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The overwhelming 83 percent of college students nationwide who do not live in institution-owned housing are generally termed "commuters." National studies have shown that commuter students are less satisfied with the collegiate experience and less likely to persist to graduation. Substantial institutional change is required to address this situation effectively. This article discusses how institutions of higher education can assess themselves from the perspective of the student-as-commuter and provides recommendations for the enhancement of environments, programs, and services.

Adapting the Institution to Meet the Needs of Commuter Students

Commuter students—defined as those who do not live in institution-owned housing—comprise over 80 percent of the students in American colleges and universities today. Nevertheless, the residential tradition of higher education continues to impede effective institutional response to their presence. Educators have assumed that commuters are like resident students except that they live off campus and that similar curricular and cocurricular offerings are equally appropriate for all students. This assumption has not served commuter students well. Major studies have identified commuters as being at greater risk of attrition, and recent higher education reform reports have expressed the need to improve the quality of the educational experience for commuter students at all types of institutions.

Commuter students attend virtually every institution of higher education. Their numbers include full-time students who live at home with their parents as well as fully employed adults who live with their spouses and/or children and attend college part time. Commuters may reside near the campus or far away; they commute by private vehicle, public transportation, walking, and bicycle. They may represent a small minority of students at a private, residential liberal arts college or the entire population of a community college or metropolitan university.

In the last decade or so, the definition of commuter

students as all students who do not live in institution-owned housing has been adopted as the preferred one by the National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs, a number of key professional associations within higher education, and the authors of recent higher education reform reports. Despite the diverse nature of the population, the use of the broad definition of commuter student promotes recognition of the substantial core of needs and concerns shared by all commuter students. It also encourages institutions to regard their commuter student population as an aggregate for the purpose of assuring that they receive their fair share of attention and resources.

American higher education is characterized by the diversity of its institutions and students. Predicted enrollment declines in the late 1970s and 1980s have not occurred because of the attendance of an increasingly diverse body of students. As a result, the average student today is much different from the stereotype of a full-time student, 18–22 years old, financially supported by parents, and living away from home: this description now applies to less than a fifth of those enrolled in colleges and universities.

Fifty-four percent of all college students live off campus, not with a parent(s), while 27 percent live with a parent(s). The percentage of traditional age, full-time residential students will continue to decline during the coming years. The number of high school graduates is expected to decrease 25 percent by 1994, and higher education enrollment of suburban, 18–24-year-old, full-time, white, middle-class students will decline dramatically.

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At the same time, enrollments of adults and part-time students have increased dramatically. Over 40 percent of college students are 25 years of age or older. By 1992, more than one-half of the total college population will be over 25, and 20 percent will be over 35. Related to the age trend, as well as to the escalating costs of higher education, two-fifths of the more than 12 million individuals enrolled in colleges and universities in 1985 attended part time. By 1990, over half of all students will be enrolled on a part-time basis.

The composition of students in higher education will continue to change in other ways. Over 50 percent of all college students are women. Enrollments of American Indian, Asian, black, and Hispanic students have risen substantially in the last 20 years, although not at a rapid enough rate to reflect their proportion of the American population. Projections indicate that by the year 2000 more than 40 percent of public school students in the United States will be minority children and that the college-age population will be one-third minority.

The vast majority of the students in these increasing populations are and will continue to be commuters, for reasons of age, lifestyle, family circum-

stances, and financial necessity. Students with spouses, children, and/or full-time jobs are not likely to live in residence halls. This also applies to many students from ethnic cultures which place the highest value on the maintenance of the family unit. And, given that high proportions of minority and low-income students attend community colleges and metropolitan universities which generally do not have residence facilities, it is clear that the opportunity to live in a residence hall is not equally allocated among American college students by ethnicity and income level.

The Student-as-Commuter: Common Needs and Concerns

No matter what commuter students' educational goals are, where they live, or what type of institution they attend, the fact that they commute to college has a profound influence on the nature of their educational experience. For residential students, home and campus are synonymous; for commuter students, the campus is a place to visit, sometimes for very short periods.

To denote the essential character of the relationship of the commuter student with the institution of higher education, the use of the term *student-as-commuter* is preferred. Although the students themselves are extraordinarily diverse, a common core of needs and concerns of the student-as-commuter can be identified:

Transportation issues. The most obvious concerns commuter students share are those related to transportation to campus: parking, traffic, fixed travel schedules, inclement weather, car maintenance, fares, and finding alternative means of transportation. No matter the mode, commuting is demanding in terms of time and energy. Frequently, commuter students concentrate their classes into blocks and have little free time to spend on campus. Convenience of curricular offerings, services, and programs is of paramount importance.

Multiple life roles. For commuters of all ages, being a student is only one of several important and demanding roles. Most commuter students work; many have responsibilities for managing households and for caring for children, siblings, or older relatives. By necessity, commuters select their campus involvements carefully. It is critical that complete information about campus options and opportunities reaches them in a timely manner. The *relative value* of an activity is a major factor in their decision to participate.

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Integrating support systems. The support networks for commuter students generally exist away from campus: parents, siblings, spouses, children, employers, co-workers, and friends in the community. Each semester, students must

negotiate with family, employers, and friends to establish priorities, responsibilities, and time allotments. These negotiations are more difficult if significant others are not knowledgeable about the challenges and opportunities of higher education. It is important for institutions to provide opportunities for these individuals to learn about and to participate appropriately in the life of the campus.

Developing a sense of belonging. Commuter students often lack a sense of belonging, of "feeling wanted" by the institution. Some institutions fail to provide basic facilities such as lockers and lounge areas which enable students to put down "roots." In many cases, institutions do not provide adequate opportunities for commuter students to develop relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow students. Individuals rarely feel connected to a place where they do not have significant relationships. Students who do not have a sense of belonging complain about the "supermarket" or "filling station" nature of their collegiate experience.

Effects of the Residential Tradition of Higher Education

Residence halls have been an essential aspect of American higher education since its earliest days. The residential tradition has continued to shape the development of attitudes, policies, and practices, even at predominantly commuter institutions.

In the 20 years between 1955 and 1974, the number of college students more than tripled, expanding from 2.5 million to 8.8 million. To handle this explosion of students, the United States doubled its college and university facilities. Hundreds of new two-year community colleges and metropolitan universities were created, and many existing ones experienced substantial growth. Only 2.3 million students were placed in institution-controlled housing in 1980 when the number of college students was over 12 million. The greatest portion of the growth in the student population was due to commuter students.

However, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the response to this dramatic increase in the numbers of commuter students was construction of new colleges and universities and expansion of others, based heavily on models of the past. "Staffing patterns, scheduling arrangements, annual cycles of activity, and areas of expertise for student personnel professionals continued to be established for traditional age, full-time, mostly on-campus" students. (Schlossberg et al. 1989, 228). Ironically, this was true even in community colleges and 100 percent commuter four-year institutions.

While some predominantly commuter institutions have provided courses during evening and weekend hours, large parking lots and access to public transportation, and lounges and eating facilities, there are no significant responses to the special backgrounds of many commuting students, no attempts to deal with the difficulties they have in discovering and connecting

with academic programs and extracurricular activities suitable to them, and no solutions to the difficulties they face in building new relationships with students and faculty members and with the institution itself.

Administrators have accepted "the simplistic solution of eliminating the residential facilities and maintaining essentially the same educational programs and processes" (Chickering 1974,3). Surprisingly few differences have been found between student services at commuter institutions and those at traditional residential institutions. Metropolitan universities suffer from what has been described by Richardson and Bender as "an overvaluing of traditional ways at the expense of local community needs." Community colleges have adopted "the same procedures, facilities, and approaches to teaching and learning that had characterized four-year colleges and universities since the turn of the century" (Chickering 1974, 1).

The majority of today's faculty members earned their undergraduate and graduate degrees at traditional residential institutions. The time-honored system of instruction with 120 credit hours of coursework earned between the ages of 18 and 22 is a formula that is ingrained in faculty well before they take charge of a classroom. Most faculty members seem to expect the institutions at which they teach to be similar to those they attended and, therefore, impose the values and goals of those institutions (e.g., total immersion in the intellectual community) on their new environments. The image of a residential institution is often "perpetuated by the memories and experiences of faculty, staff, alumni, and others long after a shift to a predominantly commuter student population has taken place" (Stewart 1988).

Many administrators and faculty still have not adjusted to the fact that students frequently attend part time and have job and family responsibilities. It may be difficult for some professors and administrators to accept what may seem to them to be a lesser academic commitment. Many of them have acquired from their own experience as students deeply rooted ideas about higher learning that may hinder their ability to respond to new circumstances. For that reason faculty sometimes shun assignments to an urban campus. And commuters, both of traditional-age and older, continue to be thought of as apathetic or uninterested in campus life.

The image of a residential institution is often perpetuated by the memories and experiences of faculty and staff.

Institutional Self-Assessment

A fundamental responsibility of institutions of higher education is to conduct research and evaluation to determine to what extent the educational goals and needs of students are being met. Whether an institution has a small number of commuters or serves a 100 percent commuter population, there are basic questions that must be answered if the institution is to

understand who its commuter students really are. It has already been established that commuter students are extraordinarily diverse and that the nature of the commuter population is unique to each institution. In addition, the complexity of commuter students' lifestyles and the multiple demands upon their time and energies requires that a wide range of information be gathered if the nature of their relationship to higher education is to be understood. Knowing the answers to the following basic questions will enable institutions to take the first step in dealing with the key issues related to the educational experience of the student-as-commuter.

Questions to Ask About the Student-as-Commuter

— What percentage of the student population are commuters?
— How many students fall in the traditional college age range of 18 to 22 years old? How many are between 22 and 25? Between 25 and 35? Between 35 and 45? Between 45 and 55? Over 55?
— What are the percentages of students by sex? By ethnic background?
— How many students attend full time versus part time? When are they on campus: How many days? Day or evening? All day or an hour daily? Weekends only?
— What is the socioeconomic status of students and their families?
— What is the level of education of their parents? Other family members and peers?
— How do students finance their education? Are they dependent on their parents or spouses? Are they financially independent? Do they receive financial aid?
— What is their employment status? Do they work full time or part time? How many hours per week? On or off campus?
— What about family status? Do students live with their parents? What is their marital status? Do they have children? Other family responsibilities?
— Where do students live? With relatives, roommates, or alone? In what type of housing? Are they responsible for rent or mortgage payments?
— How far do students live from campus?
— What are their modes of transportation?
— Do students come from the local area? From other parts of the state? From out of state? From foreign countries?
— Why do students choose to attend this institution?
— What are their educational goals?
— What are the relative academic abilities of commuter students? Do they have significant remedial needs?

Frequently, much of the data required to answer these questions already exist at the institution and are available through admissions, financial aid, registration, and institutional research offices. Standardized reports provided to the institution from such sources as the College Board, the

American College Testing Program, and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program can supplement data collected by the institution. Where data do not exist, the addition of key variables to various data collection methods that are already in place can often provide what is needed. More and more institutions are conducting separate demographic and descriptive studies of their commuter, part-time, and/or adult students. The National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs maintains an active file of instruments and reports from these studies.

The institution's climate and self-image; the environment inside and outside the classroom; and the facilities, services, and programs should be thoroughly examined from the perspective of all groups in the student body profile. For example, a residential college with a relatively small percentage of commuter students will want to ask itself the question posed by Ernest Boyer in his report, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America:* "Are commuters simply tolerated because they help pay the bills or are they full partners on the campus?" A large university with a high proportion of full-time, 18- to 22-year-old commuters will want to determine whether the quality of the educational experience they receive is comparable to that of residential students. And a 100 percent commuter institution should assess whether all students—be they full- or part-time, adult or traditional age, day or evening—are served equally well by all aspects of the institutions.

The following is a proposed list of questions institutions should ask themselves in assessing whether all their students benefit equitably from the institution's offerings. Each institution should adapt the questions to reflect the profile of its student body.

Questions to Ask About the Institutional Environment

— Does the institution present itself accurately in its mission statement and its publications? For example, do publications include photographs representative of all types of students and student lifestyles?
— Do recruiters make outreach efforts in the local area beyond high schools (e.g., community centers, primary employment sites)? Are pre-admissions publications available at these sites and others, such as public libraries?
— Does the admissions office utilize a system of evaluation (other than high school grades and SAT scores) that reflects the life status of a wide variety of prospective students (e.g., noncognitive measures, interviews, learning, and experience acquired through work and volunteer service)?
— Do articulation policies exist between the institution and its "feeder" colleges which enable a smooth transition for transfer students?
— Are orientation activities appropriate for all students? Are various orientation options available (e.g., weekday, evening, and weekend

programs; individualized formats; extended orientation courses; videocassettes for home use)?

— Do scheduling policies accommodate all students, including those who need "twilight" (4 to 6 pm), evening, or weekend classes as well as classes that meet once or twice a week (rather than four times)? Are all types of classes (e.g., upper-level, laboratory, and language) offered in alternative formats?

— Do faculty consider commuter students' lifestyles when structuring assignments (e.g., offering alternatives to group projects or projects that require extensive time in campus libraries and computer facilities)? Do they integrate out-of-class learning and experiences into the curriculum?

— Does the institution have a program to identify students having difficulty and offer them assistance? Are different kinds of remedial programs readily available (e.g., evening and weekend learning center hours, computer-assisted programs, peer tutoring, materials for home use)?

— Are academic advising and career counseling services appropriate for students at various points in their lives rather than for traditional-age students only?

— Does the composition of the faculty and staff represent a wide variety of backgrounds, age groups, cultural experiences, educational institutions, and geographic origins?

— Do faculty and staff selection processes seek individuals with knowledge of and experience in working with diverse student populations? Are development programs regarding the demographics of the student body and their implications offered to all levels of faculty and staff?

— Are support groups available for students who may need them (e.g., women, single parents, veterans, individuals experiencing major life transitions)?

— Is financial aid distributed equitably to all students (e.g., adults, part-time students, students living with parents, students living independently)?

— Are there plentiful work-study and other on-campus, part-time jobs that enable students to develop meaningful connections with the institution and with their academic programs?

— If "traditional" services and activities are provided at no cost to users, are other services and activities (e.g., child care, family-oriented activities) offered on the same basis? Are mandatory student fees used equitably to respond to the interests and needs of *all* students?

— Are social, cultural, educational, and intramural sports programs and activities appropriate for all students? Are they scheduled at a variety of times to accommodate students' varied schedules (e.g., lunchtime, early afternoon, evenings, weekends, between classes)?

— Do institutional administrators and planners keep abreast of and participate appropriately in community decision-making on behalf of commuter students regarding zoning, parking, housing, public trans-

portation, employment? Does the institution provide assistance with students' transportation and housing needs?
- Is child care offered during day, evening, and weekend classes as well as during cocurricular programs and events? On a drop-in basis? Are referrals made to child care providers in the community?
- Are balanced meals and snacks available at times and locations convenient for all students?
- Is parking adequate? Are parking lots for evening students well-lighted and located near classroom buildings?
- Are adequate study areas, lounges, and lockers provided at convenient locations throughout the campus, particularly in classroom buildings?
- Are recreational facilities (including lockers and showers) accessible to students at times convenient for them?
- Are advisers, counselors, and other administrators on "flex-time" schedules so that they are available whenever students are on campus?
- If the institution has off-campus centers, are student services available there?
- Can students transact business with the institution (e.g., registration, bill payment) via telephone, computer, and/or mail?
- Is there a single place where students can go to get accurate information about the institution's policies and procedures, academic and other programs and resources, as well as referrals to appropriate offices or departments?
- Is there a telephone number that students can call for information about the hours of facilities and services (i.e., libraries, laboratories, tutoring)?
- Are commuter institutions, which emphasize flexible scheduling of classes and services to meet the needs of part-time students, at a disadvantage under state funding formulas that are based on full-time enrollment?

The process of institutional self-appraisal is nearly as important as the product in confronting negative stereotypes about students and faulty assumptions and about the quality and appropriateness of the institution's programs and services. In order for the process to be most effective, a broad representation of members of the campus community should participate by collecting student data, evaluating their own efforts on behalf of students, and assessing the institution as a whole.

Recommendations for Adapting the Institution

Considerable change would be necessary in most institutions to create an optimal educational environment for their commuter students. Institutional responses to the student-as-commuter generally have been fragmented attempts to deal with immediate, specific problems rather than long-range and comprehensive.

Because each institution is a unique combination of students, faculty, staff, mission, history, curriculum, and environment, it is impossible to provide a blueprint for change. It is the responsibility of each institution to determine its own plan of action using the self-assessment framework provided. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some key elements of a comprehensive institutional response to the student-as commuter:

1. The institution should modify its mission statement, if necessary, to express a clear commitment to the quality of the educational experience of *all* its students, and should have this change endorsed by its governing board.
2. The president, vice-presidents, deans, and all other top administrators should frequently and consistently articulate the institution's commitment to the student-as-commuter when dealing with faculty, staff, students, the governing board, alumni, community members, and others.
3. The institution should engage in regular, comprehensive data collection about its students and their experiences with the institution.
4. Regular evaluation processes should be put in place to assess whether the institution's programs, services, facilities, and resources equitably address the needs of all students.
5. Steps should be taken to identify and rectify stereotypes or inaccurate assumptions held by members of the campus community about commuter students, and to assure that commuter students are treated as full members of the campus community.
6. Long- and short-range administrative decisions regarding resources, policies, and practices should consistently include the perspective of the student-as-commuter.
7. Quality practices should be consistent throughout the institution as students' experiences in one segment have a profound impact upon their experiences in other segments and upon their perception of their educational experience as a whole.
8. Faculty should recognize that their classroom experience and interactions play the major role in determining the overall quality of commuter students' education.
9. Curricular and cocurricular offerings should complement one another, and steps should be taken to ensure that students understand the interrelationship of the curriculum and the cocurriculum.
10. Top-level administrators should actively encourage the various campus units to work together to implement change on behalf of the student-as-commuter.
11. Technology should be used to the fullest extent possible to improve the institution's ability to communicate with its students and to streamline its administrative processes.
12. Executive officers and governing board members should actively work towards assuring that commuter students and commuter institutions

are treated fairly in federal, state, and local decision-making (e.g., student financial aid, institutional funding formulas).

As the students pursuing higher education continue to become more diverse, and as students from diverse backgrounds attend a wider range of institutions, an understanding of the student-as-commuter and of the nature of commuter students' relationships to higher education is required to bring about necessary changes. In the current climate, institutions of higher education are seeking "excellence" and are being held accountable for translating excellence into educational outcomes for all students. Institutional change requires substantial effort and commitment; however, failure to respond effectively and comprehensively to the needs and educational goals of the student-as-commuter will make excellence impossible to achieve.

Suggested Readings

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