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The Campus Tour: Ritual and Community in Higher Education

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# The Campus Tour: Ritual and Community in Higher Education

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*This study examines the messages that a university transmits to prospective students during a particular ritual—the campus tour. Specifically, the article discusses the ways that members of a university communicate their expectations with respect to becoming contributing members of the academic community. Three community discourses serve as the theoretical foundation for the analysis. The conclusion discusses ways that rituals could be examined and modified to create multicultural and democratic communities.*

During the 1996 fall semester, I attended many university-sanctioned, start-of-the-year events including the campus tour, convocation, the international students' orientation program, a day-long new faculty orientation meeting, the first football game, and life in three different classrooms during the first day of classes on Miami University's Oxford campus.<sup>1</sup> This article reports on a portion of this research project focusing exclusively on the campus tour. Following this introduction, I describe the campus tour and then analyze it to better understand the intentions of organizers of the campus rituals, the various higher education discourses about community, and the relationships between rituals and community.

An examination of the campus tour narrative offers researchers numerous interpretive possibilities. Given the scope of this article, I examine a single analytical theme: the use of rituals to conjure a sense of community. I devote the remainder of this analysis to a two-fold agenda. First, I examine the ways the campus tour ritual persuades prospective students to believe that if they enroll, they will be members of a unique academic community. Second, and more importantly, the analysis will reveal the implicit beliefs and values that guide tour organizers as they convey what is the "normal" student role within this academic community.

Data for this study were gathered three ways: participant-observations (see Jorgensen 1989; Sanger 1996; Spradley 1980) of numerous public events; in-depth unstructured interviews (see Fontana and Frey 1994; Schatzman and Strauss 1973; Spradley 1979) with ritual organizers and participants; and analysis of written and audiovisual artifacts (see Hodder 1994), such as the promotional materials that target prospective students. These three distinct yet complementary fieldwork methods (i.e.,

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participant-observations, interviews, and document analysis) and data sources (places, people, things) illuminate the multiple ways that the university, the Admission Office staff, prospective students, and I made meaning of the campus tour.

This study is influenced by and situated within an interpretive worldview with critical theory leanings. An interpretive view (see Schwandt 1994) (1) solicits and documents the multiple realities of the researcher and respondents; (2) values and attends to local context and its history; (3) recognizes that knowledge is partial, positioned, and incomplete; and (4) values and celebrates subjective interpretation while recognizing that these interpretations are socially constructed and influenced by the researcher's position and perspective.<sup>2</sup> The critical influence is evident in two distinct ways. First, the fieldwork and analysis weave the issue of power into the interpretive tapestry. I focus on power relations and reveal how power operates within this particular setting. Second, my presence, position, politics, and subjectivity as a researcher are clearly acknowledged. This is unlike the case in numerous interpretive studies, in which the role of the researcher in the doing of and writing about the research undertaking is eclipsed by the examination of the phenomena. In the narrative and interpretation sections that follow, the reader is reminded of my presence and subjectivity as I seek to examine the intersection of prospective students with their prospective higher education environments.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Campus Tour**

"Good morning! My name is Mark and I'll be your guide this morning. I'm a sophomore marketing major from Medina. Anyone from Medina?" No one raises a hand, so Mark continues, "Oh well. Let's get started." Dressed in khaki pants, a polo shirt, and deck shoes, Mark herds the 16 individuals assembled for this campus tour to a secluded locale outside the admissions building. The humid late summer air is a striking contrast to the admissions building's air-conditioned auditorium where the group politely listened to a 30-minute introduction to Miami University. So begins one of the many university-sanctioned events—the campus tour—that transmit "the ways" of the university.

"This is a one-hour tour of campus. We'll walk around and take in the sites. Feel free to ask questions," Mark continues. He shifts from an impromptu conversational style to a more preprogrammed oratory style as he presents his brief Miami history lesson:

Miami University was established in 1809 by an act of the Ohio legislature. . . . The first building was built in 1818. Classes began in 1824. In 1824, Miami had one president who taught classes, two professors, and 20 students. In 1996, we have over 16,000 students, and the president still teaches classes. . . . The university was named for the Miami Indian Tribe. Miami still has a close relationship with the tribe. Chief Floyd Leonard is a frequent visitor, and members of the tribe attend school here.

Mark augments his historical overview with campus profiles. He mentions the four Miami campuses: Oxford, Middletown, and Hamilton, which are in Ohio, and the European campus in Luxembourg. Taking a deep breath, he recites the university's six undergraduate academic divisions: the College of Arts and Science, the Richard T. Farmer School of Business Administration, the School of Education and Allied Professions, the School of Applied Science, the School of Fine Arts, and "Western"—otherwise known as the School of Interdisciplinary Studies. So far, this information is familiar to me because of my 12-year affiliation with the university as a student affairs administrator and faculty member in the School of Education and Allied Professions. I suspect it is new information for the prospective students and parents who accompany me on this tour.

Walking backwards while addressing the group, Mark returns to a more conversational style. He points to the building from which we just exited and lists other inhabitants besides admissions: "[inside is] the registrar, bursar, financial aid, disability services, and learning assistance. . . . This used to be the School of Education's lab school." We cross a major campus street at one of the designated crosswalks en route to our first official tour stop. Mark works hard to direct the visitors' attention toward campus and away from an off-campus student rental across the street. The numerous plastic cups and discarded cans strewn all over the nearly bald lawn, coupled with the interior kitchen and living room furniture scattered around the lawn, not-so-subtly suggest that another familiar campus ritual—the off-campus party—has taken place in the not-so-distant past.

As we reassemble on the other side of the street, I size up the group: eight parents and seven students—nine men, six women. The cohort stays close to one another, careful not to get mixed up with the other campus pedestrians also following the tour route. As expected, the prospective students' uniforms—jeans, sneakers, pullover shirts—are more casual than their parents', although everyone dresses for the warm summer weather. Decorum reigns as family members whisper comments to each other so as to avoid disrupting the guide's ongoing commentary. A father tries to pinpoint his whereabouts on the campus map he received at the Admission Office.

Mark points to the first of many expansive, red-brick buildings with cream trims: "This is McGuffey Hall, home of the School of Education and Allied Professions. Its teacher certification program is a four-year program. . . . The placement rate for Miami education students last year was over 85 percent." One prospective student's observation is correct when she whispers to her father, "It looks like an old high school." As we pass McGuffey, Mark directs our attention to an adjacent building:

This is Bishop Hall. It is named after Robert Hamilton Bishop, Miami's first president. Inside are the Honors Program and the Center for Black Culture and Learning. You do not have to be an honor student to live in Bishop, but it

helps. . . . The Black Culture and Learning Center is downstairs. It assists minority students, sponsors programs, and offers leadership opportunities. They have a lot of different programs like a faculty mentor program, an academic achievement program, and an academic skills program.

The picturesque scene—students strolling while conversing, riding bicycles, and lounging on the grassy knolls with the Williamsburg-like buildings in the background—looks like Hollywood’s quintessential portrayal of a college campus. It is a beautiful late summer Ohio morning—not too hot, not too cool, but predictably humid. The lawns, trees, and shrubs are well manicured, spruced up for the start of the 1996–97 academic year, which began five days earlier. It seems odd that first-year students have been on campus less than a week and the admissions staff is already cultivating relationships with potential students for the following year. Mark, walking backwards in order to maintain eye contact with the group, continues, “Over there [pointing west] is the main library; there are three other ones on campus. . . . We have a computerized [library] catalogue called ‘Sherlock’; if you have a modem in your room you can access the library from there.”

As we approach Alumni Hall, former and future home of the Architecture Department, Mark explains that the building is closed for renovations but will reopen next year. “Anyone interested in architecture?” Heads shaking no are the tour participants’ only responses. This nonresponse prompts Mark to continue, “Alumni used to be the old campus library before King [Library] was built.” He launches into the first of numerous folklore tales that subtly, yet unambiguously, convey the “Miami Way”—a term used by faculty, staff, students, and alumni to convey the foundational beliefs, traditions, and values (that should not be questioned or challenged) that guide formal and informal university policy. Mark continues, “When Miami opened the doors to King Library [pointing toward the building], transferring the books from Alumni to King was a hassle, so President Shriver offered students and faculty a day off if they lined up between buildings and passed the books person to person. And that’s what happened.” Prospective students and their parents smile and nod with approval. The brief tale conveys to prospective members of the campus community the seminal campus values and ideals, such as community service, teamwork, and close faculty-student interactions.

Mark halts the group in front of another red-brick building similar to the previous one and explains, “This is the recently renovated language building. Miami offers French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Latin, Chinese, and other languages that I can’t remember.” His memory lapse draws a chuckle from the crowd. He continues, “We have about one hundred students who study in Luxembourg each year. You do not have to be proficient in a foreign language to go to school there.” Mark holds the door open for our campus guests as we climb the slate steps and pass through one of the building’s entrances. Mark resumes his commentary,

"We are one of the top five schools in the country for having the most students who study abroad." Inside, Mark points to a small classroom. I suspect it is no accident that this quaint classroom is selected as the model classroom for the tour; its human scale would appeal to prospective students and their parents. As we snake our way around the first floor of the building, Mark calls the group's attention to the faculty offices that line the corridor and the multicolored flyers—ranging from computer ads, study abroad announcements, and upcoming concert reminders—posted on bulletin boards. Mark resumes his more formal tour voice as he offers student-faculty data: "The student-faculty ratio is 17 to 1. . . . About 80 percent of the first-year classes have 50 or fewer students in them, and 70 percent of first-year students are taught by faculty, not graduate assistants." The implicit "we are family" message plays well with the crowd, according to their pleasant facial expressions.

We exit at a different door than the one we entered. Recognizing that it is not feasible to visit every campus building, Mark stands erect on the building steps and points to nearby buildings of interest: "Over there is the McGuffey Museum. Remember the McGuffey Readers? Over 100 million have been sold." The McGuffey reference seems more familiar to the older tour participants, like me. Mark rotates his body as he continues, "Over there is public safety and campus police; they have a Campus Watch program. Beyond that is the communications building; it's one of the more popular majors." Mark spins 180 degrees and points to a walkway that diagonally intersects the gridlike campus. He explains, "This [pointing to the walkway] is called 'Slant Walk' because it slants toward uptown." He uses the uptown reference to offer a brief overview of Oxford, the town that encases the campus:

There are over 8,000 permanent residents. There is everything uptown: bookstores, clothing stores, banks, a hospital, fast food, and bars. It's where most of the off-campus action happens. It's where you take dates and socialize [code, I suspect, for consuming alcohol] on weekends. Further out there are more fast-food restaurants and a WalMart.

He again rotates his body, now facing north, and continues, "Way over there is Lewis Place, which is where the president lives. Harrison Hall [the building closest to us] is named for one of Miami University's most famous graduates, Benjamin Harrison, 23rd president of the United States." The building identification/mini history lesson concludes as Mark identifies the Beta Bell Tower, the administration building, and two of the oldest buildings on campus: Elliot and Stoddard Halls, residence halls that house the university's Scholar-Leader Program.

The tour continues down a sidewalk until we arrive at a huge century-old tree that interrupts the walking path. The cement path forks to circumvent the tree. The guide pauses in front of the tree to explain another campus tradition: "There are over 9,000 trees on the Oxford campus. If a group walks up to a tree in the middle of a sidewalk, there is a myth

which says you must all walk on the same side of the tree, otherwise you will break the bonds of your friendship." The bonding tradition seems more relevant to existing rather than prospective Miami-ians, yet all guests respect the tradition by veering around the same side of the tree.

Ahead, Mark pauses at a campus crossroads, where numerous cement paths intersect. In a dramatic tone, he announces, "This, ladies and gentlemen, is the hub." An aged bronze seal marks the hub—the geographic and symbolic center of campus. Mark elaborates,

The Miami seal's "Prodesse quam conspici" inscription means "to accomplish rather than to be conspicuous." The founding trustees' interpretation of the symbolic book, telescope, and globe was that literature, science, and world knowledge be taught at the university to surmount ignorance and superstition. The tradition has it that a student who mocks these ideas by stepping on the seal will flunk his or her first test. To this day, few students step on the seal.

Mark pauses long enough at the hub to verify for others the authenticity of this statement—the first three passing students do indeed sidestep the seal as they pass it. Having made his point, he urges the group to continue to follow him down the path. Mark's occasional waving and cryptic comments to acquaintances as they pass pleasantly surprise me—unlikely exchanges for a campus of over 16,000 students. Serendipitously, an older man passes and calls Mark by name; Mark explains that the man is "one of my profs." This by-chance, unrehearsed occurrence would thrill public relations and admission staffs and impress skeptics of the university's claim to be like a small liberal arts college.

Mark explains the arrangement of a collection of stones along a path: "These stones in front of the benches are donated by alumni from all fifty states. The stones point to the geographic location of the state represented by each donor. Any alumni here?" Mark asks. One older gentleman raises his hand but opts not to speak.

As we approach one of the larger buildings on campus, divided into two sections connected by an archway, Mark refers to it as Upham Hall; he then introduces yet another campus tradition:

Upham Hall is named after Alfred Upham. Among other things, he wrote the Alma Mater. . . . Tradition has it that sweethearts who kiss under the arch at midnight while the light is on will eventually marry. We call them "Miami Mergers." The [national] average percentage of students marrying students is 3 percent; at Miami University it is 11 percent. The Alumni Office sends Valentine cards each year to these Mergers. Upham has in it the college's dean, sociology, anthropology, and history.

On the other side of the archway, Mark points out sites that are not part of the official tour, including the natural wooded preserve, ice and basketball arenas, football stadium, conference center, horse stables, business school, and biology building. Intermixed are descriptions of unique aspects of campus such as "broomball," a modified ice hockey

intramural sport, and the campus's designation as "the Cradle of Coaches," referring to famous football coaches who coached at Miami and later in their careers became famous and successful. Mark effortlessly lists the names of easily recognizable football coaches—Woody Hayes, Weeb Ewebanks, Bo Schembechler, Paul Brown, and Ara Parseghian.

The size of the student body, class sizes, the percentage of in-state students, retention data, most popular majors, tuition costs, admission criteria, and campus Scholastic Aptitude Test profiles are some of the "fun facts" Mark recites as we cross yet another campus street toward the campus center. Not only does he provide concrete, uncontested campus information such as application deadlines, names of buildings, and graduation rates, but he subtly conveys numerous cherished values of the institution and its expectations for its members.

As we stroll through the campus center, crowds of students engulf the tour participants. The hustle and bustle of the center, infested with students, would be a claustrophobic person's worst nightmare. Long lines form near the bookstore and around the food court on the floor below. Greek letters are proudly tattooed on the T-shirts of students who are lounging in the numerous reception areas. The Queen Anne-style tables, settees, and chairs in all of the public lounges look more like they belong in an affluent family home than in a student center. Downstairs, students conversing and snacking fill the narrow corridors. As we maneuver around these crowds of students, Mark informs us that there are over three hundred student organizations. He names a few—Associated Student Government, Miami University Student Foundation, Campus Activities Council, and the Black Student Action Association—then announces, "If we don't have what you want, you can start your own organization."

The tour's next stop is a residence hall. This stop greatly interests two prospective students. They momentarily veer away from the larger group to explore some of the nooks and crannies of the hall. Mark continues to market the "benefits of on-campus living" to prospective students and their parents:

There are 38 residence halls on campus . . . we have single-sex and coed options . . . mostly doubles . . . personal computers are encouraged . . . quiet hours are in effect every weeknight . . . every hall has public living room and study spaces, laundry facilities, and kitchenettes . . . your mail is delivered right to your hall . . . there are multiple meal plans.

As the group squeezes into a model residence hall room, Mark makes a cryptic reference to the visitation policy, vague enough to neither inform nor offend parents or prospective students. Mark praises the unique first-year experience options by detailing the extended orientation programs and the fact that academic advisors reside in the residence halls with first-year students.



En route to the final stop on the tour, Mark offers helpful application hints and continues to reveal curricular and cocurricular offerings: "About one-third of the campus is Greek. . . . Let me tell you about the 'no car' policy. . . . We have a Women's Center. . . . You can use your dining hall meal card to buy food in the convenience stores." I reach a saturation point with Mark's advice and factoids. I am no longer able to retain the specifics, yet the sense of vibrancy, solidarity, opportunity, and conformity does not elude me. I wonder how individuals who are less familiar with the campus assimilate these data.

The final tour stop is the new \$22,000,000 recreation building, Oxford's equivalent to one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The "never-ending" steps leading to one entrance of the monstrous red-brick sports complex, the size of two football fields, guarantee frequenters a cardiovascular workout even before they step into the building. Outside, Mark recites the building's vital statistics: three pools, a diving well, a suspended four-lane indoor running track, a 40-foot climbing wall, a food court, a weight lifting and nautilus facility that can accommodate over three hundred people, and aerobics rooms. The mention of the Outdoor Pursuit Center—which rents camping equipment, kayaks, skis, and backpacks—elicits three queries from the group.

Mark informs the tour participants that they may either obtain guest permits to tour the building or return to the admissions building parking lot to retrieve their automobiles. Most, including myself, opt for the tour. Mark answers questions, refers one family to an admissions counselor, and encourages everyone to drive around to continue to explore. He also advises prospective students to schedule overnight visits sometime in the upcoming year. Mark thanks the tour participants' for their attention. A polite round of applause and multiple "thanks" are the group's reply.

The Recreation Center contingent passes through the monitored entrance. Prospective students and parents act as though they are on an archaeological dig. One family of three stares at the climbing wall for what seems like minutes, a gaze appropriate for an Egyptian pyramid, not a wall. Another father-daughter duo intensely studies the artifacts on the walls, such as the upcoming offerings, hoping to learn important clues about this culture. The sheer number of students entering and exiting the building around the noon hour surprises me. I silently wonder why so many of these students are not in class. No doubt the Admission Office's decision to schedule the center as the last stop of the tour is a strategic move—one that leaves a lasting impression on guests.

As the tour disbands, I sit on a bench outside the Recreation Center and process the hour-long experience. Because of my 12-year affiliation with the university, much of the tour's content affirms what I already know about the campus culture (e.g., the rhythms of the semester, the human scale of the campus, the homogeneous architectural style of campus buildings, the numerous curricular and cocurricular opportunities

available to students, and the state-of-the-art features of the recreation facility). Yet several aspects of the tour challenge my "conventional wisdom." For example, prior to the tour, I predicted that prospective students and their parents would ask big picture academic questions about the university. Instead, they asked micro-cocurricular questions such as the following: Do the dorms have single or double beds? What kinds of computers does the university support—Mac or IBM? Why is sorority rush second semester? During the tour I also gleaned new information. For example, I was unaware that hundreds of students visit the new recreation building daily, that the percentage of tenured faculty members who teach and collaborate on research with undergraduates is well above the national average, and that the institution has one of the largest study abroad programs in the United States.

While aspects of the tour affirmed, challenged, and surprised me, I continued to ponder two issues long after the tour concluded. First, the tour guide used this campus ritual to symbolically convey the importance that the university places on creating and maintaining a community (one it hopes prospective students will join). Second, the guide subtly conveyed to prospective students the university's conceptualization of what is "normal." The remainder of this article focuses on these two issues.

### **An Introduction and Analysis**

In the 1960s Jacquetta Hill Burnett (1976) conducted an ethnographic research study of a small Midwestern high school. In the introduction to her essay, she notes,

Recently, John L. Fischer [1965] described as "common sense" the view that the progress of civilization leads to the reduced importance of ritual. . . . Max Gluckman expressed the view that "modern urban life" is correlated with the disappearance of the ritualization of social relations. Gluckman [1962] said: "I consider that rituals of the kind investigated by van Gennepe are 'incompatible' with the structure of modern urban life." [1976:313]<sup>4</sup>

Burnett's research findings—that rituals are alive and well in America in general and in education in particular—dispute Fischer's and Gluckman's conclusions about the reduced importance of ritual in contemporary society. More recently, Peter McLaren's (1993) ethnographic study of a working-class Toronto Catholic school affirms Burnett's findings. McLaren's fieldwork suggests that "rituals play a crucial role and ineliminable role in the whole of the student's existence" (1993:2–3) and that rituals of the school continually create and transmit culture to students.

My campus tour narrative lends support to Burnett's (1976) and McLaren's (1993) claims that rituals—in particular those that take place in educational contexts—(1) are seldom scrutinized, (2) are important sources for revealing social and cultural conditions, (3) reveal much

about the ritual organizers and participants, and (4) are political acts that communicate expectations and norms for behavior and performance (that is, transmit culture). While the study of ritual has experienced a resurgence of sorts as a scholarly research domain during the past three decades,<sup>5</sup> it remains an elusive concept to define. As McLaren notes, "The term ritual is a diffuse and often impalpable concept—one that has been beset with problems of definition that have haunted it for years" (1986:44). Devising a definitive ritual definition is a futile task, especially in these postmodern times. Instead I offer a conceptualization of what I mean by *ritual* (without a claim that this is what ritual actually is). My perspective integrates the strengths of both Durkheim (1985), who views ritual as a social function that sustains the status quo, and Turner (1969), who views ritual as a social process that makes transformations possible.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I define ritual as a formalized, symbolic performance (see Quantz and Magolda 1997).

A careful examination of the campus tour narrative further clarifies this seemingly simple yet complex conceptualization. The tour is a performance of sorts. A sampling of Mark's performance roles includes guide, historian, and admission coach. Tour participants concentrate on his every move and spoken word. Likewise, tour participants involve themselves in the ritual performance as they assume the role of respectful campus guests. That is, they listen attentively to Mark, seldom speak (when they converse they whisper), and follow the guide's recommendations.

The intention of the tour is to accomplish more than the instrumental tasks of transporting guests from the Admission Office to the Recreation Center and conveying technical information about the university. All performers' roles overtly accomplish instrumental tasks (e.g., Mark's identification of various campus buildings) and subtly convey symbolic messages (e.g., optimal learning takes place when the expert/teacher [e.g., tour guide] teaches as the learners [e.g., tour participants] absorb the knowledge). Mark is, as McLaren defines it, a *montagist*, a person "who uses gestures, verbal intonations, and rhythmic methods of ritualized expression" (1986:104) to communicate expectations and norms for behaviors and performances (e.g., respect for authority and reverence for tradition).

Finally, symbolic performances have a recognizable and expected form. Embedded in these symbolic performances are explicit and implicit rules that convey to participants whether the ritual was done "correctly." Doing it "correctly" legitimates the ritual. For example, had Mark arrived late for the tour wearing pajamas or a tuxedo instead of his "casual but neat" attire, he would have violated a ground rule and probably would not have met the visitors' expectations. Likewise, when the tour guests (audience members) conversed with each other, they did so by whispering so as not to disturb Mark's commentary. Mark's dual oratory style during the tour (i.e., conversational and formal) is an additional

example of a performer subscribing to these expected norms. When introducing himself or identifying buildings, Mark employed a relaxed, conversational oratory style. When he recounted a legend or explained a tradition, he did so in a serious, more formal tone. I suspect one reason all of the tour participants veered to the right of the tree blocking the path was that they recognized that Mark took the ground rules of that particular ritual seriously. His legitimization of the tree ritual resulted in guests investing in the tour ritual.

Extrapolating properties of ritual from this definition, one might conclude that rituals take on a distinct form, (as a medium) are an integral part of the transmitted message, and include clusters of symbols that necessitate interpretations. Extrapolating ritual functions from this definition, one might conclude that rituals frame issues, bestow on participants a unique type of ritual knowledge, are formalized, and transmit a particular ideology.<sup>7</sup> These formal, symbolic performances, as Lank-shear notes, are "components of ideology, helping shape our perceptions of daily life and how we live it" (1993:xiii).

When one is asked to invoke a mental image of a campus ritual, often large formal ceremonies like presidential inaugurations, graduation exercises, or fraternity initiations come to mind. Such images tend to be formalized symbolic performances that transmit norms, values, and dispositions and are intended to forge common ideals and identities. Yet these are but one kind of ritual. Often overlooked are the smaller, more frequent rituals. Quantz and I elaborate,

It is in the small rituals of ordinary, daily school life that the real work of creating community (or in resisting it) occurs. We are talking about what Goffman (1967) called "interaction rituals," especially those little actions between individuals that work to symbolically affirm or challenge the location of the individual in the status quo that he called "minor ceremonies." Or what Grimes, 1990, called decorum. [1997:222]

Quantz and I also argue that, unlike larger rituals that border or are separate from everyday life (e.g., graduation exercises), smaller rituals (e.g., tour greetings), because they are integral to social life, often remain invisible. Because they often are unspectacular, repetitive, and predictive, they do not stimulate reflection on the part of participants.

The campus tour ritual could be examined as a grand ritual (bounded by a tour guide's welcome and departing dialogue) or a collection of human exchanges (e.g., the exchange between the tour guide and his former professor; participants walking around the tree) that exhibit ritual characteristics. The remainder of this article is devoted to reflection on and analysis of interaction rituals embedded within the tour, with the hope of bringing to the readers' consciousness core campus values that are transmitted to prospective students.

## A Quest for Community

As I noted, an examination of the campus tour narrative as a collection of interactional rituals offers many interpretive possibilities. A cursory review of the diverse aspects of the tour—the buildings and grounds, the tour guide's attire, the campus legends, the guide's lexicon—suggests that the institution desires community. An admissions staff member who supervises the student tour guides confirmed the importance of this community theme evident during the tour. The admissions supervisor explained that one of the primary aims of the campus tour is to “convey a sense of the community to the visitors.” The tour can be understood by examining the collection of interaction rituals that subtly convey to prospective students this treasured value.

On the surface, endorsing community in higher education is fashionable, morally desirable, and a low-risk stance. While there is nearly universal agreement within higher education that “community” is desirable, there is less agreement about what constitutes community and ways to attain it.

Heller (1989) identifies three distinct word uses for the term *community*: locality (i.e., a territorial or geographic notion of community such as a neighborhood), relational (i.e., qualities of human interaction and social ties/networks that attract people to one another), and collective political power (i.e., the act of organizing for social action). I use the Miami campus tour as an exemplar to elaborate on Heller's three distinct conceptualizations, with the hope that this will clarify for readers the contested terrain that lies slightly below the surface of this “community is good” movement in higher education.

Heller's first conceptualization of community links it with locality. Throughout the campus tour, the physical setting symbolizes community. The campus map that each tour participant receives clearly delineates the physical boundaries of the “community.” Mark's effort to direct attention toward the campus and away from the off-campus house (that showcases the aftermath of a party) reminded visitors which physical artifacts constitute the Miami community and which do not. Mark's statement that no campus building is over three stories high is one example of the many physical characteristics of the campus that convey to guests that the campus is more similar to a village than an impersonal city. The showcasing of the small classroom and the visit to the residence hall room reinforce this village perception. Willimon and Naylor's observations about Duke University further clarify a conceptualization of community based on locale:

When Duke's West Campus was built, after the generous gift of James B. Duke, it was conceived of as an “academic village” where gymnasias, laboratories, classrooms, libraries, a chapel and dining halls would all be interlocked in a unified college community. This arrangement signifies in an architectural way that which ought to be the norm for our life together. There is no

intellectual life that is not lived in community. No scholar is a self-made woman or man. [1995:143]

Heller's second conceptualization of community links it with human relations. Frequently, the campus tour conveys that *community* and *human relations* are interchangeable terms. For example, I learned during an interview with an admissions staff member that the director closely monitors the size of the tour groups. The goal is to keep the groups small so that a rapport between the guide and the visitors can take root. Mark's legends—handed-down narratives of historical events that have been embellished with fictional details—about students and faculty standing side by side passing books from the old to the new library and the "Miami Merger" tradition symbolize that the institution has a long history of quality human interactions, some of which even result in marriages. Mark's serendipitous encounters with his friends and a former professor, the tour participants' numerous sightings of students interacting with each other outdoors and in the student center lounges, and even Mark's reminder that the president still teaches classes affirmed that vibrant human relations are alive and well in the 1990s. The explanation of the alumni stone display reminded guests that, although alumni no longer reside on campus, they remain connected, valued, and respected.

Mark also strategically avoided "hot button" issues such as the nickname debate, which was to change the nickname of the university from the Redskins to the Redhawks—an issue that was controversial and polarizing. Instead, he mentioned safe and uncontested topics (e.g., support services for first-year students), ones that would not introduce conflict into anyone's conceptualization of an ideal interpersonal relationship.

Words like *locale* and *human relations* are frequently interchanged with the term *community*, but this is not the case with Heller's third conceptualization of community: collective political power. Words like *politics*, *power*, *organizing*, and *social action* have neither warm and fuzzy nor nostalgic feelings associated with a village or human interactions. They are hidden yet powerful influences in higher education's quest for community.

During the campus tour, Heller's conceptualization of community as a collective political power is evident but much less pronounced than the first two conceptualizations. For example, embedded in the campus tour script and Mark's performance was a political agenda that conveys to prospective students what is normal. This grand ritual is not simply a technical exercise of getting people around campus to visit the sites. As one admissions staff member revealed during our interview, there is a purposeful agenda dictating what is to be said and what sites are to be visited. (My review of the 19-page campus tour training manual confirmed this statement.) This is compatible with McLaren's view of rituals, which suggests that

any assertion that a ritual performance is a politically or ideologically neutral event, purged of political considerations, is pure pomposity and amounts to nothing more than a spurious contrived chimera. What constitutes a seemingly objective fact gleaned through observation of or enactment in a particular rite may, in reality, be a suggestive mystification or a proffered representation: in short, a hegemonic definition of reality designed to prevail over others. [1993:83]

During our interview the staff member explained that the tour participants, through their feedback, are most influential in shaping the content and sequence of the tour. Yet her detailed musing about the tour suggests that it is more than a “give the people what they want” activity. Those in power engage in a form of social action to enculturate and sustain the Miami Way. Their social action is manifested in what was seen and said during the tour as the tour guide and guests engaged in a collection of interactions (e.g., question-and-answer exchanges) that resemble rituals.

Careful analysis of these “little” rituals reveals a more complex understanding of unproblematized community definitions such as locale, human relations, and social action. For example, carefully examining the dynamics of the tour reveals that Miami is more than the acreage within its property boundaries. Its unique buildings (e.g., laboratories, student centers, recreation centers, residence halls) distinguish it from other properties. Likewise, a careful examination of the dynamics of the tour rituals (e.g., the retelling of the library story) makes known the kind of human relations that the ritual performer desires. For example, Mark’s actions and words suggest human relations that are more than individuals “doing their own thing” and peacefully coexisting. Instead, he appeared to favor relations that foster and sustain a sense of solidarity. Finally, careful examination of the “little” events of the tour reveals the political leanings of the tour organizers (and the tour’s power brokers) that went unnoticed. Rituals are a powerful vehicle to create and sustain community; attending to the little interaction rituals reveals the kinds of communities people create and sustain and the struggles and resistance that result. Next I examine the specific community norms embedded in these interactional tour rituals.

### **Communicating “Normalized” Community Expectations**

As I went about the task of visiting campus events, paying particular attention to interaction rituals, I gained a clearer understanding of the importance of community, the multiple conceptualizations of community, and the ways that rituals are used to advance these community agendas. Tour organizers were explicit about Heller’s first two conceptualizations of community—locale and relations—but more covert and cautious in revealing their implicit social action agenda. Carefully examining these interaction rituals reveals the normative assumptions of community life—that is, the Miami Way. Simply stated, a hidden social

action agenda of the tour was conveyed to prospective students—subtly conveying to them what “normal” students do. Rhoads’s brief discussion of Foucault clarifies this idea of normalized community expectations:

Normalization lies at the heart of Foucault’s view on culture. One significant way that normalization is accomplished is through the “importance of the action of the norm” (Foucault, 1978, p. 144). The norm becomes the prescribed code that societal members must follow. Cast in this light, all organizations have similar qualities in that they constrain individual action. [1994:28]

Carlson’s (1994) multicultural scholarship helps to unpack the ways that rituals are used to convey normalizing community expectations. Carlson notes that the dominant conceptualization of community in the United States is that of a normalizing community. Normalizing communities are based on those in power defining a cultural center or norm and situating the “others” on the margins. Normalizing communities privilege certain individuals, activities, roles, and relationships and portray them as normal. These communities are sustained by selective traditions (e.g., rituals), which ratify and legitimate the dominant culture.

The numerous interaction rituals within the campus tour defined the university’s cultural center and conveyed normalizing expectations to prospective students. For example, during Mark’s explanation of the legend that discourages students from walking on the university seal because they would fail their next examinations, he subtly conveyed that “normal” students learned, subscribed to, and revered campus traditions (e.g., by walking around the seal). Students who veer around the seal engage in an interaction ritual of conformity.

When discussing the multitude of cocurricular opportunities available to students, Mark singled out two mainstream political organizations—Associated Student Government and the Black Student Action Association—whose stated purposes are to represent Miami students. Mark’s mere mention of these two governing student organizations legitimized them and implied that these organizations are two “normal” ways to influence campus policy. Excluded from the list is, for example, the large, highly visible, active, and controversial Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance, which also represents students. This organization ended up on the proverbial “cutting room floor” of the tour commentary. The tour visits to the quaint classroom and expansive Recreation Center also conveyed a normalizing message to prospective students—that current students work hard and play hard.

Mark’s seemingly innocent comment about students frequenting uptown (the center of students’ off-campus social life) with dates to socialize also conveyed values, beliefs, and practices that the dominant student culture deems normal. Reading between the lines, one might conclude that “normal” students are of traditional age, heterosexual, unmarried, interested in dating, attending college full-time, prone to consuming



alcohol, and living on campus. While these assumptions apply to the majority of undergraduates, I cannot help but wonder how the students who do not fit this profile might interpret this comment. While I would not draw any definitive conclusions about the culture (or Mark's intended message) based on this anecdotal statement, it offers insights into values that I triangulated while observing other rituals during this fieldwork study. Although Mark never actually said the word *normal*, this conceptual category—which emerged through “perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating and ordering, establishing linkages and relationships, and speculating” (LeCompte and Preissle 1993:238–239)—led me to theorize about the connection between rituals and the desire of the ritual sponsors to create and sustain normalized communities.

### Responding to “Normalized” Community Expectations

In the struggle over conceptualizations of community, Carlson (1994) argues that three divergent discourses have emerged: (1) communities of interests, (2) communities that seek to recapture a romanticized lost American community, and (3) communities that engage difference and diversity. During the campus tour, the first two of these discourses were evident, whereas the third was virtually absent.

#### *Communities of Interest*

Throughout the campus tour, Mark mentioned numerous academic and cocurricular communities of interest, without designating them as such. I cite two brief examples to illustrate this claim. First, Mark spoke briefly about each of the six undergraduate academic divisions, which are relatively autonomous academic enclaves based on common interests. Mark's commentary conveyed that academic majors offered by these six divisions reflect the diverse and sometimes competing interests of students (e.g., nursing majors versus Classics majors) and reminded tour participants that no single or unified purpose for pursuing a college education exists in the 1990s. Mark's careful description of each academic division made it difficult to ascertain the power hierarchy, although it was clear that the College of Arts and Science and the School of Business are closer to the epicenter of normalcy, while the School of Interdisciplinary Studies is an “alternative” program, closer to the university's margins than its cultural center.

Second, Mark informed the tour participants that students can join over three hundred recognized student organizations (e.g., Greek, religious, honorary, military, public interest, publication, service, and sports). Students also have the option of forming new organizations, if they do not find any of the current offerings to their liking. While it was difficult to ascertain which organizations personified the cultural center and those situated on the margins, the sheer number of men and women

students proudly displaying their Greek letters on their clothing as we snaked our way around the crowded Student Center suggested that fraternity and sorority life on campus is normal and a powerful force.

Carlson argues that communities of interest (e.g., specialty student organizations) emerged as the idea of a single, unified community eluded the larger social entity (e.g., college campus). Often, marginalized groups, in order to resist normalizing expectations, formed communities of support or resistance. The formation of these new, relatively autonomous groups was based on common interests and gave the members voice and identity.

Carlson also argues that there is some merit in the "communities of interest perspective" but concludes that this discourse is fundamentally limited because the discrete, autonomous groupings make it difficult to engage in dialogue about the public interest. Dialogue about the public good was absent during the tour. Mark's neutral "separate but equal" appraisal of the various academic and cocurricular opportunities eclipsed dialogue about the larger public interests. A second concern with communities of interest is that while they appear responsive to nonmainstream interests, creating space for marginalized enclaves does not disturb the existing power structure.

### *Communities that Seek to Recapture a Romanticized Lost American Community*

The tour—which showcased the quaint college town with cobblestone streets, the consistent Williamsburg architecture, acres of red-brick buildings with the cream-colored trim, a friendly tour guide, heart-warming legends of faculty and students working side by side, manicured lawns and gardens, happy coeds strolling on the paths engaged in casual conversation, the sounds of a bell tolling from the tower over yonder, a friendly professor waving to one of his former students, love stories resulting from Miami Mergers, and a long list of former Miami football coaches who are now American football legends—conjured up romanticized images of campus life reminiscent of years gone by. These nostalgic images of beauty, old-fashioned values, safety, civility, and homogeneity were sprinkled with a few "best of the 1990s" images, such as a state-of-the-art Recreation Center (that includes a pro shop and health bar), a technologically sophisticated computerized library system, and numerous fast-food courts that easily accommodate busy 1990s college students' dining needs.

The tour firmly implanted in the memory of tour participants a romanticized image of the lost American college campus (which probably never existed), a campus where professors teach, students learn and enjoy life, staff administer, and alumni treasure their years on campus. In total, all members of the community are clearly defined and content with their particular roles.

The aforementioned commentary exemplifies the second community discourse that Carlson (1994) notes. In such communities, the homogeneous masses respect authority, and everyone is content with his or her role within the community. An intended outcome of this discourse is to keep the “other” in its place. Carlson argues that in unsettling times (like the 1990s) this hypernormalizing construction of community has a wide appeal.

Throughout the tour, the tour guide subtly implied that the university embraces this discourse as well. Subtly, the guide implicitly suggested who would fit in and who would not. The message for prospective students is “if you enroll, this is how we expect you to act.” Students are expected to reproduce existing culture norms rather than alter them.

### *Communities that Engage Difference and Diversity*

Carlson’s third community discourse focuses on difference and diversity; this discourse is rooted in democratic multicultural ideals. It provides space for communities of interest to form and prosper, while a common public culture is constantly and consciously being constructed and reconstructed through dialogue across and about difference. Carlson argues that a democratic progressive agenda must (1) maximize public participation, providing room for divergent perspectives and being sensitive to the concerns of all; (2) stand for something in the way of moral or ethical vision for the reconstruction of community (e.g., protecting minority rights and individual freedoms, equity, respect for difference); (3) rupture the borders that separate individuals into separate camps or neat categories; and (4) be directed toward helping young people build alliances and see the interconnectedness between different areas of identity formation and cultural struggle.

Unfortunately, a discourse focusing on these democratic ideals was not as pronounced during the campus tour ritual as were the other two. Maximum public participation was encouraged, while discussions surrounding controversial moral issues were discouraged. The tour script acknowledges the multitude of campus enclaves available to students, yet commentary about the cultural struggle associated with the differing agendas of these diverse groups is avoided. For example, the Redskin debate was never mentioned; nor were certain issues—such as the effort on the part of the student newspaper, through a high-profile lawsuit, to force the university to release to the public students’ discipline records—discussed. Only discourse that is authentic to campus life at Miami was encouraged.

As the aforementioned rituals suggest, the tour rituals favor particular kinds of discourses (Carlson’s first and second discourses) while avoiding others. Ironically, when students arrive on campus, they immediately encounter cultural struggles and moral dilemmas. The tour images—a tranquil setting coupled with the cordial exchanges between students sitting on benches conversing politely—are a striking contrast

to the images one might encounter during the first week of classes (e.g., contentious debates regarding whether religiously affiliated student organizations should receive funding from student government) which showcase anger and divisive ideologies. Strategies that students employ to cope with these unsettling differences mirror the strategies Carlson articulates. Some students create communities of interest (e.g., students marginalized in the debate withdraw and form an enclave based on their values), whereas some students work hard to sustain the status quo by arguing that change will challenge traditions. Some students struggle to create communities of difference that embrace multicultural and democratic ideals. If these are the kinds of discourses that the university expects students will engage in once they arrive on campus, I cannot help but wonder why such discourses are not modeled during the little exchanges that occur during, for example, a campus tour.

### **Some Conclusions**

Rituals such as the campus tour work to create an idealized vision of the campus and its inhabitants. In particular, one of the tour's social agenda items is to introduce the idealized Miami student to prospective students. Thus, this particular cultural world, a cultural logic of sorts, is transmitted and the Miami Way is reified. Prospective students learn about the sanctification of certain practices and, for example, that history and tradition are sacred. Through participation in the tour rituals, students learn that these beliefs and values are normal. In essence, the campus tour does not just symbolize the Miami Way, it embodies it. Ironically, these normalizing rituals discourage students from self-reflection, which is an espoused institutional value.

This careful examination of the campus tour ritual enriches understanding of the importance of community, the multiple conceptualizations of community, the relationships between rituals and community, the ways that rituals are used to advance particular community agendas, and some of the influences of rituals. The tour description and analysis also reveal ways that prospective students are introduced to a particular academic community and the ways existing members transmit dominant cultural norms, values, and beliefs. Insights also emerged regarding moving from normalized communities to a discourse focusing on diversity and difference. While these revelations are most relevant to Miami University, the narrative and analysis invite a broader audience of scholars and practitioners interested in issues of community, ritual, and enacting multicultural, democratic ideals to generate their own meaning making. I conclude with some of my own meaning making, based on this undertaking, as I ruminate about these complex issues facing higher education in the next century.

Rituals, in particular interaction rituals, are powerful because they often are unspectacular, repetitive, and predictable. Too often rituals go unexamined, which sustains the status quo. Too often there is a

disconnection between policy (e.g., wanting a more diverse campus population) and the implicit messages rituals convey. Carefully analyzing rituals can reveal an institution's core values, a small but important step in closing the gap between what institutions say and what they do.

Analyzing rituals reveals the power of rituals. This allows one to begin to answer two important questions: "Whose interests are being served?" and "Whose interests are likely to be ignored?" Responses to these questions will illuminate the cultural center and margins, sociopolitical terrain that is of grave importance to those interested in symbolically communicating—via rituals—values such as community.

Often rituals are enacted to create a sense of community. Yet seldom is the question, "What do we mean by community?" asked or answered. National higher education trends such as larger and more complex campuses, more heterogeneous groups of students, the emergence of historically underrepresented ethnic groups on campus, diminished fiscal resources, and increased alcohol and drug usage necessitate regularly asking and answering this question, even if it has already been asked and answered. Moving beyond grand pronouncements that the academy embraces this notion of community to engage in substantive discussions that reveal the kinds of communities we want to create is a prudent course of action. Hopefully, such purposeful discussions will extend beyond traditional and safer conceptualizations that concentrate on locale and personal relationships to dialogue that acknowledges the politics of community and difference.

If higher education desires to enact democratic progressive ideals (Carlson 1994), examining existing rituals and tending to unsensational interaction rituals can be one way to achieve these aims. Such rituals would maximize public participation, providing room for divergent perspectives, and be sensitive to the concerns of all. Rituals should stand for something in the way of moral or ethical vision for the reconstruction of community (e.g., protecting minority rights and individual freedoms, equity, respect for difference). Rituals should open the borders that divide individuals into separate enclaves and help individuals build alliances and see the interconnections among different areas of identity formation.

### **A Final Thought**

My primary interest was to examine some of the institutional values that are so embedded in our community rhetoric and ritualistic behaviors that they go unexamined. In pursuing this quest, I studied a familiar staple in U.S. higher education, the campus tour, to clarify my thinking on this topic. My intent is not to "trash" the tour or criticize the message or the messenger. I suspect that if I were to analyze the ways I introduce students to our graduate department, similar criticisms would be noted. My intent is not to publicly criticize my Admission Office colleagues. My intention is to use a familiar context (the campus tour) to illuminate

the power of rituals and to bring greater clarity to what higher education means when it talks about community.

I have tried to refrain from the stereotypical (and sometimes warranted) characterization of academicians as perpetual critics and cynics, devoting energies exclusively to pointing out what is wrong with the other. I hope that an outcome of this study will be that it prompts us to reflect on all our actions, even the most routine. Engaging in reflective practice that leads to the incorporation of Carlson's four democratic ideas—inclusion, ethical behavior that respects minority and majority views, the formation of communities of interest that have permeable boundaries, and bringing to the surface cultural struggles that are imbedded in our rituals—will aid in higher education's never-ending quest for community.

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## Notes

1. Miami University is identified because of its unique and idiosyncratic campus ethos.

2. Opting for an interpretivist research orientation has less to do with practical or methodological appropriateness (i.e., the "best" way to learn about campus rituals in this particular setting would be to design and undertake a participant-observation study) and more to do with the congruence between my epistemological, ontological, and methodological beliefs and their compatibility with this interpretive-constructivist worldview.

3. For a more substantive discussion of these influences, see Denzin and Lincoln 1994 and Schwandt 1997.

4. Van Gennep defines rites of passage as "transitions from [bounded] group to group and from one social situation to the next. . . . For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally defined" (1960:3).

5. In 1997, *The Urban Review* dedicated an entire issue (volume 29, number 4) to the topic of ritual and education.

6. For an in-depth discussion of the distinction between Durkheim's and Turner's conceptualizations of ritual, see Richard Quantz's *School Ritual as Performance: A Postmodern Reconstruction of Durkheim's and Turner's Use of Ritual* (n.d.).

7. For a detailed discussion of the properties and functions of rituals, see McLaren 1993.

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