

Engaging First-Year Commuter Students in Learning

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Abstract

Engaging new commuter students is both important and challenging. The National Survey of Student Engagement provides a useful framework for designing a wide range of small- and large-scale interventions. This article offers numerous strategies that enable commuter students to benefit from effective educational practices in their first year and throughout their educational experience.

Institutions of higher education must engage first-year commuter students deeply and intentionally in learning. Numerous reports over the last twenty years state emphatically that achieving excellence in higher education requires increasing students' involvement in their learning. While all the reports mention the need to create ways to extend involvement in learning to commuter students, they offer very little as far as strategies for doing so. This article focuses on why commuter students should be engaged in learning and the challenges of such engagement. A framework is provided for addressing these challenges, based on the National Survey of Student Engagement. This strategy suggests a wide range of small- and large-scale interventions for engaging first-year commuter students in learning that are designed to continue their engagement throughout their college career. In this article, the terms "involvement" and "engagement" regarding student learning are used interchangeably.

Why Engage Commuter Students in Learning?

Since the mid-1980s, higher education experts have called for a fundamental re-conceptualization of undergraduate education that is squarely centered on student learning. Their calls to action serve as a mandate for colleges and universities to refocus policies, practices, and programs to enhance the learning of all students (American College Personnel Association 1994; Astin 1985; Barr and Tagg 1995; Boyer 1988; Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University 1998; Joint Task Force on Student Learning 1998; Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education 1984; Wingspread Group on Higher Education 1993). The publication in 1984 of the report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*, provided the catalyst for what Barr and Tagg call a "new paradigm for undergraduate education" (1995, p. 13). According to Barr and Tagg, the shift from a "teaching paradigm" to a "learning paradigm" means that the mission of higher education is to produce "learning with every student by *whatever means works best*" (p. 13).

The Study Group lamented that although “much is known about the conditions under which student learning and growth can be maximized...colleges, community colleges, and universities rarely seek and apply this knowledge in shaping their educational policies and practices” (1984, p. 17). The group sets forth three critical conditions for excellence: student involvement, high expectations, and assessment and feedback. The report cites the first of these conditions, student involvement, as “perhaps the most important for the purposes of improving undergraduate education” (1984, p. 17). Highly involved students devote considerable effort to studying, work at on-campus rather than off-campus jobs, participate actively in student activities, and interact frequently with faculty members and peers. Conversely, uninvolved students tend to not study enough, spend little time on campus, not be involved in student life, and have few contacts with faculty and fellow students.

Following the Study Group’s report, Alexander Astin presented his in-depth theory that student involvement is the key to effective education. He states that student involvement, consisting of the amount of students’ motivation plus the time and energy they devote to the learning process, determines the degree of student learning that results. *The Student Learning Imperative* further states that learning and development “occur through transactions between students and their environments broadly defined to include other people (faculty, student affairs staff, peers), physical spaces, and cultural milieus” (American College Personnel Association 1994, p. 2). Similarly, Tinto argues that “it is apparent that the more students are involved in the social and intellectual life of a college, the more frequently they make contact with faculty and other students about learning issues, especially outside the class, the more students are likely to learn” (1993, p. 69). Although there is much that colleges can do to design environments to promote student learning, involvement in learning also requires considerable commitments of time and energy by students. As such, Astin states: “the most precious institutional resource may be student time” (1985, p. 143).

Challenges of Engaging Commuter Students

The fact that learning requires significant commitments of time and energy by students presents a considerable challenge for commuter students. They enter college with educational goals that are just as high as those of residential students. They seek to be involved in the campus community and in their learning. However, their lives consist of balancing many competing commitments, including family, work, and other responsibilities. Commuter students are more likely to work, to work more hours, and to work off campus than resident students. As a result, they may appear to be less committed to, and engaged in, their education. Without doubt, there are both commuter and resident students who seek minimal engagement while earning their degrees. The critical issue is not to assume that this is more likely true of commuter students (Jacoby 1989, 2000).

Keeling describes commuter students as “reinvented students.” As he explains, “Students’ lives, like those of their parents and caregivers, are absolutely more complicated today (by jobs, debt, and transportation, for example) and the ranking of

college...or of studying, or classes, among their immediate priorities have clearly changed.... 'Student' is no longer every student's primary identity.... 'Student' is only one identity for people who are employees, wage workers, opinion leaders or followers, artists, friends, children...parents, partners, or spouses" (1999, p. 4).

Recognizing these realities of commuter students' lives, Astin summarizes the challenges that institutions face in engaging them in learning: "Educators are in reality competing with other forces in the student's life for a share of that finite time and energy. The student's investment in matters relating to family, friends, job, and other outside activities represents a reduction in the time and energy the student has to devote to his or her educational development" (1985, p. 143). Astin concludes that, as a result, colleges and universities must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice can affect how students spend their time and how much effort they devote to their education.

Although commuter students are the majority of college students, institutional response to their needs has been impeded by common misperceptions and myths that persist and reflect outdated or inaccurate perspectives. For example, commuter students of both traditional and non-traditional age continue to be thought of as apathetic or uninterested in campus life. Some administrators still believe the myth of what works for traditional residential students would work equally well for commuter students... if they would just be a little more serious about their education (Jacoby 1989, 2000).

However, by using what we know about commuter students, we can create opportunities to enhance their engagement in learning in ways that meet their needs. Rather than expecting commuter students to adjust their lifestyles and schedules, it is the responsibility of colleges and universities to design curricular and co-curricular activities specifically and intentionally to engage commuter students in learning.

The National Survey of Student Engagement as a Framework for Engaging Commuter Students

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides a useful framework for developing strategies to engage commuter students in learning. Since 2000, the NSSE has annually assessed the extent to which students in four-year colleges and universities participate in practices that hundreds of research studies indicate are strongly associated with high levels of learning and development (Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer 2001). A similar survey of community college students is also being piloted. The NSSE identifies five clusters of engaging activities that are called benchmarks of effective educational practice. Figure 1 enumerates the benchmarks and describes the types of activities that fall under each.

Figure 1: Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Level of Academic Challenge

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.

Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college.

Student Interactions with Faculty Members

Through interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom, students see first-hand how experts think about and solve practical problems. As a result, their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life-long learning.

Enriching Educational Experiences

Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment the academic program. Experiencing diversity teaches students valuable things about themselves and other cultures. Used appropriately, technology facilitates learning and promotes collaboration between peers and instructors. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide students with opportunities to synthesize, integrate, and apply their knowledge. Such experiences make learning more meaningful and, ultimately, more useful because what students know becomes a part of who they are.

Supportive Campus Environment

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.

—Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer 2001

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In an analysis of data from the NSSE, Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer (2001) compared three categories of students: on-campus residents, walking commuters, and driving commuters. They found that students who live on campus, both first-year students and seniors, had higher scores on all the benchmarks, although many of the differences were relatively small. Some of the largest differences were found in the benchmarks of student interactions with faculty members and enriching educational experiences. Results also indicated that, although many commuter students have time constraints tied to work and family matters, they expend as much effort as resident students in areas that relate directly to their classes (Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer 2001). These findings are consistent with previous research (Chickering 1974; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991).

Strategies for Engaging Commuter Students

This section provides examples of strategies for engaging commuter students for each of the NSSE benchmarks. The strategies that are offered vary in complexity of organization and amount of resources required.

Level of Academic Challenge

No one rises to low expectations. Engaging students in activities that stretch them intellectually and creatively, together with appropriate supports, creates the ideal conditions for learning and development. As mentioned earlier, it is critical for faculty to be sensitive to the demands on commuter students' time and energy while, at the same time, challenging them by setting high expectations.

All students, but especially commuter students, should have a faculty advisor or mentor who works closely with them to set academic goals and regularly reviews their progress towards their academic and other life goals. Advisors who are familiar with students' skills, experiences, and aspirations can point them toward appropriately challenging courses and other learning opportunities, help them choose among options, and support them when issues begin to feel overwhelming. As students and advisors assess progress, students should be encouraged to revise their educational plans as appropriate. In this way, students who have not progressed as far or as quickly as they would like would not feel that they have failed but, rather, that they are empowered to make modifications as a result of life circumstances or changes in their academic program.

Freshman seminars that are designed to introduce students to learning in college are ideal settings to set high expectations and provide support to students as they deal with academic challenges. All too often, these seminars consist of little more than a series of guest lecturers who describe various campus services and programs or discussions about students' adjustment issues. Instead, such courses can, for example, engage students in service-learning experiences that expose them to the assets and issues in the community that surrounds the campus, to critical reflection through written and oral expression, and to working collaboratively with others on real-life problems.

In order to enable commuter students to engage in some of the most academically challenging learning experiences, including the kinds of active and collaborative learning activities described below, faculty should consider providing in-class time for students to work together on group projects. Although commuter students benefit from working on challenging group projects, coordinating schedules can often be difficult and stressful for them.

Active and Collaborative Learning

Experiential learning, based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle, is "a process in which a person experiences something directly (not vicariously), reflects on the experience as something new or as related to other experiences, develops some concept by which to name the experience and connect it with other experiences, and uses the concept in subsequent actions as a guide for behavior" (Gish 1979, pp. 2–3). It takes the form of internships, service-learning, cooperative education, field work, action research, practica, student teaching, and clinical practice. In addition, there are many experiential components that can be integrated into courses across disciplines, including interviews, site visits, shadowing, role-playing, experiments, simulations, games, and various field projects and group exercises.

Experiential learning is a powerful pedagogy. However, it is important to avoid the mistake of thinking that experience equals learning. Faculty must engage students in reflection that is specifically designed to achieve specific learning and development outcomes. Reflection activities can be subjective, providing some degree of structure through which students examine how the experience has affected their feelings. Reflection should also be objective, leading students to integrate their experiences with course content and to test their experiences against relevant theories.

How can experiential learning be designed to be "commuter friendly"? One possibility is to provide opportunities for students to integrate work and community experiences in which they are already involved into appropriate courses and cocurricular workshops. For example, if a service-learning course on social problems has a five-hour-per-week service requirement, permitting a student who volunteers with her church or in her child's school to use this type of experience to fulfill the requirement is respectful of ways in which many commuter students are already involved in their communities. Or, if students are required to perform their service at particular community sites, it is helpful to students with children if at least one of the sites offers opportunities for families to serve (and reflect) together. In a workshop for student leaders that meets six times a semester to examine various topics related to leadership, students beyond those who hold traditional positions with campus organizations should be encouraged to enroll. This would include students who serve in off-campus leadership positions in organizations such as church choirs, PTAs, neighborhood associations, and scout groups.

Another way to enable students who must work to participate in service-learning is through Federal Work-Study community service positions. The Federal Work-Study

program requires that institutions that use Federal Work-Study funds spend 7 percent of these funds on wages for students in community-service positions and maintain a child or family literacy program (Campus Compact 2003). As a result, many institutions have created America Reads programs in which students earn part of their financial aid by tutoring children having difficulty with reading. To engage student tutors in active learning, they should be involved in reflection about such issues as educational inequality, immigration, poverty, and child literacy.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is becoming more popular as a pedagogy that encourages active and collaborative learning. PBL “challenges students to ‘learn to learn,’ working cooperatively in groups to seek solutions to real world problems.... PBL prepares students to think critically and analytically, and to find and use appropriate learning resources” (Duch 2002). In order to incorporate PBL into courses in a “commuter friendly” way, courses can be scheduled to provide opportunities for prolonged interaction and, at the same time, to be easy to work into the life of a student employed full time or with family-care responsibilities. It is possible, for example, to organize the approximately 48 semester hours for a three-credit course into six full-day Saturday sessions and two extended Friday evening sessions to open and close the term.

Student Interactions with Faculty Members

Over time research has shown that meaningful interactions with faculty members inside and outside the classroom are among the college experiences that students find most valuable and that positively affect retention (Tinto 1993). With some creativity, existing programs can be adapted to engage commuter students and new ones can be added.

In one simple but innovative example, a freshman seminar could be set for Mondays and Wednesdays at 11 a.m. Students selecting this section would be advised not to schedule a class during the noon hour so that they would be able to have lunch, study, and relax together with the faculty member who would also be available during those times. An enhancement to this scenario would be to reserve the classroom on Fridays so the faculty member could meet with students one-on-one or in groups or arrange for occasional guest speakers to interact with the students.

Information technology has opened up many possibilities for faculty mentors to engage students in regular, albeit asynchronous, communication that may be difficult or impossible in person or by telephone. E-mail mentoring, or e-mentoring, programs are becoming increasingly common. Faculty mentors can be paired with students based on a variety of factors, such as career interests, major, or personal characteristics. Faculty are also finding that technology enables them to engage students in their classes in online discussions of complex topics or questions that some students (e.g., nontraditional-aged students, students from cultures where it is not common practice to challenge authority figures openly) may find difficult to discuss in a classroom setting.

Experiential learning offers many opportunities for faculty and students to interact inside and outside the classroom. In a study of more than fifteen hundred students at twenty colleges and universities, Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997) found that many positive outcomes of faculty-student interaction occur as a result of service-learning. The study revealed that “students perceive themselves to be more skillful when they have a close relationship with college faculty members” (p.13). They also suggested that increasing faculty-student relationships is likely to have long-term effects on student development. In order to reap these benefits, faculty must work together with students to meet community needs and in critical reflection.

Faculty who “send” students into the community miss out on powerful learning opportunities for students and satisfying substantive interactions. However, preparing students for work at community sites, organizing and monitoring their projects, and reading reflective journals is very time consuming. In response, some universities have developed programs in which experienced undergraduate students serve as teaching assistants to enable faculty to design and implement service-learning courses with high levels of student interaction. Undergraduate teaching assistants have the opportunity to work closely with a faculty member while developing leadership and academic skills.

Working with a faculty mentor in conducting research is one of the most stimulating and rewarding undergraduate experiences and can begin as early as the freshman year (Stevens 2000). Undergraduate students can assist faculty with basic tasks while experiencing the thrill of working at the frontier of knowledge discovery and creation. More and more institutions ranging from community colleges to large research universities are establishing centers that promote and support undergraduate research. Such support includes training faculty to involve undergraduates in research, small grants for research projects that include undergraduates, and seminars that educate students about research techniques. The Council on Undergraduate Research offers a wide range of services regarding undergraduate research programs and has 3,000 members at more than 870 institutions (Council on Undergraduate Research 2003).

Enriching Educational Experiences

Higher education has become adept at creating vibrant educational programs that engage new students in learning by connecting the curriculum with out-of-class activities to bring coherence to the college experience and encouraging stimulating relationships with faculty and peers. Without doubt, one of the most powerful means of engaging first-year students in learning is through learning communities. The many well-documented benefits of learning communities include organizing students and faculty into smaller groups, encouraging integration of the curriculum, and helping students become socialized to the expectations of college or specific disciplines (Shapiro and Levine 1999). This section describes how to reap the benefits of learning communities and other enriching educational experiences for commuter students.

Curricular Learning Communities

There are excellent models of curricular learning communities that can be designed intentionally for commuter students. Three commonly implemented approaches to curricular learning communities are paired or clustered courses, cohorts in large classes, and team-taught programs.

The paired-course model, the simplest of learning community models in terms of curricular strategy, typically enrolls a group of twenty to thirty students in two courses. Block scheduling, arranging the courses so that they meet in back-to-back time slots, is recommended. This provides faculty some flexibility in arranging activities across the two courses and makes scheduling more convenient for commuter students. Paired-course learning communities tend to include existing courses that enroll significant numbers of first-year students. One of the two courses is usually a basic composition or communications course and might be paired with a first-year experience or freshman seminar course designed to assist students in their transition to college. Courses are individually taught, but faculty work together to coordinate syllabi and assignments. Classes are often organized around logical curricular connections and skill sets. For example, a pairing of calculus with general chemistry promotes scientific discovery and quantitative reasoning skills.

The cluster approach typically links three or four individually taught courses around a theme. One course is often a writing class, and clusters generally include an integrative seminar. Clusters tend to be small, enrolling cohorts of twenty to thirty students. Faculty commitment in clusters is usually greater and more time intensive than in paired courses. Faculty collaboratively decide the theme, coordinate readings and assignments across the cluster, and may share responsibility for teaching the seminar.

Another type of learning community generally involves first-year students and is commonly referred to as freshman interest groups (FIGs). This approach works well at large universities or at others where freshmen enroll in at least one or two large lecture courses in a semester. In this model, learning-community students represent a subset of the total enrollment in larger classes. In addition to one or two large courses, FIG students usually enroll as a cohort in a smaller writing course or a weekly seminar.

Team-taught programs, sometimes called coordinated studies, usually enroll forty to seventy-five students in two or more courses organized around a theme. This is the most complex approach in terms of curricular integration and faculty and often requires both full-time faculty and student involvement. However, there are also successful part-time models. In most instances, the learning community constitutes students' entire schedules for at least a semester and sometimes an entire academic year. Some full-time programs permit part-time student enrollment, which is a useful option for commuter students who could not otherwise participate. In coordinated studies, themes are interdisciplinary and may be based in the liberal arts or emphasize skill development in related disciplines, such as math and science. Students break into smaller groups with a faculty member to discuss assigned texts and to connect what

they are learning. Each learning community model represents a way to address fragmentation in the curriculum by allowing faculty to teach and students to learn in more interdisciplinary and intellectually stimulating ways (Levine and Shapiro 2000).

Upper-level students who have participated in learning communities can be continually engaged as peer advisors, tutors, or teaching assistants. Peer-led integrative seminars enable experienced students to assume a key leadership role. Such positions are ideal for commuter students because they can often be arranged to fit their busy schedules. Peer leadership roles help commuter students remain connected to learning communities after their initial enrollment. Although students typically receive credit or some other tangible form of recognition for their participation, the most important rewards might be the opportunities to remain connected to each other and to faculty and the satisfaction of helping to create community for others.

Welcoming Commuter Students into Living-Learning Communities

Unfortunately, at many institutions, learning communities for first-year students are in fact living-learning communities that are designed for students who live in residence halls on campus. Some of these communities boast that “commuter students are welcome,” but, in reality, commuter students often feel that they are not full members of the community. There are, however, practices that can be employed to be inclusive of commuter students.

Access. Because program facilities, including classrooms, offices, and computer labs, are often located in residence halls, access to these facilities and to activities that take place there is of paramount importance for commuter students. Although on some campuses residence halls are unlocked during the day, most have twenty-four-hour electronic key access systems. Some living-learning programs offer unlimited access to commuter student participants, but most restrict access to specific floors or to certain times. To truly welcome commuter students, both the ramifications of limited access and the need for residence hall security must be considered. It is difficult to feel like a full member of a community if one’s access to its physical facilities is limited. Such limitations discourage program attendance as well as informal interactions with faculty, staff, and peers.

Student governance. Commuter students should be represented on boards and committees that govern living-learning programs. Because commuter students’ needs are different from those of their residential counterparts, they should be involved in community decision-making. Issues of access to facilities and personnel and scheduling of classes and programs particularly warrant commuter student input.

Communication. Regular communication about opportunities for involvement and program news is essential for commuter student participants. Classroom announcements are effective, as are e-mail and listservs, as long as convenient on-

campus computer workstations are available. Individual campus mailboxes or frequent home mailings augment other methods of communication (Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt 1991). It is especially important that complete information (including date, time, location, need for advance tickets or reservations, and whether guests may attend) reaches commuter students in a timely manner so that they can make arrangements to attend. These arrangements may involve transportation, adjustment of work schedules, and family issues.

Parking. Parking for commuter students in living-learning programs can be a troublesome issue. On many campuses, commuter lots are located at some distance from the center of campus and not necessarily close to residence halls where the programs are housed. Although some institutions lift parking lot restrictions on weekday evenings and weekends, students may not always have time to move vehicles before an evening class or program. Commuter student involvement in living-learning programs may depend on how safe they feel returning to their cars after dark. It is worthwhile to explore with parking services the possibility of special permits to enable commuter students who are members of living-learning programs to park near the residence halls in which the programs are located. In addition, it is important to ensure that walking paths and parking lots are well lit and that security services are available to commuter students who leave a program or class at dusk or later.

Scheduling of courses and programs. The timing of classes and cocurricular activities frequently determines the extent to which commuter students can participate. Living-learning programs often involve course clusters. Clusters that meet two or three days rather than five and that are scheduled without long gaps between classes are most convenient for commuter students. Cocurricular activities associated with living-learning communities generally include lectures, films, discussions, and review sessions as well as a rich array of cultural, social, and recreational programs. If these are scheduled late in the evenings, hours after classes are over, many commuter students will have left the campus because of work, family commitments, or transportation issues. Lunchtime and afternoons immediately following classes are often times when commuter students can fit these important activities into their schedules (Stevens 2000).

“Four-Stage Plans”

Recognizing the value of enriching educational experiences throughout college, some institutions are creating “four-year plans” that recommend particular types of experiences for each year. The experiences increase in complexity and become more focused as students progress. However, it is important to design “plans” to be appropriate for commuter students who enter college after a break in their education, transfer from another institution, attend part time, or “stop out” intermittently to deal with family or work priorities. It is therefore more “commuter friendly” to construct a “four-stage plan” that is flexible rather than tied to a full-time, four-year college career. The stages could include moving in, moving through, moving on, and staying connected—to adapt Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering’s (1989) college transition model.

In such a plan, it would be important to offer new-student seminars that are relevant to students with significant life and work experiences as well as those designed for students who have just finished high school. In addition, many institutions are creating senior capstone courses either as part of four-stage plans or as independent entities. Capstones enable students to tie the various aspects of their learning together and to bring coherence to their collegiate experience. Although they often consist of integrative papers, capstone courses can take many forms. Among these are internships, research projects, service-learning, and forms of artistic expression such as films, poetry, or performance. In developing capstone courses, it is important to ascertain that they are developmentally appropriate for all students, not just for traditional-age students finishing college in four years. For example, an internship may be just the right bridge to the world of work for a twenty-two-year old who has held only student jobs on campus. However, requiring an adult parent who has worked for a number of years to do the same type of internship may not be useful. A creative project that ties the curriculum to life experiences could be far more meaningful.

On-Campus Employment

Given that most commuter students work during college, they should be strongly encouraged to work on, rather than off, campus. They should be informed about the advantages of on-campus employment: avoiding the “three-point” commute between home, campus, and work; flexible scheduling around and between classes; supervisors’ willingness to reduce work hours at times of heavy academic work; and the workplace as a means to learn about the campus, meet people, and find a “home away from home” on campus.

In addition, on-campus student employment can be made into an enriching educational experience. Student employee development programs can enable them to learn and use skills such as synthesizing information, creative problem solving, effective communication, and collaboration and teamwork. Student employees can be included in office meetings and involved in discussions about goals, strategies for achieving them, and assessment of success. Their work can be structured so that they assume an area of responsibility that they work on with some degree of autonomy rather than being assigned only menial tasks.

Supportive Campus Environment

Commuter students often feel the lack of a supportive campus environment. They describe themselves as missing a sense of belonging or of feeling wanted by the institution. Students who do not have a sense of belonging complain that their college experience is like “stopping at the mall” to get what they need on the way to somewhere else (Wilmes and Quade 1986; Jacoby 2000).

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) emphasize the need to acknowledge that, from the commuter student’s point of view, finding one’s way into (or back into) college, understanding its myriad opportunities, figuring out how things work, and

then making the college experience part of one's life require a new set of complex learnings. Whether they enter college after full-time work or homemaking, a community college or high school, commuter students must make the transition from a world in which they feel comfortable and in control to a new world in which they feel like strangers. They are faced with uncertainties and risks, as well as opportunities. They may lack confidence in their ability to handle the academic work at the new institution and to meet the expectations their professors may have of them. If the campus environment is not intentionally designed to make commuter students feel that they matter and that they are recognized as members of the community, they will feel marginal. And, as Schlossberg (1985) reminds us, students who feel marginal are less likely to engage in the enriching educational experiences that lead to success and satisfaction.

Because the first semester is particularly challenging for new commuter students, Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) believe that a comprehensive institutional strategy is ideal. They recommend that institutions consider establishing an "entry center" that assembles all functions related to entry: recruitment, pre-admission counseling and admissions, assessment of prior learning, academic advising, financial aid, orientation, and registration. Although most of these services can and should be offered electronically, it is important not to assume that this alleviates the need for personal interaction. In fact, Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering suggest that a single staff member be assigned to work with each new student from pre-admission through the first semester.

Given that this comprehensive strategy, as attractive as it is, would require massive reorganization on most campuses, there are other interventions that are easier to implement. As early as the recruitment and pre-admission stage, there is much that can be done. Students' early impressions of the extent to which they will "fit" at an institution are influenced by the ways in which the institution portrays itself in its publications and on its website. In this vein, print and online text and photographs should represent all types of students and a variety of life styles. In addition, recruitment and admissions officers should be able to provide prospective commuter students with thorough and accurate information about housing, transportation, child care, and other services, as well as opportunities to become involved in campus life (Jacoby 1989).

Orientation programs should make all students—commuters on a predominantly residential campus, adult learners, part-time students, transfers—feel equally welcome to the campus community. If "one program for all" is the approach, activities should be appropriate for all students and should enable them to interact with both new and experienced students like themselves. Adult learners returning to school, for example, should not be expected to view skits about date rape and alcohol abuse or to participate in physical activities that may make them feel uncomfortable. Various orientation program formats should be considered, including, but not limited to, weekday evening, weekend, overnight, and online options.

For many commuter students, whether they are of traditional age living with their parents or living independently with a spouse or partner, the first people they turn to for support and guidance are most likely family members. This is particularly true for students who lack or do not use on-campus advisors or support systems. As a result, orientation programs for family members are valuable. Such programs should be designed to address a wide variety of family systems and situations.

In addition, programs can be created for commuter students' parents and partners to enable them to offer immediate support to their student in times of need. While parents and partners should not be expected to substitute for on-campus advisors and mentors, they can complement and supplement them. Online or in-person workshops could be offered to parents and partners, together with training on how to access information and resources to address students' concerns.

The manner in which campus facilities are designed and the ways in which services are delivered can create either a welcoming or a chilling environment for commuter students. For example, older students are likely to feel uncomfortable in a student cafeteria where there is very loud music and bean-bag chairs that are difficult for them to get into and out of. Campus health centers that offer workshops on sexually transmitted diseases and "date-rape drugs" could also offer information on menopause, osteoporosis, and low back pain, for example. If services are not open during hours when commuter students need them, such as early mornings and evenings, commuters may feel frustrated and disenfranchised. Conversely, commuter lounges with lockers, microwaves, eating areas, and computers go a long way to making students feel that they matter and that they have a "place to be" on campus.

Class scheduling policies for both individual courses and learning communities based on clustered courses that are designed to fit into the lives of commuter students are critical for a supportive campus environment. In addition to traditional day and evening classes, institutions should consider "twilight" classes (4 to 6 p.m.), "dawning" classes (6 to 8 a.m.), and classes that meet once or twice a week rather than four times. All types of courses—including upper-level, laboratory, and language—should be offered in alternative formats. Without doubt, distance learning enables commuter students to take courses when and where it is convenient for them. However, it is important to realize that not all commuter students prefer distance learning and that distance learning does not meet all their curricular needs.

The realities of commuter students' lives may impede or limit their ability to participate as fully in campus life outside the classroom as they would like. As noted earlier, some students are more interested in active involvement in co-curricular activities and organizations than others. However, it is important not to assume that this is more true of traditional-age students who live on campus. Rather, it is incumbent upon administrators to carefully examine policies and practices related to co-curricular programming and to ensure that there are no institutional barriers, even inadvertent ones, to commuter students' involvement. Commuter students should be intentionally and explicitly invited to engage. A range of educational, cultural, social,

and recreational sports program that includes activities appropriate for all students should be offered. Programs should be scheduled at a variety of times to accommodate students' varied schedules, including lunch time, late afternoon, and early evenings. Information about activities and meetings should be disseminated sufficiently in advance of events so that commuter students will have time to rearrange their family, work, and transportation schedules to attend.

All types of students should be encouraged to participate in student government and in campus governance organizations. Too often, the "typical" student leaders are the ones we solicit and nominate for key leadership positions. However, at many institutions, adult learners, part-time students, and long-distance commuters have been successful campus leaders. It is also important to design criteria for campus awards that recognize student leadership accomplishments off campus to the same extent that on-campus involvement and leadership are recognized (Jacoby 1989).

Programs that encourage the involvement of commuter students' families should be offered in addition to traditional programming. Family evenings or weekends at the recreation center are popular on many campuses, as are family movies and performances. For students with children, parallel programming is an innovative way to provide opportunities for their engagement. As one of many examples, a lecture or performance could be held simultaneously with a children's art class or puppet show next door.

The Collegia Program, Seattle University

An exceptionally innovative and exciting model for creating a supportive environment for commuter students serves as the final example of this article. Unlike the other examples described throughout, it is currently unique to Seattle University (S.U.). In 1996, S.U. established the Collegia Program. The concept of *collegium* (from the Latin, meaning "gathering place") was inspired by then-president William J. Sullivan, SJ. As an urban, commuter, Jesuit institution with fewer than 25 percent of its students living on campus, S.U. lacked a sense of place, or of belonging, for the majority of its students. In addition to a sense of belonging, the desired outcomes of the Collegia Program are: identifying with a diverse student community, learning beyond the classroom, participation in the broader campus community, and institutional attachment.

To achieve the desired outcomes, the physical and programmatic elements of the collegia are carefully conceptualized and implemented. Each collegium is a single room of approximately twelve hundred square feet, furnished and equipped to provide for the needs and comforts of commuter students. Existing space in campus buildings is selected and renovated as necessary. In each case, a designer who understands the desired outcomes develops an interior concept that makes the best use of the space and is conducive a variety student activities. The collegia are intimate, personal, and inviting. The excellence of design and high-quality furnishings communicate clearly that collegia offer the best to students and that their best is expected in return, echoing the theme of

high expectations. The unique identity of each collegium is based on a theme developed around a focal point or special feature, such as windows, a piano, or a fireplace. For example, in the first collegium, prominent stained-glass windows suggested a traditional reading room motif and directed the selection of the theme and colors. Another collegium is notable for its elegant atmosphere and thick white carpet. Student members immediately established the tradition of removing their shoes as they enter.

In each collegium, a small kitchen equipped with refrigerator, microwave, dishwasher, flatware, and dishes provides a comfortable eating place and encourages a social atmosphere and interaction. Tables and chairs are present for small-group study and conversation, along with a computer and printer for e-mail and quick projects. Soft chairs, sofas, lamps, and stereo promote quiet study and meditation. A TV and VCR become the attraction for film nights and other collegium events.

Because a collegium is designed as a caring community designed to foster relationships outside the classroom, individuals with clear roles and responsibilities are strategically placed in each. Graduate work-study students serve as mentors, role models, and informal leaders. They provide a regular presence in the room and personalize the collegium by calling members by name. They connect students to campus resources, host special activities, and respond to questions. Faculty associates have an informal presence in the collegium. They encourage a culture of conversation, advise students on academic and personal matters, reach out to invite new students to join the community, and act as hosts for the collegium and for special events. Collegia coordinators are graduate students who help organize and operate the individual collegia. The collegia director plans, develops, implements, and evaluates the overall program; hires and supervises the collegia coordinators; and manages the program budget.

There are a variety of options for establishing collegium membership, including class standing, special interests, and random selection. For the first collegium, a college-based model was chosen, in the hope that sharing a collegium experience with others in their field of study would enable students to develop friendships among classroom acquaintances and that faculty from the associated college would be a natural presence. The population selected was undergraduate commuters from the College of Arts and Sciences, the largest college at S.U. The size of the collegium membership was determined to enable comfortable accommodation of student members in a limited space and facilitation of the development of community among collegium members. Each collegium community has 250 to 350 commuter student members (Orlando 2000).

Early assessment of the Collegia Program clearly demonstrated its success and identified several themes. The collegium helps students develop relationships and form friendships, build a learning cohort, stay on campus longer and get further involved in campus activities, and leads to a positive college experience. Further study is ongoing to learn more about how a collegium community develops and what elements lead to achievement of the desired outcomes (Orlando 2000).

Conclusion

As commuter students become more diverse and attend an increasingly wider variety of institutions, educators must develop a thorough understanding of the needs of commuter students and how to implement strategies that enable them to benefit equitably from effective educational practices. The strategies offered in this article are readily adaptable to all types of institutions and their differing populations of commuter students. The NSSE reveals that students who commute are less engaged in their learning when compared with residential students. By employing the strategies described in this article, institutions can create environments that correct this inequity and enable all their students to enjoy a rich and engaging college experience.

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