

Snapshots from the Fringe: Utilizing Photovoice to Discover Commuter Experiences at ONU

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Introduction

Despite the fact that the number of enrolled college students is on the rise, retention continues to represent a challenge:

- 25% of all students drop out by year two
- 50% of all students who begin college fail to obtain a degree within 6 years (ACT, 2010).

Commuter Students (Non-Traditional Students)

- Make up 73-85% of all college students
- More likely to drop out than traditional students (Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Newbold et al., 2011).
- Report feeling “2nd class” and that they don’t fit in on campus (Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Newbold et al., 2011)

Established Correlates in Higher Education

<u>Phenomenon:</u>	<u>Correlates with:</u>
Lack of involvement/engagement on campus	Poor academic achievement
	Lack of persistence
	Less satisfaction
<i>*Commuters are less involved than traditional students</i>	
Sense of Community	Student persistence
	Satisfaction with school experience
	Motivation
	Sense of value
<i>*Commuters report experiencing less sense of community</i>	
(Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Kirk & Lewis, 2015)	

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Purpose

The purpose of this participatory action, qualitative research study was to explore the lived experiences of commuter students at a private university in Illinois.

Qualitative Research Questions

The research questions to be addressed are:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of commuter students at Olivet Nazarene University (ONU)?

RQ2: How do these commuter students describe their experiences as commuter students?

RQ3: What are the challenges and opportunities of being a commuter student at ONU?

Methodology

Because research has shown that commuters are a vulnerable population, a qualitative, participatory action research (PAR) method was chosen.

PAR is designed to **empower participants**, helping marginalized populations to gain a sense of ownership and voice (Higgins, 2016; Pain, 2012).

Photovoice is one PAR strategy that *utilizes participant photography and accompanying narratives* to facilitate expression of experiences from the perspective of the participant (Higgins, 2016; Pain, 2012). PAR utilizes the study participants as the lens through which their experiences are shared. Photovoice strategies do this quite literally, utilizing participant photography to document their experience through visual means. In addition, participants share perspectives through written means by attaching narratives to their photography (Peabody, 2013). Photovoice was designed to empower participants, demonstrating that their experiences and perspectives have value and can be used to create social change.

Data Collection

1. Recruitment

Students recruited through flyers, emails, and faculty/staff

Olivet Nazarene University

“Voice of the Commuter”

Photovoice Research Project

Do you want to help improve the commuter experience at ONU?

Looking to share your experiences?

We are looking for:

- ONU commuter students
- Ages 18-25
- Commuter experience for at least one full year
- Traditional undergraduates
- Willing to commit to 3, 1-hour sessions (*food included!*)
- Willing to take and share photographs that express your experiences as a commuter



The first session will be held:

Thursday, Sept. 22 at either 9:30-10:25 OR 4:30-5:30 in Weber 301.

Identical sessions—choose one that fits your schedule.

Only 15 students will be accepted for the research project. Let YOUR voice be heard!

Email Prof Broers at drbroers@olivet.edu if interested!

Data Collection, cont.

2. Training

Participants attended a one hour training on Photovoice and completed a demographic survey

3. Photovoice Submission Period

Participants were given about 3 weeks to submit up to 3 submissions

4. Focus Groups

Participants attended a 1 ½ hour focus group to process all the submissions and further discuss the research questions

5. Data Analysis

Focus group was transcribed and coded, along with Photovoice submissions, by all 3 researchers. Researchers then met to identify themes emerging from the data.



“Sometimes in life you have to work around the system and extemporize temporary solutions to permanent problems. Majority of the time, my days seem to feel incessant. I am now a senior and have to balance planning ahead, afterschool clubs, volunteer work, working out, homework, and studying. Due to all these factors, there are a lot of late night drives home. For most college students, the answer would be caffeine. However, I gave up drinking coffee a year ago. This is a photograph of two seats put together on the third floor of Benner Library. I place the chairs in this position to form a small bed. I take naps inside and roll myself up to a little ball. It can be quite comfortable, especially when I take my shoes off and my feet hang off the top of the cushion. I do not have the luxury or the money to afford living on campus. I cannot take a nap in my dorm or apartment. Instead of driving forty minutes home every time that I feel sleep deprived, I work around with what I am given.”

Participant #3 |

Olivet Nazarene University

October, 2016



This is Kresge Auditorium, in Olivet's Larsen building for the Fine Arts. If it weren't for this stage, and the theatre clubs and theatre department, I'm not so sure I would be at Olivet still today. I didn't have any friends my freshman year at ONU, and the only time I was on campus was when I would have a class; I spent no extra time here. My sophomore year I became involved with Greenroom, the student run theatre club, and choreographed for their fall variety show *Broadway Revue*. Then, in the spring of my sophomore year, I was privileged enough to work along Professor Cohagan, the head of Olivet's theatre department, to choreograph the spring musical *West Side Story*. I made countless friends, found my niche at Olivet, and have learned so, so much. Now, this fall during my junior year, I will be back on Kresge to be in my first straight play as a lead in *A Piece of My Heart*. I count myself lucky for all the experiences and friendships made because of this stage and Olivet's theatre department.

Participant #9

Olivet Nazarene University

October, 2016

Results

What's Working?

- Participants were pleased with “Bagel Tuesdays”-a weekly time where bagels are offered as a treat in the commuter lounge
- Participants were appreciative of a designated parking lot
- Participants believe ONU tries hard to publish activity information
- Participants are overall pleased with the friendliness of faculty, staff, and students
- Participants believe the university is intentionally attempting to improve their experiences
- *Participants verbalized a great deal of appreciation about this study—they felt their voices were valued and heard and would like more opportunities to share experiences*

Results

The primary theme that emerged that is critical in shaping the interpretation of the rest of the themes, is a **validation that the commuter experience typically reflects that of vulnerable, marginalized populations** within the context of traditional campuses.

Results

	Disengaged from People	Detached from Common Student Identity	Disconnected from Place
Commuter Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Friendships tend to be made early (Frosh/Soph years) and through communal living and activities on campus ▪ Socialization and connections happen during communal meal times among residents ▪ Schedules and distances prevent engagement in clubs/activities ▪ Commuters tend to relate most with other commuters but don't know how to find them ▪ Treated "like commuters" by residents—pitied—"I'm sorry" ▪ Feel like minority on campus, can feel embarrassed/shame about commuter status, don't want to be pointed out in class as a commuter (stigma) ▪ Some feel different and judged if their faith beliefs aren't similar to other students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Multiple identities/dual roles/"double life" (compared to residential student singular role as "student"). Commuters wear many hats (parent, employee, child, as well as student). Fragmented identities ▪ Experience pressures, anxieties, and inconveniences unique to commuters ▪ daily schedules described as incessant and monotonous ▪ Often lack support to maintain student role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No "home base" once on campus, feel "stuck" ▪ Meal plans: extra cost (compared to whole room & board cost to residents). Residents don't tend to utilize dining hall where residential students eat ▪ Designated resources for commuters (parking, lounge) are often "taken over" by residential students ▪ Nowhere to stay overnight if weather emergency or late meeting/activity

Results

THEMES: The Commuter Experience at ONU			
	Disengaged from People	Detached from Common Student Identity	Disconnected from Place
Reported Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪Self-confidence/esteem can be difficult to develop in this minority role and/or can be harmed▪Difficult to make friends▪Information is often shared/perpetuated through on-campus social networks (“are you going to the game tonight?”) and commuters often lack knowledge of campus activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪Lack of identity as a “student” makes dropping out easier. Having a shared social identity improves engagement long term▪More pressures but less support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪Between classes students have no where no “crash”—take naps in library, in a corner of a stairway, or in car▪Other than cars, there is nowhere to store belongings during day. They carry all books, lunch, purses, etc. around for the whole day▪Designated commuter lot is often full and residents who don’t register their car take many spots. This can lead to long walks from parking and getting to class late▪They love Bagel Tuesdays, but some students can’t/won’t eat bagels and so are left out. Residential students also come and take food provided for commuters

Results

THEMES: The Commuter Experience at ONU			
	Disengaged from People	Detached from Common Student Identity	Disconnected from Place
Potential Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪Encourage or engage faculty/staff to connect with commuters outside of class ▪Commuter 2 Commuter mentoring—connecting commuters with each other, with older commuters, and with residential students who engage with and mentor them ▪Commuter apps, social media, and link on Canvas that allows commuters in a class to find each other (but not accessible to residential students) ▪Offer a commuter-only Bible Study, perhaps during chapel hour ▪Consistently encourage commuters to find a group, a “niche”, where they can belong, and to “be present” on campus as much as possible ▪Consider commuter-only Freshman Connections groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪Training specifically for commuters that focuses on the realities of the commuter experience and resources to help ▪Training for faculty/staff on the specific experiences and challenges of commuter students ▪Help commuters feel a part of the campus: give t-shirts, specifically invite to events and offer connectivity (“meet at the concession stand...”), reach out to see how they’re doing. ▪Offer specific support (counseling, stress management, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪larger, private lounge with places to rest or work (with internet) just for commuters ▪More commuter-designated parking that is better enforced ▪Lockers that can be reserved for the day or semester to store belongings during the day ▪Variety of snacks to meet dietary needs/preferences on “Bagel Tuesdays” ▪Minimal overnight accommodations available for emergencies or late meetings/activities

Conclusions and Implications

The lived experiences of commuter students tended to reflect prior research on commuter students. Of critical importance for future understanding and action are three broad concepts:

- 1. Marginality**—Commuter student often feel like and are treated as a vulnerable, marginalized population.

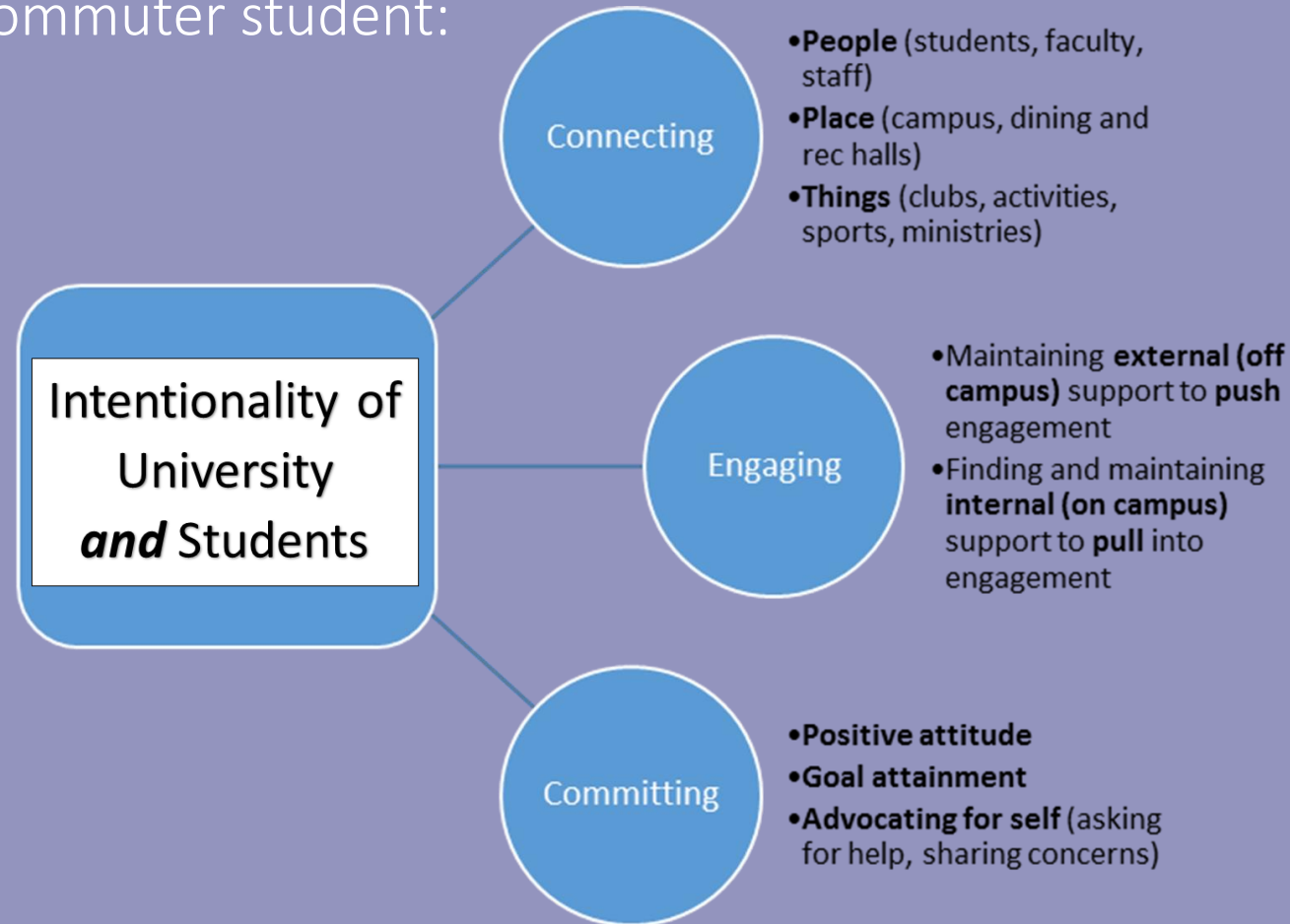
Conclusions and Implications

2. **Risk and Protective Factors**—Like all marginalized populations, certain risk and protective factors tend to exacerbate or minimize the marginalization:

Risk Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introverted personality• Beliefs/behaviors that challenge cultural norms (contextual)• Distance from campus (far)• Field of study (larger, less relational majors)• Unattached to a subgroup (team, club)• Lack of support—no on- or off-campus encouragement to stay
Protective Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extraverted personality• Shared beliefs/behaviors• Distance from campus (near)• Field of study (smaller, relational majors)• Connected to a subgroup and/or students, faculty, or staff on campus• Supporters who encourage commitment both on campus and off campus

Conclusions and Implications

3. **Intentionality**—success rests on the intentional choices and actions of both the university and the commuter student:





“This photograph was taken on a warm spring evening with a \$10 disposable camera from Walgreens. There is something weirdly nostalgic about disposable cameras. I’m not sure what it is but the whole concept of it completely consumes me. I think it’s the tangibility of actually holding these photographs. When I go through these pictures I feel like I’m floating through forgotten dreams I once had when I was a child. I feel like I’m listening to an old song, like greeting a long lost friend. I feel like everything is going to be okay even if it’s just for a couple minutes. In this specific photograph I captured a moment of stillness. Maggi and I spent the entire day exploring the city of Chicago. We tried to experience the pleasures and amusements this city offered. We were immersed in the heartbeat of this city and its fast lifestyle. On our commute back to campus, we drove in silence. We were away from the bright lights. We were away from the tall skyscrapers. Adventures quickly turned into distant memories. Maggi was looking out of the window at Lake Michigan. We were in a euphoric state of mind, not wanting the day to be over but glad we were resting our tired feet. It’s little moments like this that make me appreciate the life I have. It’s little moments like this that makes the daily struggles bearable.”

Participant #1

Olivet Nazarene University

October 13, 2016

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