

Green Lessons from Italy: Enhancing Student Well-Being Through Campus Design

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Introduction

As I walked through the vibrant piazzas and riverside paths of Italy, I began to notice something I had often overlooked at home—how public spaces are designed to bring people together, offer comfort, and encourage reflection. Whether it was locals gathering along the Arno River or tourists admiring sculptures in Piazza della Signoria, these spaces felt essential to daily life—not just decorative. Back at UNI, I began thinking critically about our own green spaces. Why do we not have more areas that encourage reflection, connection, or simple rest? This question led me to explore how thoughtfully designed outdoor environments can support mental health and academic success—particularly in university settings.

Through a blend of travel observations, course content, and scholarly research—particularly the study by Liu et al. (2022) on green space and student well-being—I have come to see this as a vital issue that goes far beyond aesthetics. This paper explores how intentional green space design, inspired by Italian public spaces and supported by evidence-based practice, could positively impact UNI's campus community. Informed by my background in social work and environmental ethics, I argue that green spaces should be treated as essential wellness infrastructure—not just landscaping choices. By reimagining our campus environment, we have the opportunity to create spaces that foster connection, reduce stress, and promote student flourishing.

Lessons from Italy

During my time studying abroad in Italy, one of the most impactful realizations I had was how differently Italians design and use public green spaces. In cities like Florence and Rome, plazas, parks, gardens, and pedestrian areas are not only aesthetically beautiful but socially alive. These areas welcomed people of all ages: locals chatting, children playing, students reading, tourists resting under trees. While these areas varied in size and function—from small urban courtyards to expansive spaces like Piazza della Signoria—they all shared a sense of openness, accessibility, and integration into daily life. Unlike many

American college campuses—where green spaces often serve a decorative purpose—Italian spaces felt truly lived in and valued.

Florence stood out as a city that encouraged reflection through its design. I remember standing along the Arno River, watching the water flow quietly past layers of centuries-old stonework. It was not a park in the traditional sense, but that simple, walkable stretch of riverfront gave me a deep sense of peace and clarity. I did not need to buy anything or enter a building to feel connected—just being in that space, under trees with a light breeze, was enough to reset my thoughts. I had not realized how much daily access to restorative natural environments mattered until I experienced it firsthand. While UNI has outdoor areas and landscaping, they rarely invite the same kind of emotional or social recharge.

Rome provided a different kind of lesson. Amid the chaos and history layered in every street, the city's open spaces still offered quiet moments. Piazza Navona, for example, was always lively yet surprisingly calm. The fountains and greenery tucked among ancient ruins reminded me that nature and civilization do not compete—they can strengthen one another. The contrast of stone and vegetation made the space feel timeless and grounding. It was a reminder that even in the most urban settings, nature can—and should—be incorporated. In social work, we often talk about meeting people where they are. Italy's urban design does this physically, offering pockets of peace and connection in the heart of the city, accessible to everyone.

These experiences reshaped how I view the built environment's role in mental health and learning. I came to see how physical space can shape mood, focus, and relationships in ways we often underestimate. Italy showed me that when cities prioritize human-centered design—where natural elements, rest areas, and gathering spaces are seamlessly integrated—people benefit in tangible ways. That realization has stayed with me and challenged me to reimagine how we design and use space at UNI and in other American academic settings.

This connection between place and wellness feels deeply relevant to my future as a social worker. The design of Italy's green spaces aligns with core social work values: promoting well-being, reducing

environmental stressors, and expanding access to supportive spaces. These environments modeled the very principles I hope to bring into my future work. I now see green space not as a luxury or background element, but as a tool for wellness, equity, and resilience. My experiences in Italy laid the foundation for this understanding and made it personal.

Green Spaces, Mental Health, and Academic Success

While my experiences in Italy first opened my eyes to the importance of thoughtfully designed public spaces, academic research has helped me understand the deeper impacts these spaces can have especially in educational settings like UNI. According to Liu et al. (2022), the quality and availability of campus green spaces are directly linked to student mental health outcomes and academic achievement. Their study, which used survey data from 7,600 college students across 74 Chinese universities, found that well-designed green spaces with comfort, scenic variety, and accessibility helped reduce symptoms of depression and increased students' sense of well-being. The authors measured green space quality using four indicators: layout, comfort, plant variety, and scenery. Students with access to higher-quality green spaces consistently reported better mental health.

Notably, academic achievement served as a key mediating factor—suggesting that better environments improved both performance and well-being. This means that green space not only had a direct impact on students' mental health but also improved their academic performance, which in turn further reduced depressive symptoms. The researchers also observed gender differences: academic achievement had a stronger mediating effect for female students, who often face greater academic stress and benefit more from environmental support. This finding resonates with me personally. As a woman managing the academic and emotional demands of college life, I know how easily stress can build up. It is not always feasible to take long breaks or get off campus sometimes, the difference between an overwhelmed mind and a grounded one comes down to whether or not you have access to a quiet, restorative outdoor space in the middle of your day.

This connects directly with both my experiences abroad and what I have observed at UNI. When I was in Florence, simply walking along the Arno River or resting in a public piazza helped reset my mind. There was no pressure to spend money or perform socially; these spaces were open, comfortable, and embedded in daily life. At UNI, many green spaces between buildings function more as decorative buffers than as welcoming areas for rest or connection. Shaded seating is limited, and few zones are clearly designed for reflection or informal gathering. Given Liu et al.'s findings, this gap feels like a missed opportunity—especially at a campus that otherwise prioritizes student support.

Liu et al. also apply Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Stress Recovery Theory (SRT) to explain how green spaces function psychologically. ART suggests that natural environments allow the brain to recover from attention fatigue by offering effortless, "soft" fascination—things like trees rustling or water flowing. SRT proposes that exposure to nature can reduce physiological stress responses and promote emotional balance. My time in Italy gave me lived experience of both. Walking through tree-lined areas in Rome or sitting by the water in Florence often made me feel more relaxed, focused, and emotionally regulated. I did not know it at the time, but I was engaging in informal restorative practices—just by being in well-designed environments.

From a social work perspective, especially within mental health and community well-being, this research has significant implications. Environmental interventions—like adding or improving green spaces can be powerful forms of preventive care. They are non-stigmatizing, accessible, and scalable. Rather than requiring students to self-identify as struggling and seek help, green spaces can provide everyday relief and support by design. They also serve as tools for environmental justice: if made inclusive and intentional, they offer marginalized students access to the same emotional and cognitive benefits as their peers. As Liu et al. point out, the relationship between place and wellness is not a luxury—it is an essential feature of supportive educational environments.

It is also important to frame this issue in a post-COVID context. Since the pandemic, universities have seen a sharp rise in mental health concerns, burnout, and academic disengagement. At the same time,

students have expressed a greater need for flexible, inclusive, and supportive environments. Investing in campus green space is a tangible response to this demand. Rather than focusing solely on indoor interventions, schools like UNI can promote resilience through environmental design. When green spaces are built intentionally—with student use in mind—they become not just decorative features, but essential support systems for mental health, academic focus, and social connection. In this way, green space design becomes a public health and equity issue, not just a landscaping choice.

Applying Lessons to UNI's Campus

Reflecting on both my experiences in Italy and the findings from Liu et al. (2022), it becomes clear that UNI has a significant opportunity to reimagine its campus green spaces in a way that actively supports student well-being. Although the university does have open areas—like Lawther Field, the central Campanile Plaza, and the green spaces near Rod Library and Bartlett Hall—these zones often feel transitional rather than intentional.

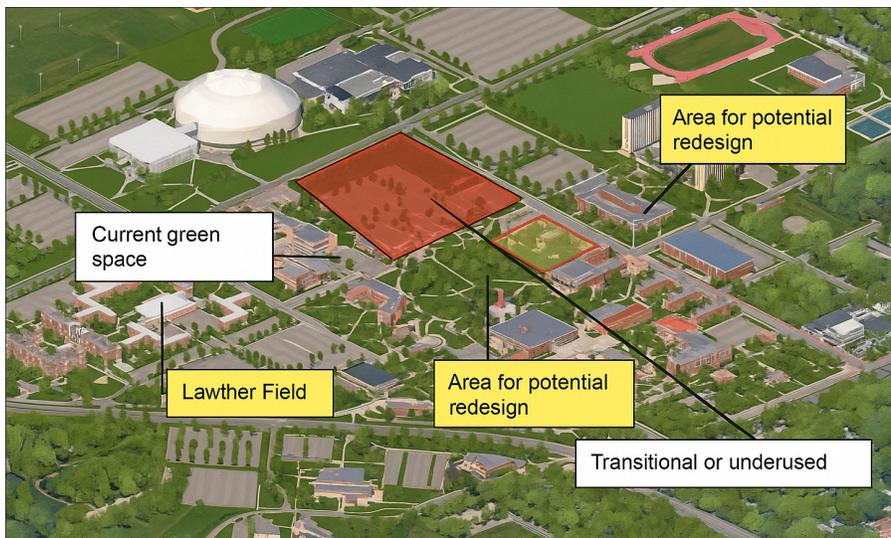


Figure 1. UNI Campus Green Space Analysis

This map highlights current green areas across campus (in green), underutilized or transitional spaces (in yellow), and potential redesign zones (outlined in blue). The area between Rod Library and Lang Hall has been identified as a high-potential location for a sensory healing garden.

Despite the amount of green visible on campus, what is missing is intentionality. These spaces rarely invite students to stay, reflect, or recharge. Most lack elements like comfortable seating, shade, natural sounds, or interactive plantings— features Liu et al. (2022) associate with high-quality green space that promotes mental health. The underuse of these areas reflects a broader pattern in campus design: green space as aesthetic filler, not as a functional or therapeutic resource. This disconnect contrasts sharply with what I experienced in Italy, where even small public plazas and riverside paths were designed for meaningful, everyday use.

One practical solution UNI could implement is the development of a sensory healing garden in a central, accessible location—such as the space between Rod Library and Lang Hall. Designed with intentional sensory and restorative features, this garden would include diverse plantings, shaded benches, accessible pathways, and calming natural elements like wind chimes or a small fountain. This kind of space would offer a low-barrier, non-stigmatizing way for students to decompress, support one another, and practice informal self-care without needing to leave campus.

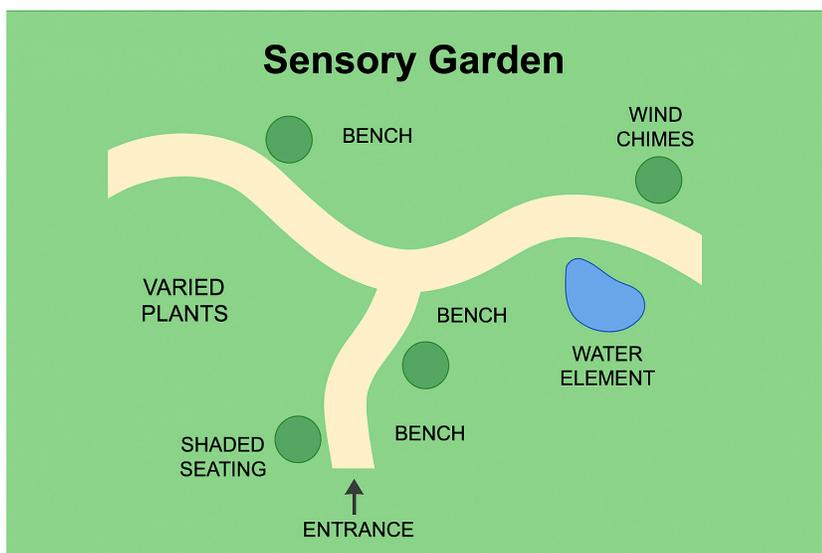


Figure 2. Sensory Healing Garden Concept Sketch

This sketch illustrates a simple garden layout with shaded seating areas, sensory plant zones (color, scent, texture), a walking path, and calming focal features like a small water element and natural sound integration.

As Liu et al. (2022) emphasize, high-quality green spaces have a measurable impact on student well-being and academic performance. These effects are particularly strong for female students and students under academic stress—populations UNI already seeks to support. By designing this space with universal accessibility and trauma-informed principles in mind, UNI could not only improve its physical landscape but also strengthen its commitment to student-centered mental health strategies.

This vision also connects deeply with the course materials, especially Robin Wall Kimmerer's call for reciprocal relationships with the land. A sensory garden is not just a human-centered feature; it can also be a site for environmental learning, reflection, and respect for biodiversity. As Katharine Hayhoe and others have emphasized in course podcasts, climate action and community resilience start locally. This kind of green infrastructure is one small—but powerful—step toward designing a healthier and more sustainable future for UNI's campus community.

Ultimately, integrating what I observed in Italy with what I have learned from academic and environmental research points to a clear path forward: green space is not a luxury—it is a necessity. And when it is designed with care, it can serve as a daily source of connection, healing, and inspiration for students across every background and major.

Professional and Ethical Relevance

As a future social worker focused on mental health and community well-being, the lessons I have drawn from Italy and the literature on green spaces speak directly to the values and ethical responsibilities of my profession. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of promoting the dignity and worth of the person, challenging social injustice, and engaging in practices that strengthen individuals and communities. Ensuring that campus green spaces are accessible, inclusive, and designed with care aligns with all of these principles.

Liu et al. (2022) make it clear that high-quality green spaces offer mental health benefits that disproportionately support students under academic and emotional stress. From a social work perspective, this calls for a trauma-informed, equity-focused approach to campus design. It is not enough to have green lawns; we need spaces that recognize students as whole people navigating complex emotional and academic pressures. Creating sensory gardens or restorative zones supports not only wellness but also student retention, focus, and engagement-factors that social workers within educational settings increasingly address.

This also intersects with what Robin Wall Kimmerer described in her podcast reflections: the land is not just a resource—it is a relationship. In social work, building relationships is foundational, and this extends to the environments we shape and steward. Designing green spaces with intention is a form of advocacy—especially when we center voices and needs that are often overlooked in traditional campus planning, such as neurodivergent students, students with chronic stress, or those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Additionally, Katharine Hayhoe's message about integrating climate action into everyday life reminds me that social work must be forward-thinking. Climate resilience and mental health are increasingly intertwined. A small garden on a college campus may seem minor in the face of global climate change, but it represents a local, tangible step toward sustainability and community care. It also models ethical leadership—something that is vital in both social work and environmental advocacy.

Ultimately, this project reinforces my belief that social workers should be involved in conversations about campus infrastructure, planning, and environmental design. We bring a lens that centers lived experience, access, and long-term well-being. Applying that lens to green spaces is not only ethical—it is essential.

Conclusion

This project began with a simple observation: in Italy, public green spaces are deeply embedded in the rhythms of everyday life. What seemed at first like a cultural detail soon revealed itself to be a

powerful example of intentional design—spaces built for rest, reflection, and relationship. Through research and personal reflection, I have come to understand how deeply the built environment influences student well-being. Studies like Liu et al. (2022) confirm what I experienced firsthand abroad: that high-quality green spaces are not just nice to have—they are essential to mental health, academic performance, and community connection.

For UNI, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. While we have the physical space, we lack the intention and design necessary to make those spaces work for students. A sensory healing garden or similar restorative area could transform underused parts of campus into powerful tools for inclusion, stress reduction, and sustainability. This is not just about trees and benches—it is about creating a culture of care. In doing so, we would be answering the call posed by our course readings and podcasts: to live more ethically, more sustainably, and more connected to the environments we inhabit.

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