

# VIEWS FROM CAMPUS

## These Walls Will Talk: Diplomas and the Stories They Tell

*Ricardo Montelongo suggests that creating a thoughtful diploma wall can encourage student engagement and motivation.*

By Ricardo Montelongo

**P**ACKING DIPLOMAS FOR AN OFFICE MOVE should be a relatively simple and quick task—or so I thought. I invited Ruth, my student worker of over two years at my previous institution, to help pack my office belongings when I was offered a faculty position at another campus. I requested her assistance so that we could spend time together before I left. As a final task, I asked Ruth to take down my diplomas from a wall. Immediately, I noticed how she handled each with great care: fresh newspaper for wrapping, corners tucked tightly, crisp edges. After a good hour or so, the task was completed. Once Ruth was done, she looked at the wrapped diplomas and solemnly said after a brief pause, “Dr. Ric, I’m sure going to miss seeing these every day.”

Ruth’s comment intrigued me. Her emotions concerning my move were not placed on me, but instead placed onto objects that meant a great deal to her: My diplomas. In subsequent conversations, I found out she admired my diplomas whenever she visited my office. Seeing them in their frames gave her motivation to one day achieve the same level of success where similar frames would be placed in her own office. Ruth’s educational ambitions highlight the idea that offices are more than places where work occurs; they are places where ideas live and grow.



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Like habitats that sustain life for a specific species, Jonah Berger and Chip Heath in their 2005 study for *Cognitive Science* found ideas thrive in environments where there is an abundance of cues that nurture their development and growth. Berger and Heath noticed how environments encouraged thought and action. They used this metaphor of habitats to understand the

successful transmission and recall of ideas within a social environment. Our offices are akin to habitats in that personal items placed throughout our workspace communicate our interests and beliefs. Thus, offices are compelling spaces where we can promote student engagement and success.

## Diploma Walls, Office Habitats, and Environmental Cues

**AS EDUCATORS, WE DIRECTLY AFFECT** students through our support, teaching, and guidance. While this occurs through our personal interactions, I believe there is another way we affect students—through environmental cues. Pictures, knickknacks, and mementos placed throughout our offices have the potential to do more than provide décor for our workspace. Offices quite effectively become extensions of who we are and what we value in education.

For example, in my office, photographs document my educational and professional development. Artwork represents my cultural identity. Posters express my aspirations for learning and diversity. In sum, almost every item encourages students to learn more about me. This includes the area where I display my educational and professional credentials—my diploma wall.

Michael Cuyjet believes campus environments “evoke nonverbal interpretations in members of the community” (p. 40). While he specifically identified campus buildings and offices as part of this environment, Carney Strange and James Banning expand this idea to also include artwork, statues, portraits, and building names. In total, these items symbolically influence feelings of membership and identity within a campus setting. Even the smallest

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visual cue present on a campus or in an office can provide some type of nonverbal social message to students.

When we display our diplomas, they become more than part the expected office décor. They connect students to thoughts and behaviors we believe are needed for college success. When Ruth made her earlier comment, I left my office that day knowing I had a mission to understand better how the space displaying our diplomas can inform, influence, and inspire.

## My Diploma Wall

**MY DIPLOMA WALL SYMBOLIZES** what Cuyjet calls the reality of my educational experience, which for me involves success as well as hardship. In what first appears very simple and straightforward, my diploma wall is a symbolic response to a seventh-grade event. My school at that time used reading circles to match a

student’s reading ability. Placement in a circle involved reciting orally a passage from a book. Despite my love of reading, pronunciation of words was difficult for me, and I often coped by mumbling and speaking softly. When I was subsequently placed in the lowest level reading circle, I saw this as an upsetting experience where I was denied educational opportunity. From that point forward, I did not settle on the minimum expected from me in school, and my doctorate diploma symbolizes this resiliency. I encourage

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my students to do the same, especially if their educational reality includes similar experiences where self-doubt emerges.

The additional items surrounding my diplomas signify elements of my success. ACPA College Educators International has provided a strong network of colleagues that have become *mi familia*. My professional work family in ACPA’s Latinx Network has provided support and leadership crucial toward my educational and career goals. I consider the plaques surrounding my diploma as offspring to my doctorate diploma. They remind students that success is not achieved alone and that professional networking is a key once the diploma is earned. Students learn that outside my role as faculty, I am involved professionally in my field.

The last item on my wall is an image of ecumenical chapel from the institution where I earned my doctorate. Symbolically, the chapel represents a very spiritual time

of my life. In the final year of my dissertation, my father was diagnosed with cancer. The disease worked fast and he passed away before my final defense. Students sometimes ask why I have a picture of a chapel under my diploma. As I explain it, the chapel, with its simple structure and peaceful surroundings, serves as a daily symbolic and personal cue to remain calm and at ease no matter what life throws our way—now and in the future.

## The Symbolic Power of Diplomas

**DIPLOMA WALLS, LIKE MINE**, also imply what Cuyjet describes as the “character of the institution” where students begin recognize who is represented in the campus support services and how their issues are addressed (p. 42). The diploma signifies not only academic achievement but also personal stories describing hardships and commitment to reach a goal. The symbolic power diplomas possess to share our achievements, as well as our challenges and hurdles. As stated by Cuyjet earlier, the smallest visual cue can provide some type of nonverbal social message to students, including sense of belonging for campus members from diverse populations. From the mid- to the late-1990s, higher education studies by Sybril Bennett, Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes, and Caroline Turner described the college experiences for underrepresented students using campus environmental cues as critical reference points.

With some creative thought and effort, you can intentionally turn your diploma into an effective environmental cue. Thus, the first step is to display your diploma prominently in the workspace where your story can have an impact. As Ruth affirmed, students find motivation within your office, and they achieve this is by inspecting your office habitat. The diploma wall is an important part and, therefore, should be in a highly visible spot that encourages interest and interaction. If significant events and individuals are part of your story, adding these visual reminders provide attention-grabbing details. I find this part of diploma walls fascinating since they provide rich symbolism to our diplomas.

I realize not everyone displays their diplomas at their office, choosing to hang them at home. The same impact of environmental cues can still carry over to that location as well. As an online instructor who interacts

with students virtually through video from my home office, I created another diploma wall where students see not only my bachelors and master’s diplomas in my videos but also cues identifying the schools I have attended and achievements as recreational runner. Having a diploma wall is not limited to a campus office; any wall space can be devoted to represent your professional journey and what you value in education. I feel that Berger and Heath’s habitat is all encompassing; the diploma wall is just one specific part. All areas in your office can be used to provide a message.

Students see these images and prompts every day—when they visit a faculty member during office hours, discussing degree plans with an academic advisor, even during a conduct hearing in the Dean of Students office. Our challenge is to make diploma walls do more than give evidence of our expertise; they should symbolically present our story. Which brings me back to Ruth. I am proud to say that she graduated and is currently exploring a career in higher education. I would like to think her success was partly influenced by being in the presence of my diploma wall. Ruth helped me realize that my office was more than just a workspace; for her, I provided a home where aspirations and goals were nourished and grown.

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