

PLANNING STORY

Tell Us What You Think

Smith College Drafted Its Master Landscape Plan Through Robust Stakeholder Engagement

by Signe Nielsen, BS, BA, RLA, FASLA

More than 1,600 students and alumnae provided input through online mapping tools and in-person workshops. Staff and faculty were interviewed in person and via phone. And Instagram was used to reach 6,400 members of the campus community.

Smith College, founded in 1871 and encompassing 147 acres in Northampton, Massachusetts, has a long history with landscape, which stems from its status as a Level III arboretum and having a renowned botanic garden and landscape studies program. As external and internal pressures related to climate change and sociocultural concerns have escalated in the last decade, the college decided to assess how these issues would affect the campus over the next 20 years. It took steps to launch a landscape master plan initiative.

A 2017 *Report of the Smith College Study Group on Climate Change* set the stage for a new plan. Its recommendations included using the campus as a classroom, closing the gap between the “learned” and “lived” experiences of students, in which sustainability

3 TAKEAWAYS . . .

. . . to Connect with Stakeholders Wherever They Are

1. **Use phone interviews to access faculty and administrators** who are unable to meet in person.
2. **Reach a broad audience through online tools** such as Instagram and interactive portals.
3. **Connect with students through in-class presentations, group activities, and anonymous interaction.**

would become the new norm, and “developing a new campus landscape master plan promoting use of the physical campus to demonstrate best practices in ecological management and climate change.”¹ Believing these aspirations to be targeted and achievable, they were closely aligned with the college’s mission statement:

“Smith College educates women of promise for lives of distinction and purpose. A college for and of the world, Smith links the power of the liberal arts to excellence in research and scholarship, thereby developing engaged global citizens and leaders to address society’s challenges.”

In 2019, Smith’s Landscape Master Plan (LMP) Committee began the planning process by soliciting proposals from landscape architecture firms. This article’s author’s firm, MNLA (formerly known as Mathews Nielsen), was awarded the commission. Typically, many initiatives that impact a broad spectrum of a campus community seek affirmation from stakeholders—administrators, staff, faculty, students, and alumnae—before being enacted, but the firm decided to take a different approach. We took this model a step further and asked ourselves: “What are ways to craft a meaningful stakeholder engagement process at the outset that will lead to optimal success?” We acted on the answers.

This article provides a case study of how robust and sustained stakeholder engagement guided the outcomes of our firm’s resulting LMP, published by Smith in 2021.

1. *Report of the Smith College Study Group on Climate Change*, 2017, 30.

Figure 1 The existing campus plan included a question to solicit participant input.

HOW DO YOU EXPERIENCE SMITH LANDSCAPE?



Image credit: MNLA

What is a Landscape Master Plan?

LMPs are uncommon. Normally, future planning for a campus landscape is folded into a comprehensive facilities master plan that addresses physical expansion, siting new buildings, additional parking lots, and other built elements. However, when Smith began considering a new LMP it had no immediate plans for campus expansion or alterations. Therefore, the LMP Committee set clear goals for a

future-focused plan that would guide its landscape development while balancing aspirations with pragmatism. The committee comprised 12 members—two current students, five faculty members, and five administrators—in addition to two of the college’s senior cabinet sponsors. Those members remained actively engaged throughout our 18-month plan development process.

The goals of the committee evolved into four foundational themes that directed research, planning, and implementation to improve outcomes within the framework of an “Adaptive, Inclusive, Connected, and Educational landscape.” The themes were not siloed, however. For example, the acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples became a topic that comingled several themes, exemplifying the intentional overlap and interpretation of the four focuses throughout.

Figure 2 **Four foundational themes—Adaptive, Inclusive, Educational, and Connected—underpinned all phases of the Landscape Master Plan.**

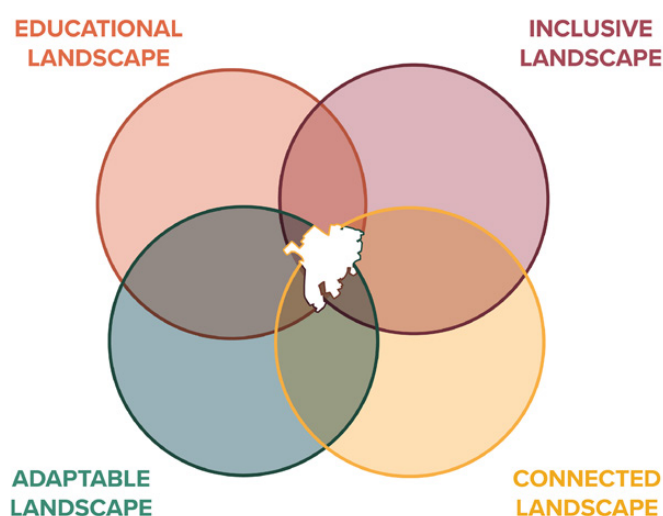


Image credit: MNLA

In the absence of imminent building plans and thorny topics related to such initiatives, we developed the resulting LMP as a deliberately adaptive tool. It offered a wide-reaching, action-based framework supported by performance goals and guidelines, as opposed to project-based designs.

“Most importantly, this landscape master plan shows the way toward a campus that extends the ideals of equity of experience and a sense of belongingness into every corner of our shared physical space,” observed several college officials in their Executive Summary Letter.²

Defining the Planning Process

Working in close consultation with the LMP Committee, MNLA outlined a schedule of engagement to inform the process of research, analysis, and development of implementation guidelines. The first step was to translate the LMP principles into a set of actionable steps used to identify appropriate participants. For example, “promote use of the landscape in teaching, learning, and scholarship, making its processes visible and legible” suggested that faculty and student voices needed to be heard to understand how the campus was currently being used and what untapped resources could be explored.

2. MNLA, “Executive Summary Cover Letter by Michael Thurston, provost and dean of faculty, and David DeSwert, vice president for finance and administration,” *Smith College Landscape Master Plan 1*: 3 (2022).

Figure 3 **An example engagement tool allowed stakeholders to participate without attending in-person events.**

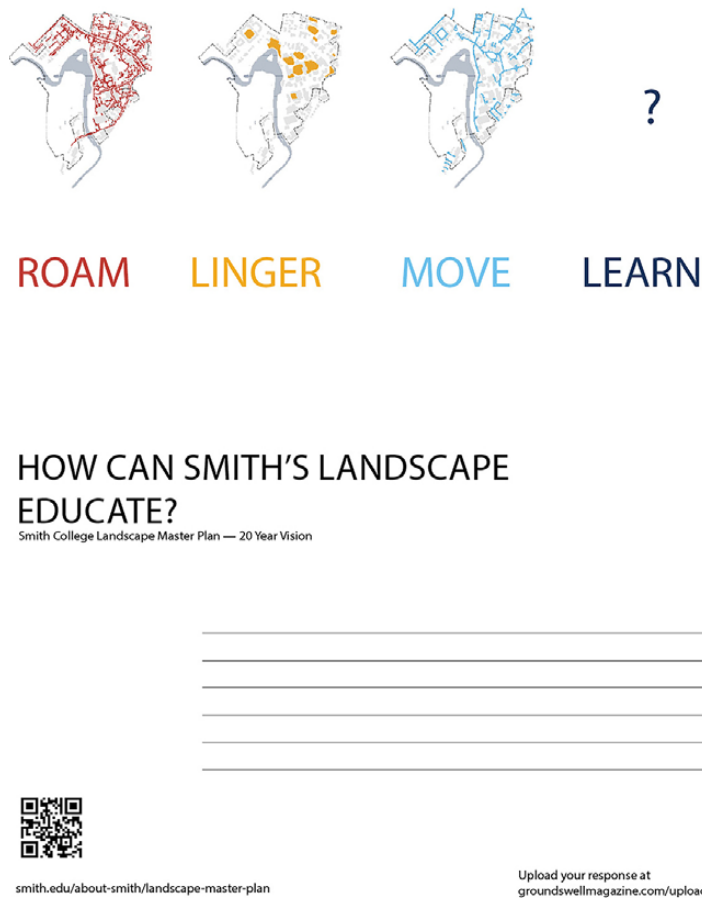


Image credit: MNLA

Our conversations with grounds personnel yielded an understanding of the staff's capacity to maintain innovative landscape transformations. Another principle, "protect, steward, and enhance Smith's historic campus, the botanic garden and arboretum, and distinctive spaces vital to the college's identity and traditions," meant gleaning alumnae perceptions as well as those of administrators and staff, all of whom were actively engaged with managing the special campus landscape features. There is a "culture of consultation and involvement," said an

LMP Committee co-chair. "They have become an expectation. The campus is deeply tied to the sense of identity of the institution. You don't go messing with this without significant engagement."³

Figure 4 **Future maintenance of the landscape as it adapts to effects of climate change was discussed with grounds and botanic garden personnel.**



Image credit: MNLA

Next, MNLA created an engagement schedule tailored to the college's academic calendar so meetings and events would circumvent vacation and exam periods. With guidance from the committee, we identified key members of the campus community whose voices were essential, and activities for each group were crafted to solicit information efficiently. From the outset, the engagement process was envisioned to occur in three steps during the "Discovery, Vision, and Implementation" phases of the LMP. Discovery

3. Interview with Dano Weisbord, Smith College's former associate vice president for campus planning and sustainability, and co-chair of the Landscape Master Plan Committee, by Jonathan Lerner, June 30, 2022.

involved a deep dive into all aspects of Smith’s natural and physical environment that was coupled with perceptions of the landscape provided by the entire campus community. Vision offered a spectrum of specific designs for significant places on campus on a scale from “light to moderate to intense” landscape transformations. Implementation synthesized Discovery and Vision into a set of guiding principles to adapt and manage the landscape in the face of climate change effects and cultural evolution over the next two decades. Resulting input informed the deliverables so thoroughly and definitively that the final product was endorsed by the college administration and the Board of Trustees.

Figure 5 **Outreach to students in places they regularly met helped bring more participants to the table.**



Image credit: MNLA

Goals of Engagement Informed Outcomes

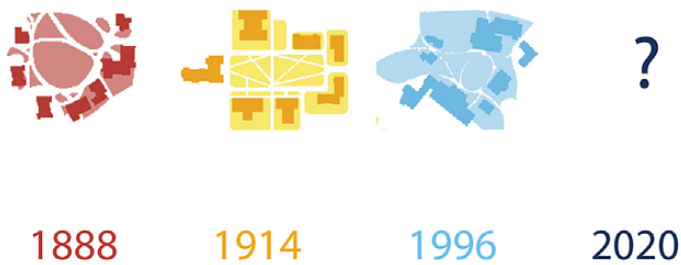
“Engagement” is a term with multiple meanings and, therefore, outcomes. Given the LMP Committee’s

request for robust dialogue with the campus community, we identified four tracks for the information-gathering process during that phase and captured the outcomes:

1. **Educate and inform:** Create visual tools to enable participants to grasp what an LMP is and its merit to administrators, staff, students, and alumnae. *The outcome was a greater understanding of the value and potential of the landscape to respond to environmental change and learning opportunities.*
2. **Invite input and perceptions:** Ask provocative questions and provide interactive tools for campus members to optimally articulate needs and aspirations as well as preferences and dislikes. *Outcomes ranged from interactive maps highlighting places on campus that felt unwelcoming, to collages illustrating what would make outdoor spaces more accessible, to thumbs-up/thumbs-down sticky notes on design alternatives.*
3. **Provide space for different opinions:** Facilitate conversations (in-person or virtual) to understand where there are differences of opinion and how these could be accommodated. *Outcomes included intense dialogue around potential changes to iconic views, parking relocation, and campus lighting.*
4. **Manifest results of a transparent process:** Leverage *Groundswell Magazine*, an online publication MNLA developed pre-pandemic, to summarize the findings from the Discovery phase and those phases that followed. Use Instagram to keep the community apprised so that participants were able to readily see

their contributions and how those influenced the resulting LMP phases. *Outcomes varied from passive appreciation of the evolving process to active, on-going input, to published summaries and results.*

Figure 6 A postcard posing a provocative question was distributed to stakeholders; responses were uploaded to *Groundswell Magazine*.



HOW CAN SMITH'S LANDSCAPE BE INCLUSIVE?

Smith College Landscape Master Plan — 20 Year Vision



smith.edu/about-smith/landscape-master-plan

Upload your response at
groundswellmagazine.com/upload

Image credit: MNLA

Grounds for Change: Tools of Engagement

For the most part, faculty, staff, and administrators contributed their input to the engagement process

verbally, in conversations, or through written comments. Students were the challenge. Therefore, MNLA devised a variety of tools that offered participants opportunities to engage anonymously, individually in person or in group activities.

Student-directed: During the Discovery phase of information gathering, a group of Smith students engaged fellow students and faculty members in conversations about the LMP, inviting them to share their experience online. Through in-class presentations, tabling sessions, and house meetings, they interacted with approximately 140 Smith community members. One of those students, Greta Mundt, astutely commented on the educational value of the outreach itself: “People had strong opinions about this place where we live and learn but hadn’t always realized that there were changes that could be made, or what kind of thought would go into them.”

Figure 7 Students led in-person engagement in the campus center to answer questions about the Landscape Master Plan’s purpose, process, and value.



Image credit: MNLA

“What are ways to craft a meaningful stakeholder engagement process at the outset that will lead to optimal success?”

In-person mapping: To understand how the campus landscape is experienced today, MNLA created a series of large site analysis maps associated with provocative questions. Some examples of questions:

- What parts of the campus feel welcoming or unwelcoming to you?
- What views of the campus and natural context inspire you?
- Which environmental impact would you like Smith’s landscape to address?

Answers were posted in a central campus location over a period of three days. Stickers associated with map legends were provided to capture input from the campus community. These crowd-sourced data points formed the basis for experiential maps that revealed patterns of use and perceptions of various landscape elements.

Collaging sessions: To identify the aspirations and values that Smith students, faculty, and staff prioritize when thinking about the future of the campus landscape, we set up open-to-all collaging sessions and invited the participants to create visions for spaces on campus. MNLA provided a wide array of cutouts of campus improvements from which students could select elements that best fit their visions. The toolkit included seating, tables, trees, and lighting.

This activity was particularly useful for students who preferred activities rather than speaking, and revealed some unexpected outcomes. “We came to understand the desire for what I think of as ‘neighborhood hubs’ and for increased and movable seating, the idea that individuals should get a degree of autonomy in altering their experiences,” said an LMP Committee co-chair.⁴

Figure 8 Students engaged in collaging activities by using cutouts of elements to make the landscape more inviting.



Image credit: MNLA

Postcards: To allow students to take more considered time thinking about their priorities for Smith’s future landscape, we created a postcard series, each postcard focused on one of the foundational themes. “How can Smith’s landscape be more inclusive?” yielded comments ranging from expanding accessible routes

4. Interview with Tim Johnson, director of Smith College Botanic Garden and co-chair of the Landscape Master Plan Committee, by Jonathan Lerner, July 6, 2022.

to recognizing Indigenous heritage. Responses to the question “How can Smith’s landscape adapt to climate change?” ranged from modest suggestions related to grounds maintenance to “It is imperative that Smith be an example of forward-looking, climate-aware practices.” Students could take the postcard home, fill it out, and upload a photo of it to *Groundswell Magazine*.

Groundswell Magazine: This online, interactive publication ensured that students, faculty, staff,

and alumnae remained engaged and informed. Each phase of the project was summarized in a new issue. Issue 1 featured results of the Discovery phase and was illustrated with site analysis maps and associated online surveys and interactive maps. Issue 2 synthesized responses to design options from the Vision phase, and Issue 3 explained the Implementation Guidelines tied to the four foundational themes.

Figure 9 Issues of *Groundswell Magazine* kept participants engaged when the campus went remote during the pandemic.

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

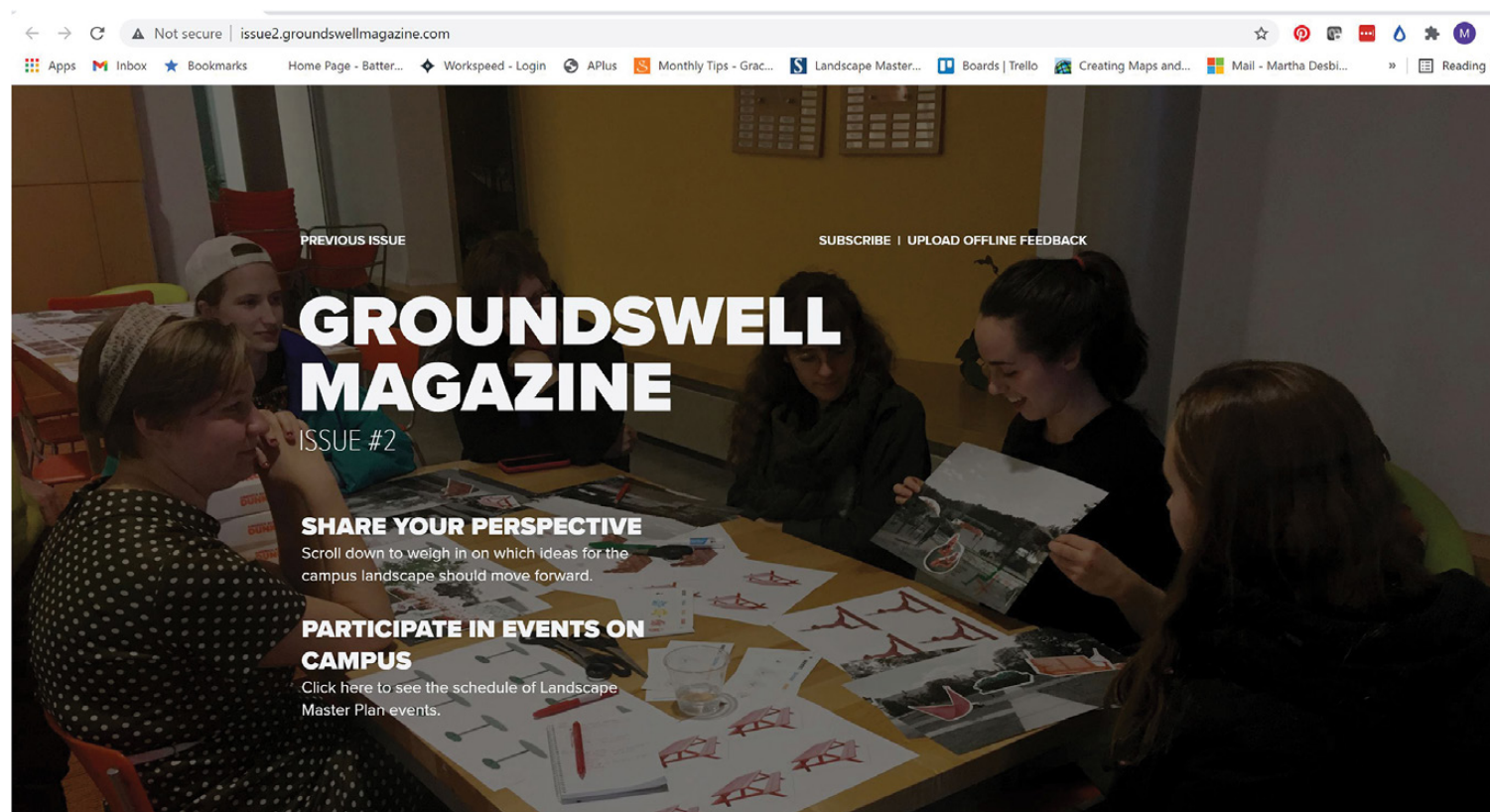


Image credit: MNLA

Vision spectrum: “Share Your Perspective” was an activity that was paired with the Puzzle Exercise. Together, these evoked the greatest diversity of opinions and dialogue. We created a series of visualizations representing light, intermediate, and intensive transformations for each of 12 key areas of campus. The spectrum of design changes was displayed in a central campus location and generated a range of commentary. For example, an astronomy department faculty member responded: “People and plants need darkness. Lighting should not focus on *more* light but on the *right* light uniformity.” “Lighting is the number one issue that students note as a concern,” observed one campus police officer.

Puzzle Exercise: “Put Your Landscape Together” followed with more in-depth and in-person sessions during which participants were asked to make choices from the spectrum of design transformations and

to assemble them into one overall plan. The activity prompted detailed conversation about priorities for the campus and how different degrees of change could still result in a cohesive campus. Related to the theme of inclusivity, the design alternatives illustrated a variety of new and modified outdoor spaces. “Many students have social anxiety and have challenges communicating with peers and others. There is a need to provide spaces to be alone while together,” said the director of Smith’s Health and Wellness Center. In response to design ideas related to recognizing Indigenous peoples, an LMP Committee co-chair observed: “Part of the sense of place and identity is interest in the history of the place itself. I don’t know if that would have come from any planner doing this work without engagement.”⁵

5. Interview with Dano Weisbord, op. cit.

Figure 10 “Share Your Perspective” brought out diverse opinions as shown by the red and green stickers on MNLA’s drawings of design options.

ON-CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT



Image credit: MNLA



Engagement Process Participants

At the outset of research, it is typically difficult to predict if an engagement process will glean the desired outcomes in both participation and content. Will enough people contribute? Do participants represent a breadth of voices? Who has been left out of the conversation? And, considering the timing of this particular LMP process, how does engagement pivot from in-person to virtual during an unexpected COVID pandemic?

MNLA visited the campus seven times during fall 2019 to conduct in-person engagement with members of the administration, staff, faculty, and students. Additional outreach used phone interviews to access a broader spectrum of administrators who were unable to meet during our campus visits. When the campus switched to remote learning in spring 2020, our engagement tools went virtual with a variety of resources. *Groundswell Magazine* became invaluable to our process as time progressed with students, faculty, and administrators physically scattered. In all, 1,600 students, faculty, alumnae, staff, and administrators participated through in-person and online communication tools. An additional 6,400 members of the campus community were reached through two Instagram takeovers. Due to the anonymity of online engagement, it was statistically impossible to calculate the percentage of the total community that participated in the comprehensive outreach process, but in-person activities prior to the COVID shutdown reached 55 percent of the student body.

Figure 11 Two Instagram takeovers drew 6,400 likes and reached the largest audience of all engagement tools.

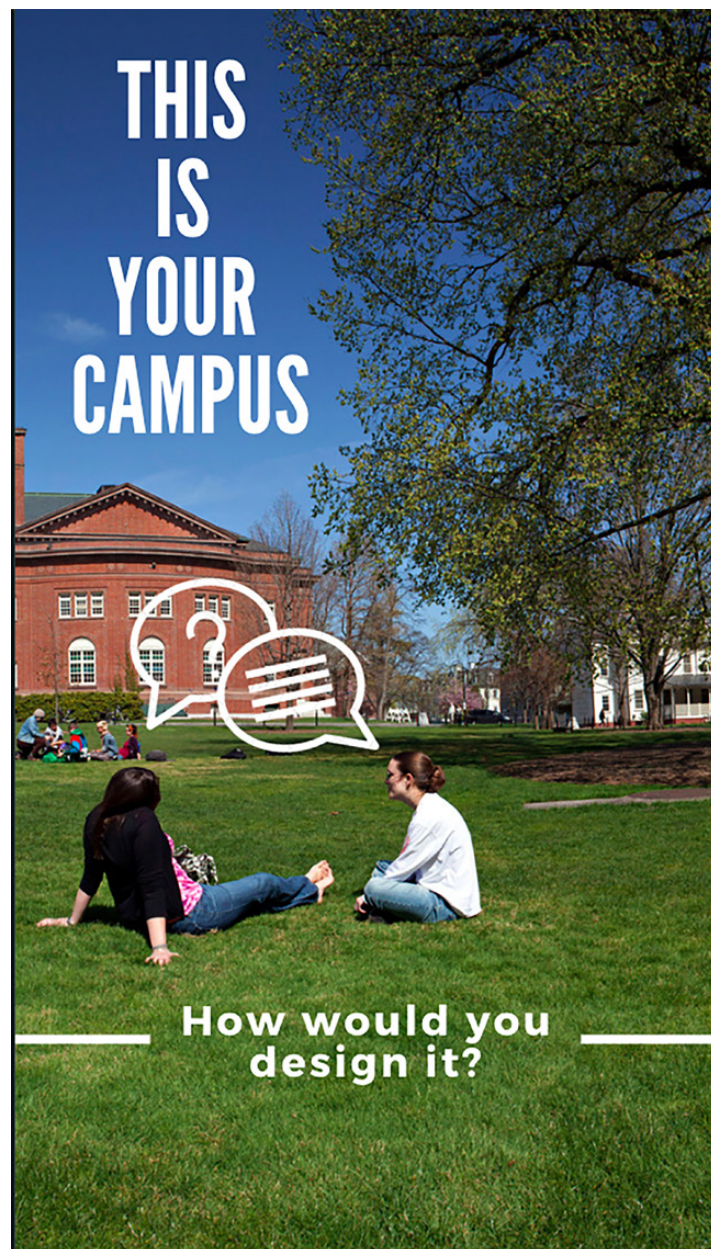


Image credit: MNLA

By intent, the initial engagement process during the Discovery phase was compressed into an intensive three-month period to raise campus community awareness. While different tools and techniques were used to elicit participant input, conducting concurrent outreach among all constituent groups proved to be advantageous. Interestingly, valuable synergies among faculty and students, administrators and staff, and faculty and administrators came to light during that time. An example was the shared belief that while the Smith community is multicultural, its landscape is not consistently reflective of that diversity, resulting in cognitive dissonance between what students are taught or want and what they experience daily on campus. While this simultaneity of awareness-raising did not necessarily lead to consensus on change, it did result in focused dialogue about the future of the campus landscape.

Figure 12 **Different activities reached different audiences, but each one deepened the level of dialogue about the future landscape.**



Image credit: MNLA

As the campus shifted to remote learning, it obviously became more challenging to maintain consistent engagement during the Vision and Implementation phases. The LMP Committee continued to meet with MNLA on a bi-weekly basis via video conference, but in-person activities fell away. Ultimately, despite the forced protraction of the final master plan, the glue that sustained participant involvement was the clearly articulated goals and themes embraced by the LMP itself.

Takeaways from Engagement: The Process Yielded Results

In summary, how did participants see the results of their contributions influence the outcomes of the LMP? *Groundswell Magazine* was the mechanism by which participants could track their input throughout the planning process, but why, fundamentally, was this extensive outreach valuable to Smith? The following thoughts summarize some of the key topics raised by participants; they were formulated into actionable recommendations in the final Implementation Guidelines:

Adaptive Landscape

- Restore natural woodlands and improve riparian function adjacent to the river for long-term ecological uplift and climate-aware management practices.
- Reduce non-essential lawn, and introduce alternative bio-productive landscapes to reduce use of potable water, chemicals, fossil fuels, and associated environmental and financial costs.

... set clear goals for a future-focused plan that would guide its landscape development while balancing aspirations with pragmatism.

Figure 13 An MNLA-generated view of a rain garden was an example of an adaptive landscape to absorb increased rainfall.

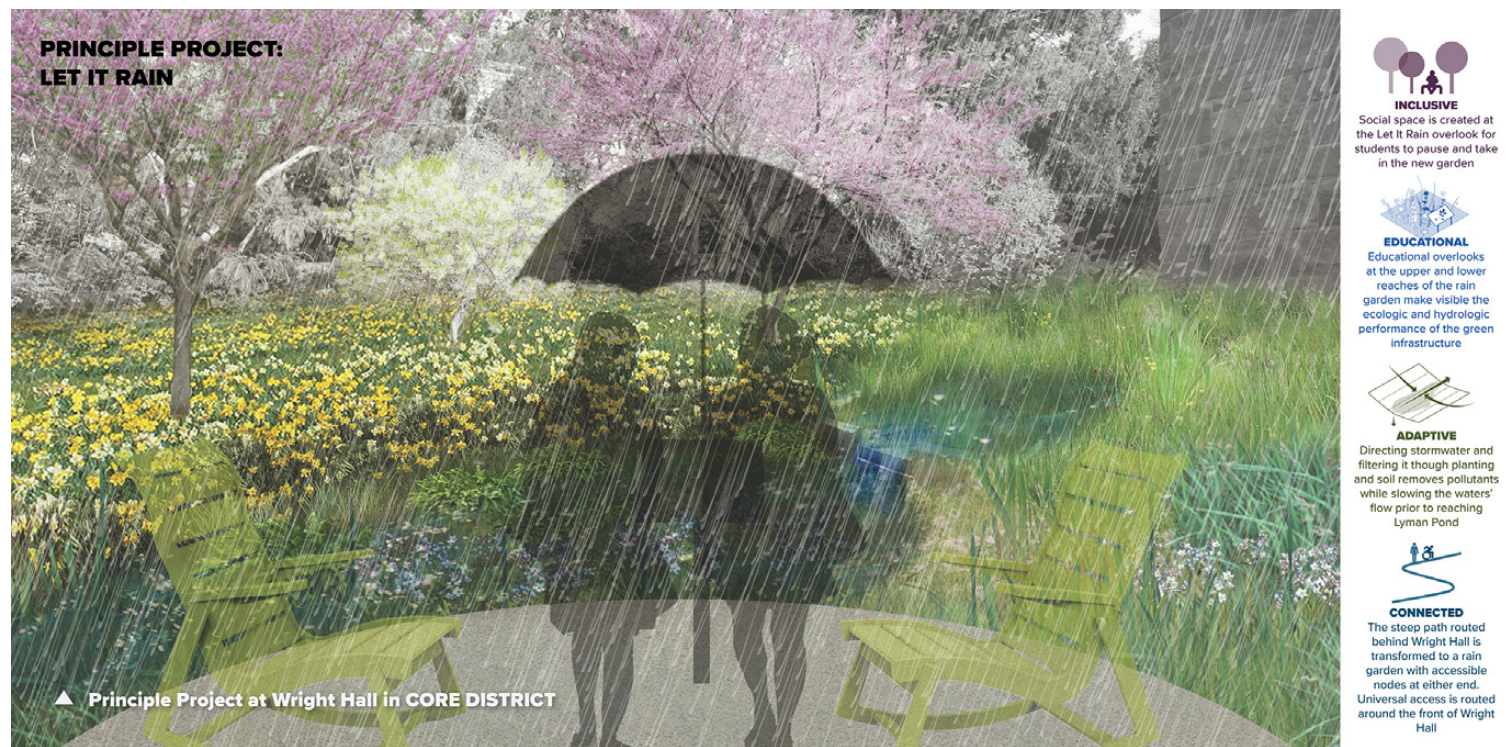


Image credit: MNLA

Inclusive Landscape

- Recognize the spiritual and social needs of BIPOC students by creating spaces for students to practice their religious beliefs, and improve spaces adjacent to affinity houses to be more welcoming.
- Improve and expand social and ceremonial spaces by removing physical and psychological barriers and introducing amenities to encourage lingering and interaction.

Figure 14 An MNLA-generated view of a new universally-accessible path shows how two areas of the campus would connect.



Image credit: MNLA

Connected Landscape

- Expand campus-wide universal accessibility, especially between important destinations so that all students can enjoy equity of experience.
- Improve safety at public street crossings, and augment uniformity of site lighting levels to encourage multi-modal movement during day and night.

Educational Landscape

- Create new outdoor learning spaces that incorporate innovative, climate-positive landscapes for teaching and scholarship.
- Expand opportunities to engage with the natural landscape by introducing new paths and gathering areas in the natural woodland and arboretum to inspire self-learning and study.

Through in-class presentations, tabling sessions, and house meetings, [students] interacted with approximately 140 Smith community members.

Figure 15 A summary of participant input on a spectrum from status quo (left side) to significant change (right side) was based on the four foundational themes.

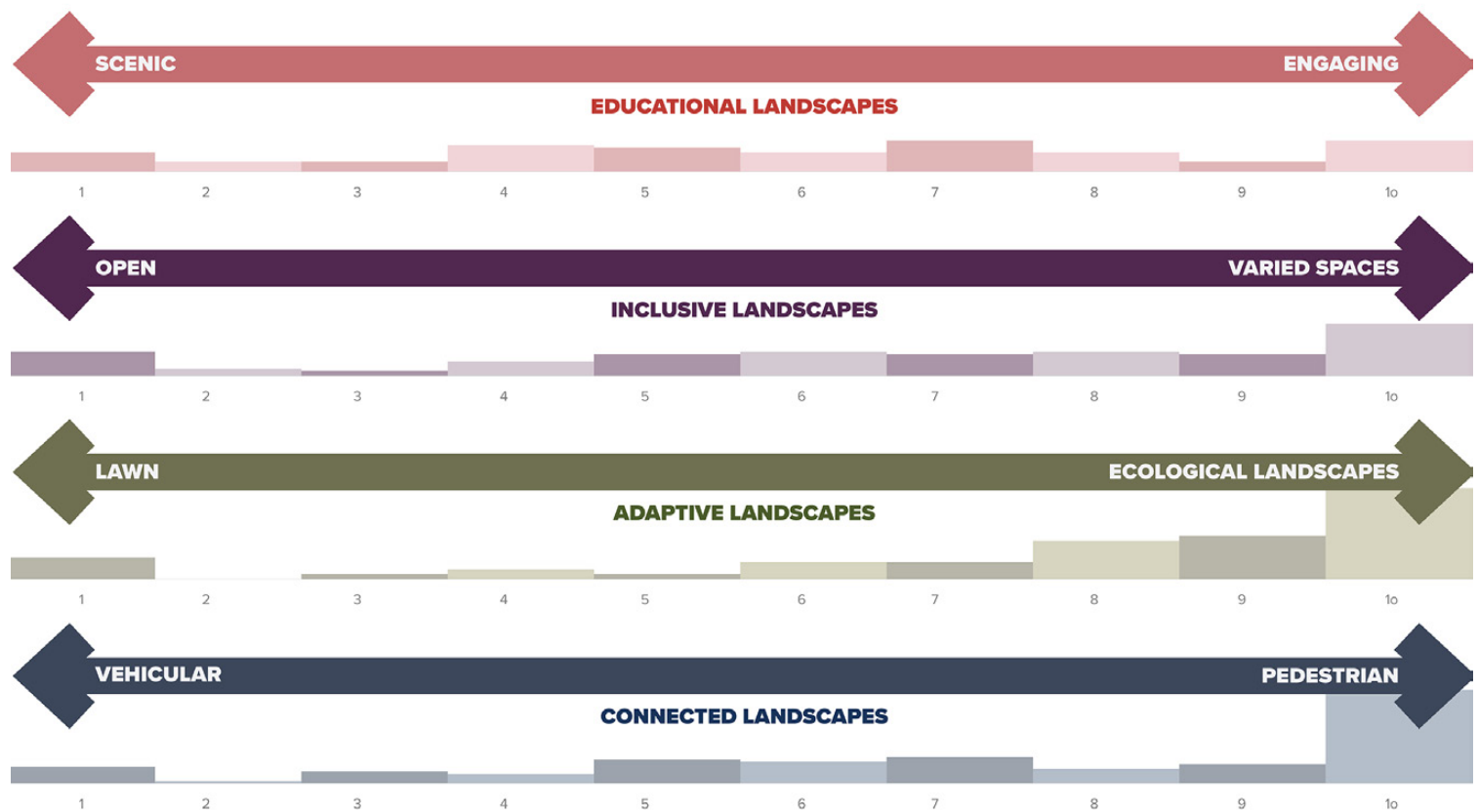


Image credit: MNLA

Due to the anonymity of online engagement, it was statistically impossible to calculate the percentage of the total community that participated in the comprehensive outreach process, but in-person activities prior to the COVID shutdown reached 55 percent of the student body.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

The most significant takeaway from Smith's LMP case study is that there is no formula for a meaningful campus engagement process. Upfront, pre-planning is essential to assure positive outcomes. Get to know the players, spend the time to understand what tools are useful to the different audiences, remain nimble throughout the process—and provide a consistent feedback loop so participants see the results of their contributions. Though consensus is hard to achieve, open dialogue, well-conceived options, and a structured, adaptable future are keys to success.

Reference

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WHAT WORKED?

- In-person engagement sessions, small focus group conversations, and phone interviews were the most successful means to solicit targeted feedback.
- Meeting students in places where they felt comfortable (e.g., affinity groups, residential settings, student clubs) was effective in reaching audiences that might not otherwise engage.
- Online tools reached and engaged a broad audience.
- Response anonymity facilitated willingness to participate.

WHAT DIDN'T?

- Interactive mapping was challenging to use for older members of the campus community who were less facile with computer tools.
- Pandemic-related protocol for faculty, staff, and administrators reduced their capacity to participate in later phases of the process.
- Most of the respondents to all forms of engagement were students who will graduate before planned landscape projects are implemented.
- The Implementation Guidelines did not include measurable metrics, because the LMP Committee did not believe it was their mandate to set policy extending 20 years into the future.



Author Biography



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Engage with the Author

To comment on this article or share your own observations, email snielsen@mnlandscape.com.

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