

1989

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Programming to meet the needs of commuter students

Abstract

Commuter students are defined as those who live with their parents, spouse, family, or by themselves (Flanagan, 1976) in housing not provided by the institution. They comprise eighty percent of the undergraduate population in American colleges (Stewart and Rue, 1983). Commuters have been dubbed "the neglected majority" (Slade and Jarmul, 1975), because academic and personal counseling, campus activities, and special services have not been provided for these students on a consistent basis.

PROGRAMMING TO MEET THE NEEDS OF COMMUTER STUDENTS

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

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May 1989

This Research Paper by: Joanne Kay Loonan

Entitled: Programming to Meet the Needs of Commuter Students

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Commuter students are defined as those who live with their parents, spouse, family, or by themselves (Flanagan, 1976) in housing not provided by the institution. They comprise eighty percent of the undergraduate population in American colleges (Stewart and Rue, 1983). Commuters have been dubbed "the neglected majority" (Slade and Jarmul, 1975), because academic and personal counseling, campus activities, and special services have not been provided for these students on a consistent basis.

Chickering (1974) found that commuter students enter college less prepared and less self-directed than resident students. He stated that comparing residents and commuters is a case of the "haves and the have-nots." It is important to consider the special needs and concerns of this group of "have-nots" so programming can be implemented to reduce the inequities commuter students face in higher education.

This review of the literature will focus on the needs and concerns of commuter students. Aspects of programming will be addressed and specific programming ideas examined. Finally, the role of the student affairs professional will be discussed.

Needs and Concerns of Commuter Students

Commuter students' needs and concerns revolve around four issues: mobility, multiple life roles, integrating support systems, and developing a sense of belonging (Wilmes and Quade, 1986).

Mobility Issues

Mobility issues are related to transportation to campus, parking, inclement weather, car maintenance, finding alternative forms of transportation, time spent commuting, and transportation expenses. The demands on students moving between home, work, and school require efficient scheduling of their time. Time spent on campus is usually in the classroom or going to and from the parking lot. Commuter students rarely have the time to explore unknown parts of campus. Unless commuter students make an effort to find a particular resource, they may not be aware of opportunities or services that exist. Because of this, commuters are often poorly informed about campus resources.

Multiple Life Roles

Commuter students tend to lead divided lives, due in large part to their multiple roles (Harrington, 1972). Being a student is only one of these roles. Being a parent, caregiver, spouse, or employee is an equally demanding role. Time becomes a precious commodity. Choices between taking an exam, caring for a sick family member, or meeting a deadline at work may have to be made.

The perceived value of an event becomes a factor in making these decisions. Many programs are seen, then, as a demand on one's time, rather than as an opportunity. Andreas (1983) found that family or work environments generally hold priority over the educational environment for commuters.

When personal schedules and environmental demands compete with school, commuters are prevented from easily forming friendships with other students.

Integrating Support Systems

The support system for a commuter student often involves parents, spouse, children, employers, high school friends, and co-workers. In order for them to provide support, however, they must be integrated into the student's new world. There may be a dissonance between the old and new worlds that is difficult to overcome. Chickering (1974) suggested that commuters are constrained by internal conflict and by pressures of parents, peers, and prior community. Schuchman (1974) observed that commuter students have difficulty finding support at home. Parents and peers may have little understanding of what college involves in terms of study requirements and investment of time. Negotiations must be made each semester with family, friends, and employers to set new priorities, time commitments, and responsibilities. The student may encounter stress when explaining and justifying new roles and time spent on campus.

Institutions often encourage the commuter student to invest more time on campus without providing channels to integrate the support systems.

Developing a Sense of Belonging

Involvement in campus life is related to the student developing a sense of belonging to the institution. Often, the commuter's academic world is the classroom and the car. The car not only is the mode of transportation but also the dining room, the study area, and the place for a quick nap. When colleges fail to provide facilities, such as lounges or lockers, which allow for a sense of ownership, commuter students can receive the message that they are different and that their experiences are not truly collegiate. Andreas (1983) observed that commuters spend a brief amount of time on campus; as a result their knowledge of faculty, institutional facilities, and other aspects of campus may be limited. Schuchman (1974) found that commuters leave campus when their classes are over, spending only between fifteen and twenty hours per week on campus. When commuters leave campus, they may go to a job or home that may be both geographically and psychologically distant from the institution. There is little chance for them to maintain contact with fellow students at school.

Programming for Commuter Students

Innovative programming addresses the needs and concerns of commuter students. Programming begins with advocacy and developing the commuter perspective, i.e. viewing the educational process through the eyes and ears of the commuter, then becoming knowledgeable about commuters' needs and actively working to meet those needs (Likins, 1986).

Advocacy

Three tasks are involved in becoming a commuter advocate. First, one must become informed about commuters in general and specifically about commuters on one's own campus. Next, one must heighten the awareness of all members of the campus community about the needs of commuters. Finally, one must encourage institutional change that promotes and supports the commuter perspective.

Advocates need skill in information gathering, analysis and dissemination, communication, innovation and persistence. They can work informally by volunteering to work on committees or by talking with student leaders and faculty about commuter students and their needs. Advocates can also work in a formal structure by submitting proposals recommending modifications in programs or services. Participating in workshops for faculty and staff members about commuter characteristics, or becoming involved in development where gifts are solicited from alumni

and parents for commuter projects, are other involvements of a formal nature.

Likins (1986) suggested that effective advocacy reflects the institution's history and development as well as its values and tradition. It is beneficial for advocates to plan strategies, to consider where there is likely to be support of or resistance to advocacy efforts. Cultivating the acquaintance and respect of campus policy makers can enhance the influence of the commuter advocate.

Assessing Needs

The next step in programming is to assess students' needs. Commuters on each campus will have needs unique to their setting. It is important to identify these needs and to provide programming designed to meet them. Rue and Ludt (1983) found that eighteen of twenty colleges surveyed assessed the needs of commuter students but not on an annual basis. They stated that the most common needs assessments undertaken by institutions were developing demographic profiles of commuter students and monitoring students' use of facilities. Half of the twenty colleges surveyed developed complex longitudinal or developmental studies. Several of these colleges conducted studies of their freshman class. Few institutions monitored faculty and staff attitudes toward commuters and still fewer institutions made commuter-resident comparisons.

Program Goals

The third step in commuter programming is to formulate goals. Wilmes and Quade (1986) cited five general goals: providing accurate and timely information, promoting institutional identification, encouraging involvement with other students, providing opportunities for interaction with campus personnel, and integrating outside support systems and significant others. These goals were arranged in a hierarchical model based on the premise that certain basic information and comfort requirements must be met before more complex and time-consuming activities are appropriate.

Accurate and timely information.

Providing accurate information to commuter students increases their knowledge and use of campus facilities and resources. It increases their contact with faculty and staff and ultimately increases their satisfaction with the college experience. Dissemination of this information can take a variety of forms. Newspaper columns and articles, direct mailings, pamphlets, and bulletin boards are among the options for printed material. Frisz and Aylmann (1980) suggested that "branding" programs and service announcements with a logo or a graphic typeface would make them distinctive, eye-catching, and memorable. Homemade posters are obsolete. Commercially-prepared ads must be used to catch the attention of students. Slide shows, video tapes,

open houses, and new student orientations are other traditional methods. Increasingly common is the strategic placement of video monitors on campus to provide daily announcements of upcoming events and services (Frisz and Aylmann, 1980). Oakland University (Rochester, Michigan) enters information regarding campus services and activities into the University's mainframe computer (Rue and Ludt, 1983). This increases student access and decreases staff time. Other universities use on- and off-campus radio and television stations to improve commuter access to information.

Offering classes to commuter students, with the objective of increasing the students' awareness of campus services, is another way to provide information. Whether to give credit for the class is an institutional decision. Marymount Manhattan College (New York, New York) provides non-credit discussion groups designed to ease the new student's transition to college. Information is provided, friendships are formed, and social ties are established (Arthur, 1977).

Separate from on-campus information, commuters need access to information that will help them function outside the academic community. Topics such as tenant and landlord rights, rental guides, community transportation schedules, commuter car pool references, consumer service guides, city maps, and area recreational opportunities should be addressed. This information

can be provided at minimal cost to the institution, since the content varies little from year-to-year.

Institutional identification.

Presenting information to commuters in a way that promotes institutional identification can be challenging. One format is to sponsor a "Commuter Week." Morningside College (Sioux City, Iowa) sponsored a program, "Commuters: Students with Drive," which provided a full week of commuter awareness activities. Display cases were filled with pictures of commuters and with maps showing the locations from which students were commuting. Banners and buttons promoted their slogan. Commuters were provided with coffee, doughnuts, and informational brochures by staff in the parking lot, a location where commuters were sure to be found (Vander Zwagg, 1988).

Another format is to welcome all new and returning students to campus with a welcoming fair early in the fall semester (Wilmes and Quade, 1986). Students at the commuter student table, set amidst other organizations' tables, can hand out brochures, pamphlets, and take names of students interested in joining the organization.

One of the goals of institutional identification is that the student feel valued by the institution. The institution can accomplish this by providing consumer services such as a commuter lounge where commuters can eat, sleep, shower, relax

or interact with peers. Such a lounge encourages commuters to spend more time on campus.

More elaborate forms of consumer services include lockers for commuters and child care facilities. Hood College (Frederick, Maryland) provides a separate facility for a commuter student center (Rue and Ludt, 1983). Mountain Empire Community College (Big Stone Gap, Virginia) provides five vehicles filled with educational aides, such as video and audio equipment, and reference materials so that students can learn while in transit. Services such as these make a strong statement about how commuter students are valued.

Knefelkamp and Stewart (1983) suggested that on-campus employment for commuters can facilitate their involvement. Employment fosters increased identification with the institution by providing commuter students with a connection to their coursework and by keeping them on campus longer.

Providing campus services to commuters at convenient times and places promotes the feeling of being valued. The financial aid office, faculty member's office, academic advising office, or counseling center that has evening hours, or the food service that provides a commuter board plan, all send the message, "We're glad you're here."

Involvement with other students.

An important aspect of programming for commuters is promotion of social interaction with other students. This process can be facilitated through a commuter-advisor program, similar to a resident assistant program in the dormitory. This program would provide support and socialization and act as an anchor for commuter students (Wilmes and Quade, 1986). The advisor should have knowledge of institutional services, academic advising, communication techniques, and interpersonal group dynamics. The program could be facilitated in a group or individual setting and could begin during summer orientation or the first few weeks of the school year. The final result would be a cycle of informed commuters providing other commuters with valuable information. This program may continue throughout the school year.

The commuter student who feels secure in a group may venture out and join organizations such as a commuter student association, a nontraditional group, or student government. These groups can advocate commuter students' needs and serve as programming vehicles, sponsoring commuter-oriented activities. The Rutgers College (New Brunswick, New Jersey) commuter student group charters busses to transport students to plays, concerts, and sporting events. Tickets are partially subsidized by student

fees. These events serve the dual purpose of encouraging social contacts as well as cultural pursuits (Slade and Jarmul, 1975).

Interaction with campus personnel.

Interaction with university administration, faculty, and staff has a great impact on students' undergraduate experiences (Wilmes and Quade, 1986). Foster, Sedlacek, Harwick, and Silver (1976) stated that faculty and staff provide minimal support to commuter students. "Commuterism," they stated, is similar to racism or sexism. The resident student enjoys the chance to establish a personal relationship with a faculty member due to proximity. For the commuter student, this opportunity must be planned and deliberate. For example, the Danforth Foundation (St. Louis, Missouri) encourages faculty members to invite students to their homes. Every department at Queensborough Community College (Bayside, New York) sponsors a student-faculty coffee hour at least once a year to encourage interaction in a relaxed setting (Slade and Jarmul, 1975). Wilmes and Quade (1983) described a program entitled "Faculty Friends" which matched students with a faculty member outside their department with whom they shared an interest. The hope was that a mentoring relationship would be formed and maintained throughout the students' college experience and perhaps beyond. "Take a Student to Lunch" is another program designed to bring faculty and students together in an out-of-classroom setting. Interested

students and staff are paired, and the staff member buys the student lunch. Northeastern Illinois University (Chicago, Illinois) provides a Commuter House where faculty and commuters have an opportunity to interact in a relaxed setting (Flanagan, 1976).

Whatever the format, the goal is for increased interaction between faculty and students. It appears that in many programs this interaction is structured to occur in a relaxed setting which provides optimal relationship-building opportunities.

Integrating outside support systems.

Programming to integrate outside support systems of commuter students necessitates the involvement of families. This family involvement may take the form of providing on-campus activities for students with children or encouraging parents of traditional students to become more involved in campus activities. One way to achieve the latter is to mail an activity schedule to parents of commuter students. This makes them aware of opportunities for themselves as well as for their son or daughter. Jacoby (1983) stated that parents are a neglected resource in working with commuter students; traditionally, student affairs professionals have tried to minimize the role of parents in education and student development. Jacoby promoted the idea of increasing parental involvement by creating an active role for parents in their children's development.

Building parental identification with the institution can increase their involvement, which leads to positive reinforcement of their children in school. This is particularly important for parents who may question the value of college or resent their children's new involvements. Parents need to be included in recruitment efforts and should be encouraged to attend campus orientation sessions. Social functions that introduce parents to campus administrators can be beneficial in increasing parents' identification with the institution. Parents should receive announcements of all campus activities and be offered admission at reduced rates. They need to be informed about, and encouraged to utilize, research facilities, extension services, health care, legal counseling, and testing services. Finally, parents can be used as volunteers in activities to supplement staff members.

Parents need academic information about classes offered, grading, registration processes, and credits. They must be informed about financial aid, transportation, organizations, and honors programs. These topics can be covered in an orientation program for parents and through a direct mailing to parents who are unable to attend an orientation.

Helping parents understand the stresses of college life increases the effectiveness of their role as a support system. Increasing parents' appreciation of the student's transition to the university from high school, the need for privacy, the

pressures to choose a major, and dealing with bureaucracy will improve their ability to provide emotional support to the student. Newsletters to parents—just before student stress times such as the beginning of the semester, midterms, and finals—which explain the stresses and the strategies for providing support would be beneficial. This, in essence, is training parents to be paraprofessionals. Jacoby (1983) suggested training programs for parents in the maturational tasks of college students, such as dealing with authority, developing autonomy, and managing self-esteem. Training parents in risk-taking behavior, decision making, listening and counseling techniques would provide the commuter student with skilled individuals to support him/her in dealing with challenges, much the same support as the resident student experiences by living on campus. In the case of the non-traditional commuter student, a spouse or significant other should be encouraged to attend the training sessions.

Evaluation of Programming

Evaluation is critical if commuter programming is to meet the needs of students. Programmers must ask themselves: Does programming try to target all students on campus? Does programming consider the multiple time demands of the students? Is the programming time-efficient? Does the information network provide access to information in a timely manner? And, is there encouragement for involvement?

Questionnaires and interviews are effective evaluation techniques but are not the only ones available. Reviewing attendance records of activities, and determining usage of services through examination of appointment books, can reveal patterns of utilization. Observation of student behavior is a valuable evaluation tool. Videotaping students during activities and photographing lounges in use provide hard data of the observation. Workshops for staff members and students which facilitate a free flow of discussion can be of benefit in determining the effectiveness of programming. A staff that is open minded, willing to accept constructive criticism from program participants and to try new ideas, will provide the most effective commuter student programming.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

It is logical that student affairs professionals should assume the role of advocate in developing the commuter student perspective on campus. Goals such as increasing awareness of commuters' needs on campus, establishing or increasing budgets for commuter student programs, and unifying campus offices to provide optimal service to commuters are appropriate tasks for advocates.

To be effective, student affairs professionals must conduct research to create a database from which advocacy, programs, and services can be planned (Rue and Ludt, 1983). Student affairs

professionals can lead the research efforts in commuter student needs and disseminate this research to key decision makers and campus personnel. Providing fundamental knowledge of commuter student concerns can serve as the foundation for a well-informed institution.

Professionals in each office can assess commuter student needs in their respective areas. A task force can be formed—including representatives from each office, commuter students, and administration—to plot strategies for meeting these needs.

Generating interest and enthusiasm for change is a task to be undertaken by the student affairs professional. Frisz and Aylmann's (1980) five steps of advertising are applicable to this situation. Getting attention, creating interest, stimulating desire, imparting conviction, and asking for action is a sensible progression for encouraging acceptance of a commuter student program. These five steps can be accomplished by student affairs professionals serving on committees and task forces. Presenting programs and workshops are other vehicles for raising awareness. Informational publications are also effective tools for creating interest.

Student affairs professionals dedicated to the student personnel point of view and student development philosophies will see the necessity of providing programming for commuter students. They must promote the development of the whole student,

rather than intellectual development alone.

The responsibility of assessing the development of students lies with student affairs professionals. They need to encourage a collaborative effort, on the part of students, faculty, staff, and administration, to design programming that develops all students—commuters included—as whole persons.

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