

Undergraduate Commuter Students: Challenges and Struggles

Fanny He
New York University

Introduction

Approximately 85 percent of college and university students enrolled in postsecondary institutions are commuter students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Commuter students, as defined in this paper, are students who do not live in institution-owned housing and must travel for their studies. Astin (2001) reports that commuting is negatively associated with attaining a bachelor's degree and furthermore, "substantial commuting seems to raise the level of stress experienced by undergraduate students" (pp. 390-391). As a first-year student entering college, commuting can be an added stress factor to an already overwhelming experience. It is important for students to receive support from their institution to create their own community. Without finding a community during their first year, students may feel isolated in their new academic environment and fail to fulfill their academic goals.

Higher education institutions should seek to bridge the gap by providing support for students with differing housing statuses by creating targeted programs and resources to offer commuter students the same opportunities afforded to residential students. These opportunities should include faculty interaction outside of the academic setting, a peer mentor who can offer institutional resources and answer institutional related questions, and opportunities to form a tight-knit bond with other students who share the same housing status identity through space allocated on campus. While these programs would benefit at all postsecondary institutions, they are even more crucial in large urban institutions, as it is harder for students to find their place and receive individual attention in an academic environment with hundreds other students vying for the same resources. Commuter students should have their institution's support through a structured cohort model, programming of goal setting, and institutional navigation that integrates academics and social mentorship in order to go beyond surviving their first year to succeed as a higher education student.

Undergraduate Commuter Students: Challenges

While the commuter student population makes up a large portion of the higher education system, it is vastly underserved and lacks adequate support from higher education institutions. Commuter students are thought to be academically unmotivated in comparison to their resident peers (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). However, what many institutions fail to realize is that these students often juggle multiple identities outside of their role as a student due to their commuter status. Many commuters must balance life roles outside of academia, such as acting as a caretaker for their siblings or as a translator for their parents. Jacoby (2004) supports this notion and says that this student population, "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" (p. 62). According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 80% of undergraduate commuter students work, with 46% of full-

time students working 25 or more hours per week simply to make ends meet (2002). In addition, commuter students are more likely to be employed, work more hours, and have jobs off campus than resident students (Jacoby, 2000). These traits of a commuter student indicate that their needs surpass what resources many higher education institutions currently offer to these students.

According to Jacoby (1989), commuter students have felt marginalized on campus since they first participated in American higher education. Maslow's (1982) hierarchy of needs provides a framework for understanding commuter students' experiences both on and off campus and why institutions need to better serve and provide programming for these students. This hierarchy is based off a pyramid, with basic needs located at the bottom tier and self-actualization, which Maslow defines as fulfilling one's potential, at the top. For students, their potential lies within their academic achievements. The bottom tier consists of tangible needs such as food, shelter, water, and sleep. Once fulfilled, the student's needs move on to safety and security, and then on to social and psychological needs such as friendship, self-esteem, and love before moving to the top tier of self-realization. Based on the pyramid model, bottom tier needs must be met before advancing to the next tier. In other words, students who do not have their basic needs fulfilled cannot focus on fulfilling their potential such as education.

Commuter students are often preoccupied with fulfilling their bottom tier needs. Some challenges include figuring out what food can be prepared at home and works best for traveling as well as where on campus has a microwave and refrigerator for them to use. Another bottom tier need commuter students are preoccupied with is sleep; commuters must allot additional time for travel. No matter the mode of transportation, commuting to and from campus drains time and energy from students. Jacoby and Garland (2004) summarize the need for fulfilling the bottom tier needs in order for students to move on to focusing on their education:

It is essential that institutions provide services to meet their basic needs for housing, transportation, security, food, health care, and child care. A student who has not found satisfactory living or transportation arrangements simply cannot focus sufficiently on learning or achieving educational goals. Moving up the pyramid, all students need to feel a sense of inclusion and belonging to the campus community. (p. 65)

Jacoby's research shows that institutions must provide services to fulfill their students' basic needs. Beginning from the bottom tier, commuter students are already at a disadvantage compared to their residential counterparts as they must dedicate time and energy towards fulfilling their needs of food, housing, and transportation. As the next level on Maslow's hierarchy of needs advances to the psychological and social level, commuter students need support in building self-esteem through peer and faculty relations in order to feel integrated in the institution. As commuter students have a history of feeling marginalized on campus, institutions must take extra steps for ensuring this specific population develops a sense of belonging and self-esteem in their community. According to Jacoby (1989), marginalized student populations are less satisfied and successful and leave their institution at a higher rate than their peers. Commuter students have to fulfill their basic needs before journeying on to self-realization and achieving their potential in the academic setting.

In determining retention rates during their first year, commuter students have more to contend with in addition to their academic classes. Retention is an indicator of academic performance as well as social integration into the institution. Studies that focused on academic ability as a predictor of retention found that academic performance explained no more than half of college student dropout decisions (Pantages & Creedon, 1978). For first-year students, academic adjustment included more than a student's scholarly potential. Rather, motivation to learn, taking action to meet academic demands, and satisfaction with their academic environment were also important factors for their academic adjustment and transition (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Knowing that commuter students must find satisfaction in their institution along with being motivated to learn, higher education institutions should develop programs that address obstacles that commuter students face. Commuter students are as dedicated to their education as their residential counterparts (Jacoby, 2004). However, their social integration may pose a bigger threat to retention as they have fewer opportunities to interact with their peers without a residence hall to act as a foundation for social meetings.

First-year commuter students, like other first-year resident students, experience a transitional period when they enter higher education. Schlossberg (1989) defines a transition as any event or non-event that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. For many residential students, this transition is clear cut, such as when they first move into the residential hall. However, for commuter students, their transition may not be as clear cut. Commuter students could be transitioning from working full-time to taking part-time classes at their local college while still balancing other responsibilities. Other commuter students could be taking full course loads but still returning home to eat dinner with their family as they did every night before, working the same job they have held since high school, and keeping to the same routine.

Colleges need to recognize these transitions and provide appropriate support (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Institutions should be asking themselves how they can make the commuter student's transition to higher education a significant event in order to validate their experience when entering a higher education institution.

Undergraduate Commuter Students: Strategies for Success and Discussion

To fully recognize the commuter student's transition into higher education, one recommendation would be for institutions to host a two-fold First-Year Experience program that focuses on goal setting and institutional navigation while integrating academic and social mentorship. The ideal program for commuters should be adjusted to fit every commuter identity, including adult learners returning to the academic setting for the first time. This should be a year-long program that includes faculty, staff, as well as peer mentors facilitating workshops around topics that would be beneficial to the commuter population.

While commuter students are dedicated to their educational goals, their multiple obligations can make it difficult for college to be their first priority. The structure of the course should be once per week, with weekly rotations of different staff, faculty, and peer mentors that will host various workshops that will benefit commuter students. For example, an academic advisor can host a workshop on developing goals targeted to specific individuals. If a first-year commuter student has set a goal to complete their degree early to find a job to support their family, their academic advisor should work with them during the course to set a timeline for

reaching that goal. The course should serve as a resource for first-year commuter students to better understand how their institutions work, as many cannot take the time out of their busy lives to conduct the research themselves. Jacoby and Garland (2004) believe that commuter students are dedicated to their educational goals but may not have the time nor opportunity to set up steps to follow through on their plans: “while commuter students are serious about and committed to achieving their educational goals, they are less likely to have the opportunity to make college their only or even sometimes the top priority” (p. 71). Since commuter students juggle multiple roles, institutions can better support them by developing a course to dedicate a mandatory time for these students to receive the support they need from academic staff. The course would serve as a general elective as to encourage students to engage and make progress towards graduation.

Faculty interaction with commuter students is also crucial to further their academic goals. Weimer (2002) suggests that undergraduate students benefit from a shift in power with their faculty members. In the classroom, faculty members have a distinct upper-hand in the relationship whereas outside of the classroom, there is a better avenue for sharing power. Commuter students may not have much faculty interaction outside of a classroom setting. Endo and Harpel (1982) note that there is a difference between informal interaction and formal interaction with faculty:

Frequency of informal student-faculty interaction describes student contacts with faculty where there is a concern for wide aspects of the students' development including personal/social and intellectual growth, academic achievement, and satisfaction with education. Frequency of formal interaction describes student contacts with faculty members where there is a more limited concern for specific intellectual or academic considerations. (p.120)

Institutions should recognize that faculty members have more to offer than just in academia. The First-Year Experience course for commuter students will focus more on the interactions faculty and commuter students have together outside the classroom. As commuter students do not have the benefit of informal interaction with faculty members, this course will provide that opportunity for those students. Faculty members will be able to focus on commuter students' personal and social growth as well as their satisfaction with their current educational path and can also offer guidance towards reaching their self-realization. Faculty members can have either a positive or a negative impact on a student's higher education experience. Endo and Harpel (1982) note that by having informal interactions with students “which are more personal and reflect a broad concern with students' emotional and cognitive growth, student intellectual growth can be increased” (p. 134). Faculty members can increase intellectual growth outside the classroom by having these conversations and discussion off-campus in a non-academic setting.

The third part of the course should allow commuter students to interact with peer mentors. These peer mentors should be commuter students themselves who have gone through similar experiences that the first-year commuter students are currently experiencing. Fordham University-Lincoln Center, for example, has a Commuter Freshmen Mentor (CFM) program specifically designed to connect first-year commuter students to an upperclassmen mentor who guide and support their mentee (Fordham University, n.d.). The CFM program is intended to help first-year students adapt to college life through social and academic support. Jacoby (2004) states “Well- trained peer advisors can also serve to ease the transition of new students by informally providing information, guidance, companionship, and introductions to others who have experienced similar issues and concerns” (p. 72). Peer mentors can help integrate first-year commuter students into the institutional setting on a more informal level than

staff or faculty members. As students who have finished their first year of commuting, peer mentors can host workshops that focus on providing resources to better aid the first-years' transition into their institution. Commuter students are already balancing multiple roles with their life outside of academics and may not feel motivated to explore the institution's resources and assimilate into the institution's community on their own. Walters and Kanak (2016) believe that "at an institutional level, successful orientation programs can positively affect retention rates from the first to second year" (p. 59). Based on Walter and Kanak's findings, we can conclude that the First-Year Experience program can aid in students' involvement in their institutions and bolster retention rates. Tinto's (1997) research indicates that the greater a student's involvement and integration into the life of the university, the less likely that student will leave. With peer mentors to guide them along their first-year experience by providing tips, advice, and resources, first-year commuter students are more likely to become integrated into their institution. Returning to Maslow's (1982) hierarchy of needs, once commuter students are able to move past their third tier of establishing self-esteem and creating friendships, they will be able to move upwards on the pyramid model and work towards self-realization, which in this case means fulfilling their educational goals. Peer mentors in the course will be able to guide first-year commuter students on their journey to self-realization by working with them to socially integrate into the institution's community.

As commuter students are not on campus as often as their residential peers due to their transportation schedules, these courses should be held during a time frame where commuter students can attend several classes back to back. This ensures that the courses are commuter friendly by allowing the students to have the freedom to stack their courses together.

The academic buy-in for this orientation course would be to provide faculty and staff members with statistics showcasing the student success with informal interactions. Faculty members would be helping themselves and academia in general if they participate in facilitating a few of the workshops throughout the course of the year. Staff and faculty members would provide the tools for first-year commuter students to reach their academic potential and unfold their self-realization. In addition, faculty members should be granted additional research aid for their participation in the courses. The aid provided would be at the discretion of the institution and can range from financial aid to general resources (i.e. providing additional research assistants). Ideally, this would encourage buy-in from the faculty members. Student Affairs as a division should have incentive to recruit staff members to participate in the First-Year Experience program. This incentive includes an increase in student leadership, involvement, and retention.

Peer mentors will gain leadership skills by offering to participate in the orientation course for first-year commuter students. The mentors will be able to develop their facilitation, communication, and social skills by leading weekly workshops for the first-year commuter students. Peer mentors, who are commuters themselves, would be giving back to the community that spearheaded their personal growth. The faculty, staff, and peer mentors will be given the opportunity to apply and be interviewed for the position to ensure the commuter students are receiving facilitators who truly care about their development. With a program this big, it can serve to bridge the gap between different divisions of Student Affairs, who will ultimately spearhead the program, and Academic Affairs.

While it would be ideal to have enough funding from a single source, the reality is that the course would be from a funding stream of multiple sources such as student fees, donations, and governmental support such as the Department of Education. If possible, different offices around the institution could also allocate their student budget to this course. Offices such as the Office of the President, Office of Student Activities, and all the academic departments would greatly benefit from the success of this program and should contribute as such. This program proposal is for institutions with a large commuter population and as such, the retention, involvement, and engagement of commuter students would positively impact all the offices in

any higher education institution. In addition, funding could come from applied grants. Once the course is in place, policies should be reinforced to ensure future funding for years to come.

Outside of this academic program, another type of support institutions could offer is to allow commuter students to have access to residential lounges or create a commuter lounge to provide them with space on campus in between classes. According to Mount Holyoke's website, "At Mount Holyoke" (n.d.), this primarily residential college offers commuter students the option to relax in their residential lounges as well as offering a commuter lounge as space for students to stay connected and engaged.

Assessment Measures

The course has set goals for the institution's commuter student population. Success of the course comes in the success of the commuter students. For each individual commuter student, success can be defined in different ways. As Tinto's (1997) research indicates that the greater a student's involvement and integration in the life of the university, the less likely that that student will leave, student involvement and student retention should go hand in hand as outcomes of success through the course. One version of success would be to measure the commuter student population increase in student involvement on campus. The course tackles academic and social mentorship through the informal interactions with peer mentors, faculty, and staff members and measures the personal and cognitive growth of each individual commuter student. Another version of success would be to assess the level of knowledge and interaction first-year commuter students have with other members of their community. As Jacoby (2004), Walters and Kanak (2016), and Endo and Harpel (1982) have shown, peer mentors, advisors, and faculty members have significant impacts on a student's involvement and integration into their higher education institution. Commuter students should be assessed at the beginning and end of the orientation course to evaluate the effects the course has on their first year in higher education. If commuter students' involvement and retention rates increase after a five-year period, to allow for the course to pick up momentum, then the institution will know that the course has made an impact on a severely underserved community. First-year commuter students should also be reporting a higher level of institutional satisfaction, whether socially or academically. The goal of the program is to enhance commuter student success and success is found through commuter student involvement and retention.

Limitations

This paper should be considered an attempt to identify related literature on the subject of first-year commuter students and institutional support. This review does not aim to speak for all first-year commuter students and residential students, and as a result may not be generalizable. The reviewer recognizes that the suggestions provided for commuter student success is shaped by the reviewer's own experiences. The reviewer also recognizes that the informal course structure may not work for all institutions serving the commuter population.

Conclusion

As commuter students make up a large portion of college students, institutions will need to alter the way they accommodate students who live off-campus. The First-Year Experience program would greatly benefit commuter students in aiding them to becoming an active part of their institution. The engagement of first-year commuter students requires a different approach due to the nature of their experiences. While there are challenges, additional resources provide greater opportunity to retain students. By offering better resources to commuter students,

institutions can ensure all students are receiving equitable support in student engagement.

References

- Astin, A.W. (2001). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Baker, R. W., & Siryk, B. (1984). Measuring academic motivation of matriculating college freshmen. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(5), 459-464.
- Endo, J. J., & Harpel, R. L. (1982). The effect of student-faculty interaction on students' educational outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, 16(2), 115-138.
doi:10.1007/bf00973505
- Fordham University. (n.d.). *Commuter Freshmen Mentors*. Retrieved from https://www.fordham.edu/info/28533/lincoln_center_commuter_freshmen_mentors
- Gerdes, H., & Mallinckrodt, B. (1994). Emotional, social, and academic adjustment of college students: A longitudinal study of retention. *Journal of Counseling and Development: JCD*, 72(3), 281. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/219008434?accountid=12768>
- Horn, L., Peter, K., & Rooney, K. (2002). *Profile of undergraduates in U.S. postsecondary institutions: 1999-2000*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.
- Jacoby, B. (1989). The student as commuter: Developing a comprehensive institutional response. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, No. 7. Washington, D.C.: George Washington University School of Education and Human Development.
- Jacoby, B. (2000). Why involve commuter students in learning? In B. Jacoby (Ed.), *New Directions for Higher Education: No. 109. Involving commuter students in learning* (pp. 3–12). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jacoby, B. (2015). Enhancing commuter student success: What's theory got to do with it? *New Directions For Student Services*, 2015(150), 3-12. doi:10.1002/ss.20122
- Jacoby, B., & Garland, J. (2004). Strategies for enhancing commuter student success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 6(1), 61-79.
- Mount Holyoke College. (n.d.). *Commuter Students*. Retrieved from <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/studentprograms/blanchard/commuterstudents>
- Pantages, T. J., & Creedon, C. F. (1978). Studies of college attrition: 1950-1975. *Review of Education Research*, 48(1), 49-101.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). *Overwhelmed: Coping with life's ups and downs*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Snyder, T. D., Dillow, S. A., & Hoffman, C. M. (2009). *Digest of Education Statistics 2008* (NCES 2009-020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599–623.
- Walters, G. g., & Kanak, A. (2016). Effects of peer mentorship on student leadership. *Honors In Practice*, 1259-76.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass