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ABSTRACT

Research in higher education attributes significant differences to the learning experiences of commuter and resident students. The literature indicates that the nature of the on-campus experience, the characteristics of the student, and the motivation for learning for the commuter student may have significant implications for educational planning. The actual number of commuter students in American higher education is in dispute. It is clear, though, that commuter students compose a larger percentage of the student population in American higher education. For this review, commuter students will be defined as those student living with their parents, spouse, family or by themselves, but are not simply "living off campus." This review of the literature focuses on the commuter student as a unique person in higher education and with educational needs distinctive from the resident student and the student "living off campus." The review will be concerned only with the literature published in the last 5 years (1971-1975). The literature suggests particular characteristics for a commuter student, effects of commuting on the educational experience, and it reviews several models, proposed and in operation for meeting the needs of commuting students. (Author/PG)

RESEARCH ON COMMUTER STUDENTS FROM 1971-1975

By: Dan Flanagan

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Introduction

Research in higher education attributes significant differences to the learning experiences of commuter and resident students. The literature indicates that the nature of the on-campus experience, the characteristics of the student and the motivation for learning for the commuter student may have significant implications for educational planning.

The actual number of commuter students in American higher education is in dispute. Schuchman estimates commuter students to number two-thirds of the total full-time student population. Harrington suggests that more than fifty percent of all students (part-time and full-time) are commuters. Other estimates are more conservative. (Trivett) It is clear, though, that commuter students compose a large percentage of the student population in American higher education.

Commuter students will be defined as those students living with their parents, spouse, family, or by themselves, but are not simply "living off campus." Research on commuter students has oftentimes failed to distinguish between these two types of students. There are significant differences in the characteristics, needs and motivations of the commuter student and the student "living off-campus". This is a review of the literature focusing on the commuter student.

Educational planners are interested in research on commuter students for a variety of reasons. Among the reasons one finds that commuter students are found to be more dissatisfied with their educational experience than resident students. (Sinnett)

The dissatisfaction may stem in part from the fact that most programming (even in commuter colleges) is patterned after and/or focused on the residential student. (Hardy)

This review of literature, then, focuses on the commuter student as a unique person in higher education and with educational needs distinctive from the resident student and the student "living off-campus". The review will be concerned only with the literature published in the last five years (1971-1975). The literature suggests particular characteristics for a commuter student, effects of commuting on the educational experience, and it reviews several models, proposed and in operation for meeting the needs of commuting students.

Characteristics of Commuting Students

The literature suggests four broad categories within which characteristics of commuter students might differ from other students. These categories include personal history or background, educational goals, abilities in terms of knowledge and skills, and work commitments. Personal history would include the student's socio-economic background and significant life experiences prior to entering higher education. Educational goals refer to the reasons a student pursues higher education. A student's ability refers to the student's level of cognitive and affective growth. The final category refers to the involvement of the student in work not directly related to the learning experience.

In terms of personal history, a commuter student is more likely than resident students to be a first-generation college attender. (Schuchman) The socio-economic status of his/her parents is likely to be lower than that of the parents of the resident student. (Hardwick, Hazlo) In fact, two of the

most prominent reasons given by commuter students in the selection of a college are cost and proximity. (Marwick and Hazlo) Both reasons are related to the socio-economic status of the student's family.

Educational goals are likely to be instrumental to the achievement of a more desirable goal for the commuter student. Hence, the college experience will probably not be the main concern in the life of a commuter student. There is the obligation of the home (parents or family) which may change little from high school days if the commuter student continues to reside with the parents. (Schuchman) The academic schedules of commuter students tend to be arranged so as to minimize the amount of time spent on campus. (Harrington) The educational experience is not found to be the focal point in the lives of commuter students. Only fifteen to twenty hours per week is spent on campus. (Schuchman) Family or work environments take precedence over the educational environment. (Counelis, Dolan) The commuter student's significant relationships remain with high school friends or neighbors. (Goldberg; Harrington) Higher education serves only a functional relationship in the life of a commuter student, whereas it is likely to be a more central concern to the resident student.

The literature suggests that not all commuter students at two year institutions share the same educational goals. For example, Goldberg notes the difference between those students planning to transfer to four year institutions and those "Terminal" students who seek employment following graduation. Terminal students tend to focus on the educational experience as important less than those commuter students planning

four year programs. (Goldberg)

Describing the student body of Rhode Island Junior College, its dean of students Arthur Goldberg referred to the term "cultural illiteracy". (Goldberg 1973: 39) Cultural illiteracy was apparently related to the student's background. Fifty-six percent of his students came from the lower half of their graduating class and "one may deduce that a majority of the students come from a culturally deprived milieu..." This type of correlation between a student's background and her/his abilities is common in the literature.

Research literature is generally emphatic in its conclusion that commuter and resident students differ in levels of cognitive and affective growth. Commuter students are pictured as slower to change than resident students. The changes referred to are largely non-intellectual. (Harrington) Commuter students appear less mature than resident students (Schuchman), particularly evidenced in their inability to break ties with the home and move in more self-directed patterns.

Most literature infers that significant academic differences exist between commuter and resident students. Richard Call's comparison of commuter and resident students at York College does not support that assumption. Call's study uncovered no significant differences in intellectual abilities between commuter and resident students at York College.

The literature suggests that resident students are more likely than commuter students to graduate in four years and less likely to drop out of school. (Trivett) Harrington reports that about twenty percent of commuter students at Wayne State University graduate with a bachelors degree in four years.

Work commitments are more important to commuter students than to resident students in terms of time spent on the job. Commuter students are likely to spend twenty or more hours per week on the job. (Schuchman) In a study of Wayne State University students (a largely commuter population) seventy one percent of the student body was found to work more than twenty hours per week, (forty one percent working forty hours or more per week).

Minkevich researched the different characteristics between commuter students attending four year institutions and commuter students attending two year institutions. He found the commuter students attending four year institutions to be more affiliatory and those attending two year institutions to be more dependent on other persons. In short, he found junior and community college students to be "more conventional and less independent, thus, more susceptible to the influence of others, than their peers in four-year institutions." (Minkevich, George and Marshall)

In sum, research has found the commuter student to be significantly different than the resident student. The commuter student is more likely to have parents of a lower socio-economic status, consider the educational experience in relation to life goals differently, experience non-intellectual changes at different times, and have a greater commitment to work than the resident student.

Effects of Commuting on the Educational Experience

The literature suggests four general categories of the effects commuting has upon college students. The first is the practical consideration of time. The second category involves the student's perception of and adjustment to the college environment. The third refers to the divided life of a commuting student and

the conflict of loyalties among education, home and work. The final category involves the fostering of cognitive and affective growth of commuter students in separate environments.

The literature suggests that the distance a commuter student must travel and the time it takes to travel are important factors in educational planning. (Hardwick and Hazlo) The commuter student must consider the time it takes to travel from home to campus, parking and walking to class as significant factors in her/his educational experience. A study at the University of Alberta indicated that a commuter student was likely to spend more than five hours a week traveling to school. (Williamson) The same study concluded that commuting distances have been increasing which suggests that travel time may become a more important factor to commuting students.

Sauber suggests that commuting has a significant effect on the student's perception of and adjustment to college. (1972: 205) The "intensity" of the student's exposure to the college community is seen as an important variable in perception and adjustment. Sauber found that commuter students adjusted to sexual relations better and worried less about future vocational and educational goals than resident students. (1972: 207-8) An important variable not considered by Sauber was the student's "focal point" in life. If commuter students tend to use home and family as their reference point in life, their perception of and adjustment to the "campus experience" might be different than the resident student who uses the campus as the focal point of life.

The divided life of a commuter student is generally referred to as his/her three worlds: campus, home and work. The literature suggests that commuter students are often faced with conflicting

values in these worlds. (Harrington; Schuchman) The values of the home environment may be quite different from those encouraged on campus. The problem of conflicting values tends to be greater for the first generation college goer. (Schuchman)

The effects of commuting on the learning experience can be increasingly negative if the student has a primary orientation toward off-campus loci of living. Research indicates that commuter students tend to have off-campus loci of living. (Counselis, Dolan) Higher education is likely to have only a functional (as opposed to central) relationship to the student's life goals. The campus becomes a place which is selectively purposeful. On campus schedules tend to be arranged in order "to accomodate car pools and work schedules" (Harrington) and any extracurricular activity is chosen for its relationship to academic progress. (Counselis, Dolan)

Schuchman suggests that commuter students are more likely to have problems dealing with "authority". (Schuchman, 468) He views a student's ability to deal with authority closely associated with her/his moving away from parental dominance toward self-direction. Living at home is a sign of an inability to move away from parental dominance. Schuchman's point is that an "unresolved struggle with parental authority has direct reflections on the student's attitude toward the school and the faculty, and this struggle will undoubtedly have its impact on the student's ability to learn." (1974: 468)

It seems clear through the literature that commuter students choose different environments to facilitate different areas of personal growth. As Harrington points out resident students are likely to experience an environment that encourages both

cognitive and affective growth. The commuter student, on the other hand, tends to experience emotional and social growth separate from intellectual growth. (Hardwick and Hazlo).

In sum, there seem to be several significant effects of commuting on the student's life. The practical problems of travel relate to the amount of time a student has for learning, work and home experiences. Commuting seems to relate to a student's perception of and adjustment to college. Because the commuting student lives in so many worlds, conflicting values are likely to be experienced. Finally, the divided world of the commuting student lends itself to one environment (campus) fostering intellectual growth and another environment (home) encouraging affective growth. There may or may not be a relationship between the two experiences.

Analysis

There were several problems present in terms of research methods, definitions, interpretation of the data and use of assumptions that complicated this review of literature. First, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the unique characteristics and problems of commuter students when research methods tend to ignore the uniqueness of commuter students. Commuter students were generally treated as an identifiable group in each research project. Oftentimes data for commuter students and students "living off-campus" were not differentiated. Grouping commuter students in such a way tends to ignore important differences in ethnic background, residential location (urban, suburban), age and sex. The populations involved in each research project should be described in more detail.

Secondly, several assumptions may have had an important

impact on research conclusions. An image of the two year college as somehow inferior often pervaded the literature. Schuchman's apparent assumption that living with one's parents has a direct relationship to a student's ability to cope with authority may or may not be accurate. Several researchers tended to correlate past academic achievement (and socio-economic background) with potential for academic success. This is an assumption currently under serious question. Personal judgements and assumptions should be minimized in any research effort.

Finally, there are two important conclusions one could draw from the literature. Both conclusions suggest further research. First, a student's loci of living seems to have a significant effect on his/her learning experience. For a commuter student, the loci of living tends to be off-campus. A suggested hypothesis for research to test might be: A student's loci of living affects the amount of change during the college experience.

The type and amount of support for change a student receives from significant adults and peers appears to be important. Commuter students tend to experience significant adult support for "change" in faculty members (and possibly parents). The parents, though, often act counter to the objectives for change of the faculty. The result is a conflict of values experienced by the student. The commuter student does not seem to have significant peer support for change, at least she/he does not have the potential of peer support for change as a resident student. The resident student is more likely to benefit from adult and peer support for change. If the literature is correct in suggesting that the significant peer relationships for commuter students continue to be high school friends and/or neighbors,

peer relationships for commuter students will tend not to be as supportive of change as will peer relationships for resident students. (Peer relationships may not always be supportive of change). In short, what the literature seems to suggest is that both peer and adult support for change enhances the educational experience for the student.

It is interesting to note that students living off-campus (or in units other than home or dormitories) would tend to have even less support for change than the commuter student. The off-campus student may or may not have significant peer support for change, and will not have the adult support commuter students could find in their parents. The literature does suggest that off-campus students experience more problems than either the commuter or the resident student. This is one of the reasons the special needs and characteristics of the off-campus student deserve special attention. To date, there has been little research on the off-campus student.

Proposals and Models

Before concluding, it seems appropriate to investigate some of the models for change in commuter education since 1971. Most of the proposals for improving commuter education have centered around two elements: (1) creating more opportunity for contact with faculty members and fellow students; (Schuchman) and (2) building peer support groups. Significant new programs addressing these particular needs have been successful at the University of Maryland and Boston University. Both programs attempt to create greater social and intellectual interchange among students and between commuter students and faculty. These are two rather typical models for meeting the needs of commuter students.

Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago has developed a unique model for an urban commuter institution. It not only attempts to meet the needs of its present commuter-population, but the program is designed to extend service to more people. (Lienemann and Smith)

The significant features of the Northeastern program include the Commuter House and the Community Houses. The Commuter House was an attempt to improve the educational experience of commuter students by providing out-of-class space for interaction with faculty and students. Lienemann and Smith report that providing the physical space for interaction to occur was a most important factor in achieving the goal.

The second significant feature of the Northeastern program is the concept of a Community House. A Community House is a space provided in either a residential area or storefront to provide a "real world" setting. (Lienemann and Smith) Through the Community House the University is available to the community through its faculty and students. The "ivory tower" image of higher education tends to be converted into a better understanding of and relation with ethnic minorities. The Northeastern model is an attempt to accomodate the present commuter students and to reach out to the community.

Mountain Empire College has tried to address itself to the problems of the commuter encountered in travel time and distance. (Vaughan) Located in the heart of Appalachia, Mountain Empire College has put into service five vehicles filled with educational aides. By so doing, students can learn while in transit. "Thus travel time utilized by students for learning purposes... consist of planned learning activities which move students toward their career goals." (Vaughan)

Each model program is an attempt to meet the particular needs of commuting students at particular institutions. A review of the literature indicates that traditional remedial approaches to solving problems in higher education have tended to be from a resident student's perspective. Commuter students tend to have unique problems. Institutions of higher education in the future will do well to evaluate the needs of their particular commuter students and design programs that enhance their educational experiences.

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