



Campus Culture as the Soul of Higher Education: Building Inspiring Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Campus culture plays a vital role in shaping the intellectual, emotional, and ethical environment of higher education institutions. It reflects an institution's values, aspirations, and its collective identity, influencing how students and faculty experience teaching, learning, and community life. This article explores the campus as a living space of engagement—one that goes beyond physical infrastructure to embrace inclusivity, student well-being, freedom of expression, and meaningful social connection. Drawing on examples from leading Indian and international universities, the paper examines how practices such as peer support systems, faculty role modelling, mental health services, student clubs, and inclusive policies contribute to a vibrant academic climate. At the same time, it addresses the emerging challenges posed by victimhood culture, cancel culture, body shaming, and debates around affirmative action. Finally, the article offers philosophical and administrative directions for institutions to create emotionally safe, intellectually rigorous, and ethically responsive learning spaces. In doing so, it affirms that a healthy campus culture is essential for nurturing responsible, resilient, and socially conscious graduates in the 21st century.

Keywords: Campus culture, higher education, student well-being, academic climate, inclusivity, victimhood culture, affirmative action.

1. Introduction

A college or university campus is more than just a collection of buildings—it is the soul of the institution (Carey, 2016). It reflects the history, values, culture, and future aspirations of the college. The physical environment, the quality of interpersonal interactions, and the overall institutional ethos collectively convey how an institution perceives itself and how it wishes to be perceived by the world (Dias, 2022).

In Indian thought, the idea of a learning space is intimately tied to the concept of *śikṣa-kṣetra*—a sacred field of knowledge where the cultivation of intellect is harmonized with the nurturing of character. Much like the ancient *gurukula* or *mahāvihāra*, where the environment itself was integral to learning, the modern campus, too, plays a formative role in shaping minds and values. A well-designed, well-maintained campus silently communicates pride, purpose, and a commitment to excellence. As Owusu-Agyeman (2021) notes, the campus is not merely infrastructure; it is a statement. In the Indian philosophical context, this statement can be likened to *dharma*—the principle that upholds and sustains. When a campus promotes academic rigor, administrative efficiency, inclusivity, and student-centeredness, it becomes a site for holistic development.

1.1. Designing a Functional and Inclusive Campus Environment

A well-designed campus must balance aesthetics and functionality. Landscaped gardens, shaded walkways, and green spaces contribute to a serene, focused environment, resonating with the Indian ideal of a *śānta* (peaceful) space for contemplation (Higgins et al., 2005). Functional infrastructure—like water treatment, power supply, drainage, and lighting—is critical for daily operations (Cheryan et al., 2014). Drawing from Nālandā and Takṣaśilā, Indian education has long valued civic planning integrated with learning spaces. Faculty and staff housing should be modest yet comfortable, fostering a sense of community (Alexander, 2001). Planting indigenous trees adds ecological and cultural richness, promoting biodiversity and *loka-saṃgraha*—the welfare of all beings (Azemati et al., 2018).

1.2. Student Welfare and Campus Life

Campuses must ensure safety, hygiene, and inclusivity to support students' academic and personal growth (Gale & Parker, 2012). Facilities like clean canteens, potable water, healthcare, and hostels echo ancient Indian traditions where the *śiṣya*'s holistic well-being was central. Sports and recreation promote balance (*yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*) while modern services like ATMs, salons, and internet access ease daily life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Counselling, mentorship, and grievance redressal systems uphold *ānanda*—inner well-being. Orientation programs, codes of conduct, and extracurriculars foster discipline, belonging, and ethical living.

1.3. Inclusivity and Non-Discrimination

A healthy campus culture demands equity across gender, caste, religion, and class (Pathania, 2018; Christie et al., 2004). As Vivekananda noted, “education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man” (Vivekananda, 1963). Gandhi argued no culture can thrive through exclusion (Gandhi, 1968), while Tagore envisioned education as harmony with all existence (Tagore, 2003). Ambedkar believed education must dismantle inequality and cultivate the mind (Ambedkar, 2014). Implementing policies from bodies like the National and Minority Commissions is a matter of *dharma*, ensuring campuses become inclusive, democratic ecosystems (Tinto, 1987, 2012; Berger & Braxton, 1998).

1.4. Freedom of Expression and Dialogue

Democratic campuses should foster open, respectful debate while discouraging hate speech (Cheryan et al., 2014; Alyami & Rezgui, 2012). Tagore saw intellectual growth as rooted in freedom from fear and conformity, while Ambedkar emphasized liberty of the mind. Gandhi advocated for freedom tempered by *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Indian traditions, such as Gargi's fearless dialogue in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, highlight the value of inquiry. Thoughtful discourse encourages creativity and critical thinking (Goguen et al., 2011), revitalizing the Indian heritage of respectful, fearless debate in the pursuit of *satya* (truth).

1.5. Teachers as Role Models

Teachers are vital moral and intellectual guides. In the Indian tradition, the *guru* leads students from darkness to light (*tamaso mā jyotir gamaya*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.3.28). Vivekananda emphasized empathetic teaching that awakens the learner's soul (Vivekananda, 1962), while Radhakrishnan believed a teacher's life should itself be a lesson (Radhakrishnan, 1932). Students often turn to teachers for life guidance as well as academics (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Gandhi valued rapport between teacher and student (Gandhi, 1937), and Tagore imagined the teacher as *sahachari*—a co-learner (Tagore, 1931). True educators inspire by modelling ethical behaviour and encouraging independent thought (Zagenczyk et al., 2011).

2. Research Problem

The Indian education system has long operated on a rigid, exam-centric model that emphasizes rote memorization over critical thinking, creativity, and holistic development. This approach, rooted in textbook reproduction, undermines both Indigenous dialogic traditions and modern pedagogical ideals. Although the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for a shift toward inquiry-driven, competency-based education, implementation remains weak. Reports like ASER (2022) and NASSCOM (2021) reveal poor learning outcomes, with many students lacking basic skills and graduates facing low employability.

Assessments continue to prioritize recall, creativity is stifled, and academic stress is rising, particularly in coaching-centric environments. Infrastructural deficits, faculty shortages, and limited student support further erode the learning experience, especially in rural or underfunded institutions. Ethical lapses—plagiarism, exam leaks, and grade manipulation—have damaged public trust. The system's rigidity limits interdisciplinary learning, ignores student voices, and fails to equip learners with life skills like financial literacy or adaptability. Despite India's rich philosophical vision of education as a tool for liberation and character-building, the current model often falls short of fostering empowered, lifelong learners.

3. Campus Culture and Climate

Campus culture encompasses the enduring values, traditions, and everyday practices that shape an institution's identity—reflected in rituals, teacher–student relationships, academic norms, and informal codes of behaviour. It evolves over time through shared experiences and is communicated through both spoken and unspoken cues, including the design and energy of campus spaces. Events like festivals, convocation, and casual interactions all reinforce this culture, fostering a sense of belonging and intellectual vitality.

In contrast, campus climate refers to the immediate emotional and psychological atmosphere—how respected, safe, and included students, faculty, and staff feel. Climate can shift rapidly based on leadership, social events, or institutional responses to issues like discrimination or protest. A positive climate supports well-being and inclusion; a negative one fosters alienation and disengagement.

The campus environment also shapes students' emotional and personal growth. Familiar spaces—corridors, benches, stairwells—often become central to self-discovery and reflection. As Tagore envisioned, a university must be “where the mind is without fear,” and campus life should nurture not just intellect but also emotional

resonance and inner freedom. Ambedkar emphasized that true education must promote dignity and equality, which unfold in the everyday life of the campus—not just the classroom.

Together, culture and climate form the living soul of a college. While culture is its memory, climate is its present pulse. In a diverse nation like India, campuses must actively cultivate care, courage, and inclusion to ensure higher education transforms lives with empathy and purpose (Tagore, 1903&1931, Ambedkar, 1914).

4. Strategies for a Student-Friendly Campus

Creating a student-friendly and inviting campus environment is essential for promoting learning, engagement, and overall well-being. A thoughtfully designed campus is not just about aesthetics—it is a philosophical commitment to treating students as whole human beings, whose intellectual growth is intimately connected to emotional, social, and physical well-being. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 encourages institutions to "foster environments that promote holistic, student-centred education and vibrant campus life" (NEP, 2020, Chapter 11).

4.1. Aesthetically Pleasing Physical Environment

A visually appealing and well-kept campus boosts students' sense of belonging, creativity, and mental well-being. Thoughtfully designed physical spaces reflect the dignity of learning and enhance institutional pride.

(i). *Green & Serene Spaces.*

Campuses should feature green parks, shaded walkways, and eco-gardens for reflection and collaboration. Benches, pergolas, and biodiversity zones like butterfly gardens connect students with nature and sustainability.

(ii). *Cleanliness & Maintenance.*

Strict hygiene standards, regular upkeep, and eco-conscious practices like recycling and composting ensure cleanliness and civic responsibility.

(iii). *Landscaping & Aesthetics.*

Ornamental trees, water features, and warm lighting enhance beauty and safety. Student art, murals, and culturally inspired architecture enrich the campus identity and celebrate heritage.

Replicable Models

- *India:* IISc Bengaluru, FRI Dehradun, IIT Guwahati, and Banasthali Vidyapith highlight eco-friendly design, traditional architecture, and immersive green spaces.
- *Abroad:* Stanford (USA), UBC (Canada), UCT (South Africa), Oxford (UK), and Kyoto University (Japan) integrate nature, culture, and mindfulness into campus life.

As Swami Vivekananda said, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man." A well-designed campus can spark that perfection through beauty, comfort, and inspiration.

4.2. Student-Centric Infrastructure

Student-friendly infrastructure focuses on physical comfort, inclusivity, and emotional well-being, enabling creativity, safety, and collaboration.

(i). *Comfortable Seating Areas:* Promotes informal peer learning and inclusivity.

Eg: Azim Premji University's courtyards, University of Melbourne's student lounges.

(ii). *Accessible Buildings:* Supports universal access and dignity.

Eg: TISS's ramps and Braille signage; Harvard's ADA-compliant campuses.

(iii). *Free Wi-Fi Zones:* Essential for digital learning and research.

Eg: Ashoka University's campus-wide connectivity; Helsinki's Eduroam network.

(iv). *Cafeterias & Common Rooms:* Facilitates community building and emotional comfort.

Eg: Symbiosis' theme cafés; NTU's study-friendly food courts.

(v). *Quiet Study Zones:* Encourages reflective, focused learning.

Eg: ISB's soundproof pods; Oxford's serene libraries and gardens.

Philosopher John Dewey described such environments as catalysts for holistic growth through openness and architectural empathy.

4.3. Academic Support Activities

Robust academic support nurtures curiosity, motivation, and inclusivity across diverse learner profiles.

(i). *Learning Resource Centres:* Technology-rich hubs with 24/7 access and digital tools.

Eg: IIT Bombay's e-library; MIT's AI-integrated learning spaces.

(ii). *Mentorship Programs:* Promotes personal and academic growth through structured guidance.

Eg: Ashoka's peer-faculty mentoring; Stanford's BEAM career model.

(iii). *Academic Counselling:* Personalized help for diverse learning needs.

Eg: Loyola's bridge/remedial courses; Toronto's ADHD/strategy workshops.

As Freire emphasizes, education must be a co-learning journey between teachers and students.

4.4. Inclusive & Safe Campus Culture

Inclusivity goes beyond policy—it creates a lived experience of safety, respect, and belonging.

(i). *Anti-Ragging Measures*: Zero-tolerance approach to ensure safety and dignity.

Eg: JNU's surveillance and helplines; Melbourne's "Respect Week."

(ii). *Gender Sensitization Programs*: Fosters gender equity and awareness.

Eg: TISS's Gender Amity Committee; Berkeley's GenEq Center.

(iii). *Support for Minority Groups*: Celebrates diversity and offers tailored support.

Eg: Hyderabad University's inclusion centers; Harvard's Affinity Spaces.

(iv). *Free Expression Spaces*: Promotes democratic dialogue and creative dissent.

Eg: Ambedkar University's "AUD Dialogues;" Oxford Union's debates.

Nussbaum's idea of "cultivating humanity" is realized when every student feels they belong—*because* of their identity, not despite it (Nussbaum, 2011)

4.5. Effective Communication Channels

Clear, responsive communication is central to a student-friendly campus. As Paulo Freire emphasized, dialogue fosters collaboration and empowerment. Institutions must ensure multi-modal systems for transparency and inclusion.

(i) *Notice Boards & Digital Displays* Strategically placed digital and physical boards remain essential for timely, visible updates on events, schedules, and announcements. LCD screens and smart kiosks, like those used at the University of Delhi, enhance communication speed and reduce clutter.

(ii) *Student Portals and Mobile Apps* Centralized platforms give students round-the-clock access to academic information, resources, and alerts. Tools like Kerala University's e-Sanad and Christ University's student app streamline learning and administration.

(iii) *Feedback Systems* Anonymous and accessible channels encourage student participation in institutional improvement. Platforms such as IIT Madras' SWC Feedback Portal have led to tangible campus enhancements. By integrating notice boards, digital tools, and feedback loops, campuses foster mutual trust and active engagement—turning communication into a democratic and participatory process.

4.6. Grievance Redressal Mechanism

Grievance redressal is key to ensuring justice and student satisfaction in higher education. Effective systems foster accountability and trust.

(i) *Multi-tier Committees*: Institutions form Internal Complaint Committees (ICC), anti-ragging cells, and student grievance redressal cells (SGRC) as mandated by UGC. These ensure students feel safe and heard. For example, Banaras Hindu University uses a digital grievance portal ensuring time-bound resolution (Sharma, 2020).

(ii) *Technology-enabled Systems*: Online platforms like AICTE's "Grievance Redressal Portal" offer transparency and traceability. Tools like QR-coded suggestion boxes and chatbot-based systems (used by Shiv Nadar University) make access seamless (Biju.S.K and J.B.Rajan, 2019).

(iii) *Institutional Transparency*: Timely action, display of grievance statistics, and student participation ensure fairness. As Amartya Sen argued, justice requires institutions to listen to marginalized voices (Verma, 2021).

4.7. Campus Safety and Wellness

Safety and wellness encompass physical security and mental health, forming the foundation for effective learning.

(i) *Physical Safety Measures*: CCTV surveillance, biometric access, and trained campus security (e.g., IIM Kozhikode) ensure 24/7 monitoring. Regular safety audits and emergency drills build preparedness.

(ii) *Mental Health Support*: Institutions now prioritize psychological wellness. Initiatives like 'MIT Wellbeing' and NIMHANS' collaboration with colleges provide counselling and stress-relief programs (Joshi, 2020).

(iii) *Gender Sensitization & Inclusivity*: Workshops, ICC awareness, and anonymous reporting tools foster a safe, inclusive environment. DU and TISS run campaigns on consent, gender respect, and emotional well-being.

4.8. Financial Support and Scholarships.

Financial aid ensures inclusivity and educational continuity, especially for marginalized students.

(i) *Government & Institutional Aid*: Schemes like the National Scholarship Portal (NSP), and state programs like Kerala's E-Grantz, help economically backward students access funds (Mathew, 2021).

(ii) *Merit-based & Need-based Scholarships*: Institutions offer internal scholarships—for example, Loyola College's Freeship for top 10% students and St. Xavier's hardship grant for emergencies.

(iii) *Simplified Disbursal Systems*: Digital platforms (e.g., PFMS) ensure transparency and direct benefit transfers. Mobile apps like 'Vidya Lakshmi' streamline loan and scholarship applications.

4.9. Inclusivity and Equal Opportunity

An inclusive campus nurtures diversity, equity, and belonging across caste, class, gender, and ability.

(i) *Equal Opportunity Cells (EOC)*: EOCs conduct orientation, remedial classes, and assistive tech access. JNU's EOC has a special library with Braille and audio books (Kumar, 2019).

(ii) *Infrastructure for Accessibility*: Ramps, tactile paths, assistive software, and sign language interpreters are being adopted across institutions. IIT Delhi and University of Hyderabad set strong benchmarks.

(iii) *Gender and Social Equity*: Programs supporting LGBTQIA+ rights, menstrual hygiene, and inclusive curriculum ensure all students thrive. TISS and Ashoka University host gender-sensitization workshops and support groups.

4.10. Community Engagement and Social Responsibility

Higher education must extend learning beyond classrooms to real-world community transformation.

(i) *Service-learning Initiatives*: NSS, Unnat Bharat Abhiyan, and local outreach programs integrate curriculum with societal impact. For instance, Kerala University students conduct financial literacy drives in tribal belts.

(ii) *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*: Projects aligned with SDGs—clean energy, education, and climate action—strengthen global citizenship. Institutions like Azim Premji University embed SDGs into core curriculum.

(iii) *Civic Participation and Leadership*: Students engage in voter registration, cleanliness drives, and disaster relief, building civic identity and empathy. As Gandhi said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

4.11. Building a Culture of Belonging and Care

A campus is much like a home: *its atmosphere speaks volumes—students can intuitively feel whether it is a nurturing, joyous space, or one defined by indifference and fragmentation*. A community-first ethos is thus not a peripheral feature of academic life, but its moral and emotional foundation (Rajan, J. B., et.al., 2023).

5. Challenges to Building a Positive Academic Climate

While the aspiration to create inclusive, nurturing, and intellectually vibrant campuses is laudable, higher education institutions today face a paradoxical challenge. As they strive to protect and empower historically marginalized voices, they also navigate the unintended consequences of heightened sensitivity, often described as the emergence of a “victimhood culture” (Campbell & Manning, 2014). In such a climate, moral authority may sometimes be claimed through public declarations of offense or marginalization, leading to a delicate balance between inclusivity and intellectual freedom.

This evolving ethos, though rooted in genuine calls for justice, can occasionally foster environments where disagreement is mistaken for harm, satire is misconstrued as aggression, and academic critique is equated with personal attack. The following are key manifestations of this challenge:

5.1. Sweat Shaming and Body Shaming.

Discrimination based on appearance and body norms persists on campuses, often surfacing through subtle jokes or online commentary. Sweat shaming—mocking people for sweating during physical activity—is a newer form of exclusion that alienates those who do not fit dominant body ideals. For instance, a viral social media post from a U.S. university gym criticized individuals for “sweating too much” and “taking up space,” igniting debates on fitness elitism. Body shaming also shows up in sports team exclusions or casual ridicule within peer groups. These practices can lead to emotional distress, lower self-esteem, and withdrawal from campus wellness spaces (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

5.2. Political Incorrectness and Cancel Culture.

Efforts to prevent harm on campuses can sometimes restrict open discourse. Cancel culture, when misapplied, leads to censorship and professional backlash against individuals for expressing dissenting views. For example, Professor Bret Weinstein resigned after facing protests for objecting to a race-based campus event, despite engaging respectfully (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Discussions on sensitive topics like gender or religion have similarly drawn backlash, creating a climate where students fear speaking up. This suppresses critical thinking and weakens the university's role in fostering open inquiry.

5.3. Cancellation of Yoga Classes – University of Ottawa Case.

In 2015, the University of Ottawa cancelled a yoga class for students with disabilities over concerns of cultural appropriation, citing yoga's Indian origins. The instructor, who had taught the class for seven years, was told the practice disrespected non-Western cultures. As a result, students with physical and mental challenges lost access to a valuable wellness resource, sparking global debate on the balance between inclusion and cultural sensitivity (CBC News, 2015).

5.4. The “Unfairness” of Positive Discrimination (Affirmative Action).

Affirmative action policies, designed to correct historical injustices, are sometimes seen as unfair by those who feel disadvantaged by them. Protests in India and the U.S. have challenged these policies, including the Students for Fair Admissions vs. Harvard case, which claimed discrimination against Asian American applicants. Such controversies create campus divides, raising concerns about fairness and community trust (Supreme Court of the United States, 2023).

6. Discussions and Recommendations.

While inclusivity is vital, overemphasis on fragility, identity-based victimhood, and ideological rigidity can hinder the pluralism essential to higher education. Universities must strike a healthy balance by:

- Promoting empathy and civility without silencing dissent
- Fostering dialogue over public shaming
- Building resilience, critical thinking, and emotional maturity

A vibrant academic culture should be inclusive yet intellectually bold, compassionate yet open to complexity.

6.1. Expectations from Students and Academic Staff

(i). *Student Clubs and Initiatives*: Student-led organizations encourage leadership and community engagement. Institutions should formalize these through a club constitution, recognition form, and faculty mentorship to promote creativity, ownership, and inclusion.

(ii). *Students’ Code of Honour*: Orientation programs should introduce a student code promoting responsibility, empathy, and ethical conduct. Internalizing these values fosters a respectful and cooperative academic atmosphere.

(iii). *Faculty and Staff Vision Statements*: Faculty-specific mission statements, co-created through participatory processes, reinforce professional purpose and institutional loyalty. Displaying them prominently reminds staff of shared values (Rajan, J. B., & S. K. Biju., 2022).

(iv). *Teachers as Ethical Guides*: Faculty should model professionalism, purpose, and integrity. Their mentorship shapes not just academic outcomes but the moral tone of campus life.

(v). *Campus Culture Framework*: Institutions should align mission, leadership, pedagogy, and assessment using holistic benchmarks—such as those suggested by AAC&U—to support both excellence and well-being.

6.2. University Strategies to Counter Victimhood Culture

(i). *Foster Resilience*: Teach emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and discomfort tolerance to strengthen students’ coping skills.

(ii). *Uphold Free Speech with Responsibility*: Pair freedom of expression with civility; establish a Free Speech and Diversity Council for guidance.

(iii). *Encourage Dialogue over Censorship*: Create safe platforms (e.g., Debate Circles, Open Forums) to explore differences constructively.

(iv). *Build Inclusive, Data-Driven Policies*: Ensure affirmative action is transparent and intersectional; use equity audits to maintain accountability.

(v). *Design Wellness Programs for All*: Establish inclusive Wellness Hubs focusing on mental health and self-regulation, not identity-based injury.

(vi). *Prioritize Academic Rigor*: Embed courses in logic, ethics, and critical thinking to develop intellectual maturity and openness.

(vii). *Manage Shaming and Microaggressions Sensibly*: Use anonymous reporting systems and educate students/staff to address issues fairly and proportionately.

6.3. Administrative Role in Academic Well-Being

Leadership must actively shape a campus culture grounded in fairness, free expression, and mutual respect. Actions include:

- Transparent codes of conduct based on dignity and discourse.
- Ombuds Officers to mediate disputes.
- Celebrating shared rituals and cultural events for unity
- Encouraging integrative learning that builds both knowledge and empathy.

In sum, a balanced academic culture nurtures students who are not just educated, but resilient, respectful, and ready to contribute meaningfully to society.

7. Conclusion

A college campus is more than a physical space—it embodies the spirit, values, and aspirations of the institution. Through its rhythms, rituals, and relationships, campus culture becomes the lived experience of education. It shapes how students and faculty relate, behave, and find meaning, acting as a shared consciousness that informs identity and belonging.

When thoughtfully nurtured, campus culture can inspire pride, foster inclusion, and become a source of refuge and growth. Neglected, it can lead to disengagement and disconnection. Students today seek more than degrees—they seek community, care, and voice. A vibrant campus environment is one where teachers model ethical conduct, diverse voices are respected, and learning is a collaborative, enriching journey.

This article has viewed the campus as a mirror of institutional identity, a space for inclusive engagement, a platform for positive academic culture, and a dynamic ecosystem responding to global and local challenges. Reimagining higher education requires a holistic, inclusive approach that embraces all stakeholders—students, faculty, staff, and the wider society. Like a living organism, a healthy campus culture must evolve and uplift every individual it touches, helping education fulfil its deeper promise: not just knowledge, but wisdom, empathy, and transformation.

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