning than if he or she were simply told. It is in this manner that the visual cues given by the Lehigh University front lawn impart a powerful message, a message which begins before a word is even spoken.