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The Student as Commuter: Developing a

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WHO ARE COMMUTER STUDENTS?

Defined as all students who do not live in institution-owned housing, commuter students are an extraordinarily diverse population. Their numbers include full-time students of traditional age who live with their parents, part-time students who live in rental housing near the campus, and adults who have careers and children of their own. The population of commuter students will continue to become more diverse as the number of part-time, adult, and minority students enrolled in higher education increases.

Despite the differences in their backgrounds and educational goals, commuter students share a common core of needs and concerns: issues related to transportation that limit the time they spend on campus, multiple life roles, the importance of integrating their support systems into the collegiate world, and developing a sense of belonging on the campus. Whether they attend a predominantly residential institution or one attended only by commuters, the fact that they commute to college profoundly affects the nature of their educational experience. The term student-as-commuter is used to highlight the essential character of the relationship of the commuter student with the institution of higher education.

WHAT HAS IMPEDED THE RESPONSE OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?

The dominance of the residential tradition of higher education continues to shape the development of policies and practices, even at predominantly commuter institutions. Most administrators and faculty members earned their degrees at traditional residential institutions and tend to impose the values and goals of their own experiences on other educational environments. Administrators often inadvertently believe that commuter students can be served by the substitution of parking lots for residence halls, while maintaining essentially the same curricular and programmatic formats. The focus of much of the preparation, training, and professional work of student personnel practitioners has been on resident students. Residence halls have historically been the site of more student development activity than any other student service. Similarly, the theories and models of student development have been built largely on work with traditional, residential college students.

The research on commuter students is limited in quantity and breadth. Much of it is

based on the premise that the residential experience is the normative college experience and that commuters experiences are somehow less legitimate or less worthy of attention. The findings of the research on commuter students are generally inconsistent and inconclusive.

HOW CAN ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY DEVELOP A FULLER

UNDERSTANDING? A variety of frameworks, theories, and models are useful in understanding the complex nature of the relationship between the student-as-commuter and higher education. The diversity of commuter students and their educational goals requires the use of multiple approaches: human development theories (psychosocial, cognitive, and person-environment), design of the campus ecology/ecosystem, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, mattering, involvement/talent development/integration, transition theory, and family systems. Educators should use the best theoretical frameworks available in the development of institutional policies and practices.

HOW CAN AN INSTITUTION ASSESS HOW WELL IT SERVES ITS COMMUTER

STUDENTS? To evaluate whether commuter students educational goals and needs are being met, each institution must acquire information about its students; its programs, facilities, services, operating assumptions, general climate, and environment; and the nature of students interactions with the institution. The key variables related to the experience of the student-as-commuter are age, sex, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, finances, employment, family status, living arrangements, distance from campus, modes of transportation, educational aspirations, and academic abilities.

Institutional self-appraisal of the extent to which all students benefit equitably from the institutions offerings should include examination of several aspects from the perspective of the student-as-commuter: mission, image, publications; recruitment, admissions, articulation; funding and fee equity; orientation and transition programs; curriculum and classroom; educational and career planning, academic advising, counseling; faculty/staff development and rewards; sense of community, belonging, recognition; financial aid, on-campus work, experiential learning; cocurricular activities and programs; outreach to significant individuals; community relations; services and facilities; and information and communication.

Once a profile of the student population has been developed and various aspects of the institution have been studied from the perspective of the student-as-commuter, the nature of students interactions with the institution can be analyzed: retention,

satisfaction with the educational experience, achievement of educational goals, use of services and facilities, and participation in various aspects of campus life.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A COMPREHENSIVE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE?

Although it is impossible to provide a recipe or blueprint for change, it is possible to identify some principal elements of a comprehensive institutional response:

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 that change endorsed by its governing board.
2. The president, vice presidents, deans, and all other top administrators should frequently and consistently articulate the institutions commitment to the student-as-commuter when dealing with faculty, staff, students, the governing board, alumni, community members, and others.
3. The institution should regularly collect comprehensive data about its students and their experiences with the institution.
4. Regular evaluation processes should be put in place to assess whether the institutions programs, services, facilities, and resources address the needs of all students equitably.
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 ensure 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. In recognition that students experiences in one segment of the institution profoundly affect their experiences in other segments and their perceptions of their educational experience as a whole, quality practices should be consistent throughout the institution.

8. The classroom experience and interactions with faculty should be recognized as playing the major roles in determining the overall quality of commuter students education.

9. Curricular and cocurricular offerings should complement one another, and considerable energy should be directed to ensure that students understand the interrelationship of the curriculum and the cocurriculum.

10. Faculty and staff at all levels should be encouraged to learn more about the theoretical frameworks and models that lead to a fuller understanding of the student-as-commuter.

11. Top leadership should actively encourage the various campus units to work together to implement change on behalf of the student-as-commuter.

12. Technology should be used to the fullest extent possible to improve the institutions ability to communicate with its students and to streamline its administrative processes.

13. Executive officers and members of the governing board should

actively work toward ensuring that commuter students and commuter institutions are treated fairly in federal, state, and local decision making (e.g., student financial aid, institutional funding formulas).

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