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**The Untapped Potential of Commuters: Engaging Faculty and Staff to Foster a Commuter-
Inclusive Space and Student Interest at the University of San Diego**

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Prepared for the Degree of
Masters of Arts in Higher Education Leadership

University of San Diego

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Abstract

The commuter student population faces many challenges in getting involved on campus. Taking an asset-based approach, this study aimed to enhance first-year commuter engagement and support their sense of belonging at a private, faith-based university. By modifying McNiff and Whitehead's model of reflect-plan-act-exhibit, students were invited to engage in several identity, community, and leadership activities throughout the academic year. Results suggest first-year commuters need role modeling or mentorship that is challenging and supportive, the support of creating a 'third space' away from home and school, and the development of authentic and genuine connections among peers and staff. It is recommended that practitioners acknowledge and embrace students' commuter identity and work to increase the visibility and accessibility of commuter-targeted programming. Additionally, staff must build a community among commuter students through dedicated spaces and peer mentoring programs to strengthen and enhance first-year commuter cocurricular engagement.

Keywords: commuter students, community building, programming, sense of belonging

The Untapped Potential of Commuters: Engaging Faculty and Staff to Foster a Commuter-Inclusive Space and Student Interest at the University of San Diego

Commuter students hold various social identities that affect how they navigate and engage with an institution. Some commuters, like me, are students of color from marginalized and underserved communities and low-income or first-generation college students. These identities impacted how I navigated my undergraduate career when I lived on campus and continue to shape my graduate school experience. Through cocurricular opportunities at my undergraduate institution, I created a community on campus and maintained those relationships when I began commuting. Without supervisors, mentors, and peers to encourage, nourish, and motivate me, I would have struggled immensely in college. Therefore, early social connections with others are crucial to student development.

Cocurricular activities correlate with a student's sense of belonging, which varies by academic and social opportunities (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Holloway-Friesen, 2018; Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kuh et al., 2001). These opportunities allow students to begin their identity, leadership, personal, and community development. Cocurricular activities can help facilitate community among peers and faculty. I was fortunate to have the experience of attending Summer Bridge (SB), where a senior student inspired me to follow in her footsteps in becoming a student leader. The SB staff, Coordinator, and Student Support Services Assistant Director affirmed this decision. More importantly, they became my support system away from home by giving me a space to reflect and grow. The relationship with staff and faculty encouraged me to take on leadership opportunities. Now, my desire is to support student development by helping them engage on campus and by recognizing and celebrating their transferable skills from previous high school engagements and communities. I believe my

graduate assistantship at the Commuter Commons is a promising starting point to achieve this, thus leading to the development of this project at the Commuter Commons. The Commuter Commons, a space at the University of San Diego, provides resources for commuter students to study, socialize, and relax between classes. It is overseen by the Community and Leadership Department and accommodates the office spaces of the Graduate Assistant for the Commuter Commons and the Emerging Leaders Graduate Assistant.

Commuters bring a unique perspective to engagement, as some are already connected to various communities on campus through family, friends, and employment. However, commuters may skip university-related social engagement because they need to see the value of peer interactions when engaging in social events (Jacoby, 2004; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kuh et al., 2001). To address commuters' need for on-campus engagement, universities can bridge home and school engagement. Moreover, universities can promote more campus involvement through programming and cocurricular efforts, connecting to local communities, and aligning with commuters' needs.

The University of San Diego (USD) should acknowledge and provide more resources for the growing population of commuter students. With USD becoming an emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution, incoming LatinX students may be local commuters and require additional structural and individual support. Therefore, I aimed to understand first-year commuter engagement and support their sense of belonging by developing a programming initiative or model to encourage engagement and create a sense of community among commuter students. My overarching research questions were: 1) How can I enhance first-year commuter cocurricular engagement? 2) How does embracing students' commuter identity impact their sense of

belonging at USD? 3)How can commuter-targeted programming help commuter students build community at USD?

Social Location and Positionality

Entering this project, I hold a position of authority as supervisor of the Commuter Assistants (CAs), who work closely with the Director of Community and Leadership Development, Ariela Canizal to oversee of the physical space of the Commuter Commons and the commuter students who frequent the space. Due to my staff role in the Commuter Commons, first-year commuter students may hesitate to share their experiences with me. However, working with the CAs and Ariela Canizal, enabled me to establish rapport with first-year commuter students. Additionally, my social location as a cisgender Latina allows me to connect with students of color, specifically with the *transfronterizo* students who share the same ethnic identity. Moreover, my identity as a first-generation college student allows me to relate to the first-year struggle of navigating a primarily white institution.

Background and Literature Review

I turned to relevant literature to support commuter students' engagement at USD. I found several themes: residential versus commuter experience, social identities' impact on commuter engagement, social engagement and sense of belonging, and action research methods.

Residential Versus Commuter Experience

Research on commuters highlighted similarities and differences between commuter and residential student experiences. Many studies have reported commuters have no academic discrepancies with residential students; however, their involvement levels vary (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Flanagan, 1976; Kuh et al., 2001). Some reasons for this disparity are that commuter students are less likely to feel a part of the college community, less likely to engage in

school-sponsored events, and more likely to feel stress regarding work than residential students (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). These results align with previous studies on commuter student engagement that emphasize how commuting significantly impacts students' ability to engage with their university and recommend targeted support (Flanagan, 1976; Kuh et al., 2001).

Although commuting significantly influences commuters' involvement on campus, it does not mean they do not engage with the campus or are not engaged in their studies. Kuh et al. (2001) compared data from the 2000 and 2001 National Survey of Student Engagement on 105,000 first-year students from 470 4-year universities. They categorized students as residential students, walking commuters, driving commuters in their first year, and seniors. The commuters reported lower personal and social competency gains than residential students. Commuters also scored lower on interactions with faculty members, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive campus environment than residential students—likely due to their short time on campus. In general, commuters' involvement is limited compared to their residential counterparts, but they are on par with residential students in terms of academic engagement. Commuters lack involvement that contributes to their sense of belonging with peers, staff, and faculty but they are engaged in the classroom, thus requiring an exploration of their engagement and involvement. Early quantitative research on commuters has not provided an overall picture of commuters' involvement on campus. In addition, the institutional and external factors affecting commuter involvement need to be considered through a more holistic approach. Therefore, I aimed to elevate their stories and provide recommendations for faculty and staff by using a community-building approach.

Social Identities' Impact on Commuter Engagement

Despite insufficient research on students of color, studies have found a correlation between a commuter's racial, ethnic, and social class identities and their involvement (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Saenz et al., 2011; Waterman, 2012). They highlighted how most commuter students in urban institutions are Black, Indigenous, people of color, first-generation college students, and from low-income backgrounds. Students with these social identities hold assumptions and preconceived notions about engagement informed and enforced by the forms of capital commuters have (i.e., economic, cultural, and social). For example, they may limit their engagement due to financial restrictions or they may need to be aware of the social benefits of engaging with others. The current research on commuter students further connects a commuter's social identity with their involvement.

Nonetheless, there is a missed opportunity to discuss the wealth of knowledge commuter students have rather than what they lack, as commuters frequently remain connected to their community outside of college (Goodlad et al., 2019; Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Knelman, 2010). Moreover, colleges and universities can address social engagement for commuter students of color by involving them in cocurricular opportunities, including leadership opportunities, mentorship, and faculty interactions (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Flanagan, 1976; Holloway-Friesen, 2018). A commuter's social identities impact many of these engagement experiences as they interact with their home and college environments.

Commuter Social Engagement and Sense of Belonging

Cocurricular opportunities offer social interactions through enhancing peer support, advocating for identity-based resources, validating off-campus experiences, and encouraging faculty interactions to support commuter students of color (Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Kodama,

2015). Peer-to-peer and faculty interactions can significantly impact whether students view their institution as welcoming or hostile. Therefore, same-race peer support is helpful, especially when faculty and staff may not reflect students' identities (Kodama, 2015). Likewise, advocating for identity-based spaces can affirm students and connect them with others, aiding their socialization and integration.

Additionally, commuters may participate in off-campus leadership opportunities and not consider themselves as having a leadership role; however, institutions need to recognize these critical contributions by commuters. Lastly, faculty interactions positively impact students of color; therefore, incorporating opportunities for interaction is vital (Chang, 2005; Holloway-Friesen, 2018; Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Kodama, 2015). However, existing scholarship focused on LatinX and Native American experiences may be limited in the validity of their claims for other students of color, such as Black, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Southwest Asian, and North African American students.

In a national systematic review, Jacoby and Garland (2004) noted commuters must develop relationships with faculty, staff, and peers to build supportive networks and connect to the university. These claims are relevant today, suggesting student engagement, learning communities, and cocurricular programs can play a vital role in commuter students' sense of belonging and retention. Aiming to validate the commuter experience by developing social activities and creating comprehensive training for commuter student leaders, Secreti (2018) discussed an opportunity for commuter students to receive peer support and take on leadership roles. Specifically, Secreti recommended training commuter student leaders to be mentors and expanding engagement programs for first-year commuters. Universities should consider offering these opportunities for commuters and recognizing the various student identities they hold.

Often, social engagement is limited because commuter students find commuting and cultural intolerance contributes to their lack of belonging (Holloway-Friesen, 2018). These results are consistent with previous research suggesting that commuter students' low levels of involvement may be linked to their social identity and the institution (Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Thomas, 2020). These studies echoed commuters' need for purposeful involvement, faculty interactions, and academic programming. Jacoby and Garland (2004) and Thomas (2020) mentioned individual and systemic challenges such as commuting, campus climate, lack of commuter-specific programming, and challenges navigating the university and students' home environment, thus showcasing how complex relationships within each system contribute to a commuter's engagement and sense of belonging. I aimed to illustrate the complex systems commuters engage with daily and affect their engagement, sense of belonging, and identity.

Action Research Methods

Most traditional research on commuter students has used surveys and interviews (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Flanagan, 1976; Kuh et al., 2001). However, these methods only partially engage commuter students. My action research study aimed to support and elevate the commuter experience. Several articles have highlighted the urgent need to use student narratives, cycles, and observations. For example, as students continue to use technology, social media plays a vital role in their lives and is a potential tool for researchers. Goodlad et al. (2019) highlighted the narratives of first-year and first-generation students from a learning community as they transitioned from an urban commuter college in New York. Students reflected on their college transition through a digital writing project. One limitation of this nontraditional study was that it captured a snapshot of an event that impacted the student's sense of belonging rather than a continuum of events. Another study highlighted the importance of nontraditional methods and

specifically in working with commuter students. Puccio (2012) shared basic strategies such as sending programming invitations, providing food, meeting where students hang out, creating on-the-go programming, and collaborating with campus partners. These suggestions were essential for the recruitment and retention of the larger commuter community in this project, such as using the CAs to recruit students and working with the Commuter Commons staff to provide food as an incentive to participate in this project. These articles informed my methods by allowing me to consider a continuum of student engagement experiences and my practices as a researcher, authority figure, and practitioner. I endeavored to highlight and elevate the diverse stories of commuters and hold the university accountable to its commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and other student initiatives by connecting engagement, a sense of belonging, and identity.

Finally, two researchers working with commuter students used cycles to inform their study. Knelman (2010) used a personal research journal and observations to reflect on her practice and events in the Commuter Commons. Using one-on-one interviews, observations, and reflections, these methods illustrated how the commuter population requires more advocacy at USD. She described their need to be aware of the underrepresented identities of USD commuter students, as not doing so can result in overlooking the basic needs and concerns of the community. Similarly, Velasquez (2021) used McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) model to evaluate the needs of the commuter population. The first cycle consisted of a survey, interviews, and a creative activity to discuss infinite possibilities for commuters. This research relates to my work as it builds on Knelman's (2010) work on how the USD Commuter Commons can provide engagement opportunities. Using these methods allowed me to understand how programs and my presence affect both the space and the commuters through reflecting and pondering my practice.

Context

My research occurred at USD, a private, faith-based university with undergraduate first-year commuter students. I partnered with the Commuter Commons, which provides space to hang out, eat, and engage in academics (e.g., studying or seeking homework support). The Commuter Commons offers monthly programming focused on cocurricular learning outcomes such as community building and mentoring opportunities led by the student leaders and the CAs. With the CAs' help, the Commuter Commons has contacted more first-year students via newsletters and found new ways to engage students in the space.

The CAs also support the Collaborate Living Learning Communities (LLCs), where first-year commuter students have been intentionally placed with residential students since 2021. The LLCs are based on interest and aim to build community with professors and peers. Students take a class together and participate in several events throughout their LLC experience. For the 2022-2023 academic year, the CAs supported the programming efforts of the Commuter Commons, which I oversee.

I returned as the graduate assistant for the Commuter Commons under the Department of Community and Leadership Development (CLD) and as the supervisor of the CAs. During my first year in the role and with the use of previous action research papers, I noticed the need for commuter representation, resources, and support at USD. Based on these factors, I conducted observations and led programs on commuter-specific issues with involvement. I developed a prompt for the creative digital artwork aspect for my participants regarding their sense of belonging at USD (see Appendix H). Thus, in this presented project, I conducted an action research study centered on the narratives of commuter students and focused on aspects of identity, community, leadership, and personal development. This project was a collaboration

with Ariela Canizal, the director of CLD, the commuter students of the class of 2025, and the CAs of the 2022-2023 academic year. These topics are personal to me and prevalent in cocurricular experiences.

During my undergraduate years, I enjoyed being part of a student organization and serving as a student leader because the leadership opportunities, personal development, and mentoring made me feel like I belonged. Cocurricular engagement added to my college experience and sense of belonging, which got me through college, so I know it can also contribute to commuter students' experience. Cocurricular activities can create a voice for the commuter experience as they engage with others. While it was challenging to engage and retain first-year commuter students, I developed relationships with them by participating in the onboarding efforts from the Commuter Commons during Orientation 2022. I also utilized the Cas assigned to the first-year commuter students to encourage participation and retention.

Project Rationale

As the Commuter Commons graduate assistant, I learned how USD commuters are underrepresented and lack visibility in many students' decisions on campus. Commuters are not available for late meetings or events, making their engagement and participation difficult and contributing to their lack of belonging at USD. The primary assumption of many faculty and staff, and even the peers of commuters is that they do not engage on campus because they do not care to be involved. Institutional perspectives perpetuate this narrative about commuters as well.

Existing literature has highlighted aspects of the commuter experience I have seen at the Commuter Commons, such as the intersectionality of students' identities with the commuter identity. Commuters are not only commuters, but also students of color, first-generation college students, and low-income students. Recognizing these identities allows practitioners to

understand how some of the challenges commuters struggle with when engaging on-campus are not limited to commuting but also their relationship with their campus, home, and work environments. Moreover, little is known about commuter students that is not survey-based or quantitative. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct my research study so commuter students could have their voices heard through a community-building approach.

Through working with the commuter students at USD and considering previous action research projects of the Commuter Commons, I understand the Commuter Commons' relationships with the students and the university and how commuter students interact with the Commuter Commons space and staff. Some commuter students experience the Commuter Commons as their only form of on-campus engagement, while others view it as the bridge to engaging with the broader campus. Additionally, the Commuter Commons serves as a "home away from home" for many students as they are constantly on the go. The Commuter Commons has gone a long way in hosting programs to engage the commuter population and create more allies across campus.

The epistemological stance underlying my action research is constructivism, which posits that individuals construct understanding and meaning from their experiences. Using this perspective will allow me to understand how commuter students make meaning of their engagement experiences and discover their perceptions of involvement, community, and leadership. As I have made meaning of my personal experiences through leadership, community, and self-reflection, my project will consist of three cycles, paralleling my experience and those of the commuters. Using McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) reflect-plan-act-record model, I modified the last approach from "record" to "exhibit" to represent the final approach of highlighting and showcasing commuter student engagement. Additionally, each cycle will align

with its respective approach, for example, in the first cycle, “reflect” involved students reflecting on a specific aspect. The first cycle consisted of reflecting and planning as the commuters and I reflected on their engagement and what it looks like for them. The second cycle involved commuters engaging in three identity or leadership activities I facilitated. In the final cycle, students exhibited their engagement through art in a gallery show, in which both the student and I presented our learning from the process and presented it to commuter student allies. Throughout the process, I kept a private journal to take notes on my observations and reflections on my progress with my action research.

Research Design

I used McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) cycle of action research as my methodology because it "speaks about the experience of oneself as a living contradiction when one's values are denied in practice" (p. 112), which is encompassed in its three "reflect-plan-act-exhibit" cycles. Using this cycle as a methodology can help address such contradictions by reflecting on experiences, planning for action, and taking steps to address the identified issues. Additionally, this model best aligned with my epistemological stance of constructivism, which posits that knowledge is not objective or absolute but is relative to the individual and their experiences. It is shaped by the individual's prior knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions, as well as by the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. A constructivist epistemological stance believes that the learner has an active role in constructing their knowledge and understanding of the world. It highlights the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping this process. With my chosen methodology and epistemology, I aimed to create a structure that supports active, reflective, and context-dependent learning of the first-year commuter student experience at USD.

Secondly, this research took an asset-based approach that focused on identifying and leveraging strengths and resources within the first-year commuter students rather than solely focusing on problems, deficits, or needs. With an asset-based approach, the emphasis is on a positive, strengths-based perspective that recognizes and builds upon existing community strengths and resources, such as the USD Commuter Commons, Commuter Assistants, other student leaders, and campus partners, to promote positive change and improve community well-being. Moreover, this approach hopes to recognize and build upon the strengths and interests of individual students rather than solely focusing on their weaknesses or deficits.

Human Participants and Recruitment

I recruited my participants through snowball sampling and the assistance of the CAs. All first-year incoming commuter students were emailed a flyer through their CA's newsletter (see Appendix C), and a physical flyer was posted in the Commuter Commons. Students interested in participating signed a consent form informing them of the project and the materials collected from each activity. I had eight participants who were first-year commuter students over the age of 18 and from various ethnic backgrounds (see Appendix A).

Students' privacy was protected by creating pseudonyms. My findings were reviewed and supported by my critical friends Alejandro Picasso and Pauline Herring, both graduate students in the higher education leadership masters program, and Ariela Canizal, my supervisor and professional staff at the Commuter Commons. In addition, my faculty advisor, Dr. Cheryl Getz, supported my validation group.

Data Collection

The data collected consisted of paper deliverables such as my journal reflection, observations, student worksheets, and paper deliverables (e.g., poster paper, social and personal

identity wheel, ecosystem map, and leadership timeline poster). The three study cycles spanned the 2022-2023 academic year and varied in frequency from biweekly to weekly meetings. Each activity was scheduled for about an hour, with 15 minutes for the icebreaker and 45 minutes dedicated to the activity. The purpose of the icebreakers was to transition students into the main activities while also providing them with context. I observed the group during the icebreakers and the session, taking notes in my reflection journal to make meaning of the activities.

The first cycle consisted of the four-corner activity (see Appendix D). My first cycle consisted of reflecting and planning, in which eight students and I reflected on what engagement and community mean. Afterward, they initiated the four-corner activity by dividing into two groups and responding to questions regarding engagement and community on poster paper (see Appendix D and Appendix B, Figure 1B). They had 15 minutes per set of two questions and then switched questions. Once completed, they came together to debrief the activity.

Cycle 2 consisted of three activities: identity chart (see Appendix E), ecosystem mapping (see Appendix F), and leadership timeline (see Appendix G). During these events, students explored their identity, community, and leadership abilities to explore how they could apply them to their on-campus involvements. The identity chart activity involved five students and began with a core values activity as an icebreaker. By choosing their top 10 values from a given list and then cutting it down to five, students reflected on what they hold dear and how their identity supports or challenges their values while they completed the identity charts. Four students participated in the ecosystem mapping activity. This activity took place one week after the identity chart activity. The icebreaker for the ecosystem maps was a short video explaining Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and how it has been used in the legislature to make a policy change. The last activity of Cycle 2 was the leadership timeline. First, students created a

group mind map on leadership before engaging in their leadership timelines and reflecting on their leadership actions. The final cycle, Cycle 3, consisted of digital art creation (see Appendix B, Figure 5B), in which students met for an hour to review the prompt, brainstorm ideas for their art, and create a plan of action for when and how they would complete their art piece. The viewing of their art occurred at the Commuter Commons in March 2023, with the campus community invited to the viewing with light refreshments provided.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how I could strengthen and enhance first-year commuter co-curricular engagement by embracing their various identities, and thus to develop their sense of belonging at USD, in addition to explaining how commuter-targeted programming can help build community at USD. Through the review of data collection, I learned how commuter students highly value relationships with others, how their first year is a period of identity development, and how commuter students have competing demands and require flexibility from staff.

I will be discussing two main points: first, the importance of role modeling and mentorship in challenging and supporting students, and second, the concept of the “third space” as an environment for nurturing personal and community development for first-year commuter students. In further expanding on the second point, I will demonstrate how the third space provides a platform for identity development, highlights the need for practitioners to adapt to the unique needs of first-year commuter students, and acknowledges the challenges of navigating different worlds and cultures at the intersection of identities.

Building Authentic Connections: The Importance of Role Modeling and Mentorship for Challenging and Supporting Students

During the four-square activity and the digital art creation, students emphasized the significance of creating spaces that challenge and support them (See Appendix B, Figure 1B and Figure 5B). One student described the ideal community as “being non-judgmental, humble, and accepting” while highlighting the attributes that contribute to such a community. Another student shared the attributes of someone who is in community, such as “role modeling, giving advice, being a good listener, and sharing a sense of identity with others.” Unanimously, the participants identified specific actions that foster community, such as being “unapologetically oneself, making eye contact, nodding, and affirmations.” Most of the comments made were regarding the participants' experience with the USD Commuter Commons and their interactions with the Commuter Assistants and staff. The students' emphasis on relationship-building traits highlights the importance of authentic interpersonal relationships for the commuter student experience, which is consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of mentorship and peer-to-peer interactions.

Clark (2006) emphasized the significance of cultivating connections with students through intrusive mentoring programs maintained throughout the first two years of college, particularly on urban commuter campuses. Although Clark's recommendations primarily focus on student-to-student relationships, the traits of mentorship could also apply to faculty and administrators with time and dedication. Demetriou et al. (2017) found that academic mentors, student mentors, and employer mentors all played essential roles in supporting the personal, educational, and career goals of successful first-generation college students. Academic mentorship can build a sense of community and connection to the campus, providing guidance

and support on academic and personal issues to help students succeed in college. Mentors can also offer encouragement and motivation, assisting students in staying focused on their goals and persisting through challenges in college.

For first-year commuters, having a mentor who is either a peer or staff member is essential to keeping them grounded on campus and supporting the social and academic challenges that college life can bring. At USD, first-year commuter students benefit from having mentorship relationships with Commuter Assistants (peers), graduate assistants, and Ariela. They are encouraged to continue seeking support from both staff and student leaders.

Additionally, the student's digital art and videos highlighted the importance of relationships with friends, physical places, and peers providing validation of their identity or experience (See Appendix B, Figure 5B). One participant specifically mentioned how they have heard the phrases, "You are loved, your presence matters, and I'm glad you're here" in the Commuter Commons which provided her with a feeling of love and hope. Moreover, other participants' digital art illustrated the challenges and support provided by friends and families during their first-year experience. One student shared the experience of feeling like they would not fit in at USD or being worried about finding a community as a non-residential student. Overall, these experiences underscore the importance of relationships among the commuter student population.

Commuter students face unique challenges related to social isolation, difficulty accessing campus resources, and feeling disconnected from the college (Pokorny et al., 2017). Addressing these challenges requires a proactive and intentional approach to engaging with commuter students. This can include organizing commuter-specific events and clubs, providing access to resources and services tailored to the needs of commuter students, and using technology to

facilitate communication and engagement. Building strong relationships with commuter students is critical for colleges and universities.

The Third Space: Nurturing Personal and Community Development for First-Year Commuter Students

The concept of the third space was first introduced to me when I attended the 2022 National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Western Regional Conference in Anaheim, California. I attended a presentation titled, “Co-Designing a Holistic College Experience with Students” (Elwefati et al., 2022), where the concept was first introduced to me as a lens for Student Affairs practitioners to blend the boundaries and comprise elements of both academic and professional activity to allow them to perform and be able to create experiences with students. The presenters also mentioned the origin of the third space concept in culture (Bhabha, 1994), which caught my attention as it was an in-between space between two cultures, rather than accepting one culture or another, individuals integrate the unique characteristics and strengths of each culture to create a new hybrid culture. I made note of the concept, and compared my notes from the conference and my findings as I was trying to make sense of my data. Since then, I have reflected upon how the concept of the third space is crucial to my research, as it serves as both a physical and relational space for personal and community development. This concept is embodied by the people who inhabit the physical space of the USD Commuter Commons and is a central theme throughout this project. The theme is especially interwoven throughout cycle two, which involved identity charts, ecosystem maps, and leadership timelines. Cycle two was focused on action, exploring the factors that impact engagement for first-year commuter students. The overall findings of these activities revealed that the third space is a unique environment that provides a hybrid culture where students can

navigate and express their identities without having to assimilate to existing norms at home, work, or school.

The third space is a crucial concept for promoting personal and community development among first-year commuter students. It provides a unique environment where students can navigate and express their identities, and it requires reflective leadership and support from Student Affairs practitioners to ensure its stability and effectiveness. The importance of the third space is supported by three sub-themes. In the next sections, I discuss the first theme, which is how first-year commuter students have a strong need for identity exploration, which can be fulfilled in the third space, a unique hybrid environment. Second, I will share what I learned related to the second theme of how Student Affairs practitioners must be able to meet students in this hybrid culture. And finally, the third theme focuses on the challenges of the third space as it is a space where intersecting identities can bring challenges or conflicts to the commuter student as they navigate their first year.

Identity Development and First-Year Commuter Students: The Need for a Third Space

The first sub-theme of cycle two is how first-year commuter students explore their personal identity while balancing family expectations, family roles, and academics as shown by the completion of their identity charts (See Appendix B, Figure 2B), ecosystem maps (See Appendix B, Figure 4B), and leadership timelines (See Appendix B, Figure 3B). Student's responses were also aligned Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development thus calling for space needed for identity exploration.

While conducting the debrief for the identity chart activity, I asked the participants if any stood out to them during the activity. One participant said, "It was more difficult for me to complete the personal identity chart rather than the social identity chart because I can just recall

what others have told me about my social identity.” I followed up by asking the group if they felt the same, and many nodded in agreement. With this information in mind, when I was reviewing their identity charts, I noticed that their social chart contained more question marks next to their written responses as if they are unsure if they believe it but rather that they have heard what others have told them they are. I concluded that the participants are still building their identity away from home but also trying to find community at USD. Moreover, during one of my individual conversations with a participant, they mentioned “the weight of their family expectations” of being in the medical field, yet they were considering moving away from that path because “biology is not of [personal] interest” to them. They also disclosed the fear of losing current classmates and friends if they switched their current career trajectory. My conversation with the student relates to Chickering and Reisser’s Theory of Identity Development, which suggests that college students go through a series of stages as they develop their sense of self, including exploring and clarifying their personal values and beliefs. One of the key stages of this theory is “developing a realistic and positive sense of self,” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 46) which involves exploring one’s own values, beliefs, and interests. This can be particularly challenging for commuter students juggling multiple roles and responsibilities. For this reason, building a community away from home and academics, not just only based on commonalities or identification is essential to allow for stability and challenge. Some general examples of ways staff might support students in this include hosting discussion groups, social events, game nights, or potlucks.

These examples are possible ways to create a “third space.” As mentioned earlier, the concept of a third space was first introduced by Bhabha (1994), who referred to it as an area of cultural hybridity where individuals and groups negotiate to come together and create new

meanings and identities not constrained by the dominant cultural narratives. Moreover, Engeström (2015) expanded on this idea focusing on the concept of learning, where the idea of third spaces is where individuals can engage in creative problem-solving, develop new understandings and perspectives, and transform their practices in meaningful areas that overlap or interact with each other. In higher education, these spaces are informal environments where students can engage in informal learning activities, collaborate with peers and instructors, and explore new ideas and interests beyond the formal curriculum. The third space is also the hybrid learning space of home and school. Students compromise and navigate the complexities and conjunctions of their identity, culture, values, and norms to develop a hybrid identity. Furthering suggestions about the importance of creating spaces and opportunities for boundary-crossing, interaction, and negotiation in learning and professional practice. By facilitating these interactions and collaborations, the Student Affairs practitioner can develop new ways of thinking and working that are more innovative, inclusive, and responsive to the complex and dynamic challenges of being a first-year commuter student. This connects to my participants as they expressed to me the joy in being in the USD Commuter Commons, a space away from their academic workload, and the family expectations and responsibilities they held to at home, about themselves and others, while being in good company.

Adapting to the Needs of Commuter Students: A Call to Action for Practitioners

The second sub-theme highlights the need for Student Affairs Practitioners to adapt to commuter students by creating a third space that overlaps their family and school culture. My action research project became a third space for many of the participants, and it was crucial in supporting the larger commuter community. Practitioners are invited to create a third space that fits the students' needs and finds innovative ways of engaging them. In my project, attendance at

my activities varied due to the need for more time regarding involvement and financial constraints. Still, the students found it intriguing to be part of this research and spend time with other first-year commuters. One participant was studying for a midterm while completing one of our cycle activities. They told me, “I need to study for this chemistry midterm, but I’ll still try to participate.” I appreciated his sincerity in still wanting to be in the project without neglecting his student responsibilities, so we both made it work.

Moreover, during the ecosystem map activity, student participants learned about the Bronfenbrenner Theory of Ecological Systems. They were amazed at how it was used to create change by establishing the Head Start Program for children. Similarly, this project not only allowed them to support my research but also to spend time with other first-year commuter students outside of academics and home. Hence, this project created a common experience among a circle of first-year commuter student participants, and overall developed a sense of community as illustrated by the various pictures of them in each other's digital art pieces. One participant even named the other participants in their digital art as an impact aspect of their navigating their first year (see Appendix B, Figure 5B). This was validation for the type of work we did together.

In my digital media video explanation of my third cycle, I invited campus partners and staff to listen in to help them get a better understanding of the first-year commuter experience and how the students view the commuter commons, their first year, and USD. We had 25 staff members attending the event, and they highlighted how impactful the video explanations were. One attendee said they felt the “connectedness the students had to the Commuter Commons and you all [the staff in Commuter Commons, Ariela, the CAs, and me].” One of the staff referred to one of participant's digital art who shared how they “value a space like this one [Commuter

Commons] where I can just hang out or reach out to people who have the best interest for me and support me [in their personal and academic development].” The student’s digital art video explanation brought so much attention to the connection they have with the Commuter Commons and its staff that we are considering using these videos for the Commuter Commons website and to share with potential donors who might support the creation of more third spaces on campus.

Overall, this project calls on practitioners to think creatively and innovatively to create a community while considering resources, ability, and passion for creating these third spaces. Practitioners should be focused on more than just structure, perfection, or numbers. As my participants recalled to me, it was my intention to accommodate their needs and various situations to ensure they were still part of the full experience.

Acknowledging the Intersection and Challenges of Identities and Cultures: Navigating Worlds

The third sub-theme highlights the challenges that a commuter student’s home culture and university culture may pose as they navigate their first year, in addition to the need for practitioners to adapt to these students. Drawing from Rendón (1994), who shared her lived experience as a Latina who had to compromise her identity while navigating higher education, it emphasizes the importance of practitioners being aware of the identity challenges students face at home and school. Practitioners must identify how intersecting identities impact how students navigate college and then articulate the need to develop support for these students.

During my research, I provided a third space for participants to connect with other commuter students and share their experiences. Through this, I learned about some of the challenges that first-year commuter students face, such as difficulty with the academic rigor of

college and understanding college culture, as well as issues with finances, parking, and food, especially on a predominantly residential campus like USD.

It's important for practitioners to understand these challenges and to realize that involvement is not about first-year commuter students assimilating or alienating from the university's culture, but finding a way to facilitate the overlap of home culture and academics. Students expressed a desire to join clubs and organizations on campus and connect with residential students and anyone who shares their experiences of navigating their first year.

Laura Rendón's (1994) experiences as a first-generation Mexican American college student from a working-class background highlight the challenges of navigating two different cultures and the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture on campus. Her article addresses issues of identity, cultural capital, and the politics of higher education, specifically how higher education can perpetuate inequities and disadvantages among marginalized students.

To support diverse student populations, practitioners must recognize and value the cultural knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom. First-year commuter students come from various backgrounds and identities, and practitioners need to reflect on how their institutions recognize and value these experiences. Practitioners should also leverage student leadership in navigating a third space for commuter students.

The experience of navigating two different cultures is like Rendón (1994) experienced as a first-generation Mexican American college student from a working-class background. Rendón faced challenges navigating the cultural and academic differences between her home community and the university. Her article highlights issues of identity, cultural capital, and the politics of higher education, specifically how higher education can perpetuate inequities and disadvantages among marginalized students. She discusses the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture

on campus and the barriers faced by students from low-income backgrounds. Rendón argues that universities must be more inclusive and supportive of diverse student populations. Educators must recognize and value the cultural knowledge and experiences that students bring to the classroom. First-year commuter students in this study hold various identities, including ethnic, linguistic, and financial identities. Practitioners and staff must reflect on how our current institutions recognize and value the cultural knowledge and experiences that students bring with them outside and inside the classroom. Additionally, having practitioners be aware of the commuter identity and its challenges can help leverage student leadership in navigating a third space for commuter students.

Concerning my research, most of my participants were second-generation college students, yet they navigated their first years like first-generation college students. They lacked the social knowledge to navigate offices and did not feel comfortable attending first-generation college student programming as one student said, “It doesn't apply to me;” however, they relied on the Commuter Commons staff to remind them that it is okay to ask for help. They do not need to do things alone like home might expect them to. Thus, demonstrating the need for practitioners to focus on both visible and invisible identities, roles, and behaviors from home that impact how students navigate college.

Review: General Summary of Findings

To recap my findings sections, I first found how commuter students identified aspects of their community that focus on mentoring relationships with others. The four-square activity and digital art creation conducted by students highlight the significance of role modeling and mentorship in creating a supportive and challenging community. Students identified the

importance of authentic interpersonal relationships, including giving advice, being a good listener, sharing a sense of identity, and making eye contact, nodding, and affirmations.

I then introduced the concept of a third space as hybrid environment between home and school. It is a space that addresses the unique challenges commuter students face, such as identity explorations, and navigating family expectations. Creating a third space that meets the needs of commuter students is done by building authentic connections through mentorship and role modeling which can contribute significantly to their academic success and overall well-being. At USD, first-year commuter students have created a third space in the Commuter Commons, Commuter Assistants, and career staff, providing them with the necessary support and guidance to succeed in college.

Alongside the second finding of first-year commuter students navigating through identity development, the second theme I discussed was the concept of the third space as a crucial aspect of promoting personal and community development among first-year commuter students. During the identity charts and ecosystem map students shared how they are still trying to figure out who they are, rather than what their family or friends have identified them as in the past. College brings new beginnings as they figure out the person they want to be while navigating the roles and responsibilities back home. Therefore, making the third space a place for students to create a hybrid culture is key.

Furthermore, the development of a third space for first-year commuter students, encompassing community and identity development, requires staff flexibility and understanding that they may have many competing demands with home, school, and work that may pull them away from that hybrid space. However, it is the availability of the fluidity of the third space that can bring students back to it. Lastly, as first-year commuters are navigating both home and

school, it can bring up the intersecting identities of the student, and that can cause internal conflict within the student. This is where it is critical for the Student Affairs Practitioner to be present for them in navigating that hybrid culture.

Limitations

Although my study provides valuable insights into the experiences of first-year commuter students on our campus, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of only eight participants may limit the generalizability of my findings. Even though snowball sampling was a convenient recruitment method, it may have yet to produce a representative sample of the larger population of commuter students. Additionally, the sample was limited to first-year students, which may reflect different findings than the experiences of upperclassmen or transfer students.

Second, the use of McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) cycle of action research methodology influenced the data collection and analysis of this study. Although this methodology was selected because of its ability to explore the experiences of individuals whose values differ in the common narrative, it may have limited the scope of our inquiry or biased our interpretations of the data. Future research could benefit from using alternative methodologies that offer different perspectives or approaches to understanding the experiences of commuter students.

Third, data collection of paper deliverables and in-person sessions for data collection may have limited the depth and breadth of the data collected. The activities allowed for rich and meaningful conversations with participants; other data collection methods, such as surveys or interviews, could provide additional perspectives or insights. Furthermore, the length of the study (one academic year) may have limited our ability to capture the full range of experiences that commuter students face throughout their time on campus.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge my biases as a researcher and the limitations that may have influenced the study. Although efforts were made to minimize these biases, such as using critical friend groups and seeking support from a faculty advisor, my background and experiences impacted the data collection and analysis. However, they also allowed me to build trust among the first-year students participating in this study which I otherwise would not have been able to do.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a foundation for future research and practice aimed at improving the experiences of commuter students on our campus. By acknowledging these limitations, future researchers can build upon our work to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the needs and experiences of this population.

Recommendations

In conducting this study, it is essential to recognize the unique challenges commuter students face and implement strategies that will enhance their engagement and success on campus. Transitioning to college can be particularly difficult for these students as they navigate family, academic, and work expectations and may feel disconnected from their communities. To address these challenges, colleges, and universities should focus on the following recommendations:

First, it is vital to acknowledge and embrace students' commuter identity and allow them the space to create their own meaning of their college experience. Commuter students often feel like outsiders, so recognizing and valuing their unique perspective can go a long way toward making them feel welcome. Hosting a welcome ceremony or graduation ceremony specifically for commuter students can make them feel included in marking new beginnings for them. Colleges can also create a culture that celebrates and values commuter students by promoting

commuting benefits, highlighting successful commuter alumni, and encouraging commuter students to take up leadership positions on campus. To make these initiatives more inclusive, colleges should also consider highlighting the experiences of bilingual and multicultural students.

Moreover, providing for the basic needs of commuter students, such as food, housing, and health, is crucial. This can be done by providing and promoting free food, discounted meals, or flexible meal plans and providing them with adequate resources for mental and physical health. Ensuring that the resources are culturally competent is also important.

Secondly, to foster the development of individual commuter students, it is recommended to increase the visibility and accessibility of commuter-targeted programming. Creating programs and events specifically designed for commuter students can help them feel more connected to the campus community. These programs should be held at convenient times and locations for commuters. Social media and email newsletters can promote these programs and keep commuter students informed. However, physically inviting them to events is highly effective, and developing programming around relationships might be helpful as relationships or academics are key for commuters. It is also important to consider the prevalent commuter identities and ensure they also have a space to go. For example, a large first-generation college student transfer commuter population may need to connect with a first-generation college student center or program, transfer student hub or center, alongside the Commuter Commons. Thus, it is important for practitioners to be reflective and intentional in creating a community with these students.

Lastly, building a community among commuter students through trust is crucial. Dedicated spaces for commuter students to study and socialize, like the Commuter Commons,

are critical to their experience as it provides a space for them to connect with other commuter students and staff. Staff can also facilitate peer mentoring programs and other initiatives that foster connections between commuter students. Additionally, creating an inviting physical and campus space welcoming to commuter students is essential as they navigate home and school.

As a practitioner in this process, it is crucial to allow students to create their own narrative and experience in college and support their personal growth while respecting their home and community culture. Practitioners should approach their roles with compassion and empathy, listening to students' experiences, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. Practitioners should aim to be a part of students' narratives as they navigate higher education.

By implementing these recommendations, colleges, and universities can enhance commuter engagement and help commuter students feel more connected to the campus community. This, in turn, can lead to greater student retention, academic success, and overall satisfaction with the college experience. It is vital to recognize the unique needs of commuter students and provide them with the resources and support necessary to thrive on campus. Institutions must be ready to onboard a new, culturally diverse student population and create a welcoming environment. It is vital to recognize the unique needs of commuter students and provide them with the resources and support necessary to thrive on campus. Students, especially students of color, are often changed by higher education. Now it is time to ask ourselves, how are institutions ready to onboard the new culturally diverse student population?

Personal Reflections

When I first began planning this project, I was hesitant about my ability to facilitate group sessions. While I felt comfortable working with individuals one-on-one, leading group

activities presented new challenges for me. However, I found that I enjoyed taking on both observer and leadership roles during our various sessions. I was thoughtful in selecting icebreakers to lead into the main activity and willing to make improvisations when necessary. Over time, I realized that the skills I used in individual settings were also applicable to working with groups. Just as I practice active listening and ask questions in one-on-one sessions, I also need to be attentive to moments in a group that may slow down or restrict the flow of activity. By being observant and acting, I can help the group function effectively and accomplish our goals.

Another personal lesson I learned was that I can hold space for a group of students or individuals, but I need to be patient with myself and others. Before beginning my graduate career, people often came to me when they needed to reflect or think things through. I believed this was due to my calm and caring nature, but I now understand that it involves more than just creating a comfortable space for people to share with me. I realized that in group settings, I tend to create boundaries to protect myself from being vulnerable with others. This has caused me to take on an observer role rather than a more active leadership role. I recognize that by creating and enforcing my own boundaries, I may inadvertently create rigid containers for others, which could be limiting or restrictive. To address this, I need to be more flexible and open to negotiation when it comes to my own boundaries. This will allow me to create containers that are adaptable and responsive to the needs of the group.

Overall, the interconnectedness of my personal boundaries and the ways in which I create and maintain structures or boundaries for myself and others in various contexts is an important consideration. By being aware of the impact of my own boundaries and how they may affect others, I can create more effective containers that support healthy relationships and interactions.

This is an important lesson for me as I continue to navigate student affairs. Developing community with students is important to me, and I have learned that community building involves self-vulnerability, acknowledging the personal and academic challenges students experience, and inspiring, challenging, supporting, and validating them along the way to create a sense of belonging and foster growth and development.

Conclusion

The present research project highlights the importance of creating a “third space” for first-year commuter students to support their personal and community development. The findings suggest that role modeling, mentorship, and authentic interpersonal relationships are highly valued by commuter students for building a sense of community and supporting their personal, academic, and career goals. It is essential to have a mentor who is either a peer or staff to keep them grounded on campus and support the social and academic challenges of college life.

The study also emphasizes the need for more time and financial flexibility for first-year commuter students, which highlights the importance of creating a space where they can overlap their family and school culture. Practitioners must recognize and understand the challenges of balancing their home culture with the academic rigor of college and create a third space that acknowledges and values their diverse identities.

The research design used McNiff and Whitehead’s cycle of action research as a methodology to explore how an individual can influence their own learning and that of others while understanding the context of their surroundings. Through the data collection process, I facilitated reflection, planning, and action among the commuter students to create long-lasting, impactful change based on the data gathered.

The project culminated in a gallery show where the students' engagement was showcased and presented to their allies, highlighting the unique challenges that commuter students face related to social isolation and difficulty accessing campus resources. Overall, this research project sheds light on the importance of creating a "third space" for first-year commuter students to support their involvement on campus and personal and community development and provide valuable insights for practitioners to improve the experiences of commuter students on campus.

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Appendix A

Demographics of Participants

Name of the student, Age, Gender (Male/Female)	First Generation College Student Y/N	Race	Ethnicity	Hometown	Immigration status	Language Spoken	Number of Siblings	Hours Worked (per Week)
Jessi, 18, M	N	Decline to Answer	Decline to Answer	San Diego	Decline to Answer	English	2	10
Bailey, 19, M	N	Asian	Vietnamese	San Diego	U.S Citizen	English Vietnamese	1	10
Kai, 18, F	N	Asian	Filipino	Chula Vista	Decline to Answer	English	3	8
Mo, 19, M	N	Chamorro	Hispanic	San Diego	U.S Citizen	English	2	9
Sam, 18, F	N	White Hispanic Asian Native-American	French Mexican Japanese	Descanso	Decline to Answer	English French	2	20
Matty, 18, F	Y	Asian	Chinese	San Diego	Decline to Answer	English	0	20

Appendix B

Figure 1B.

Four Square Activity Responses

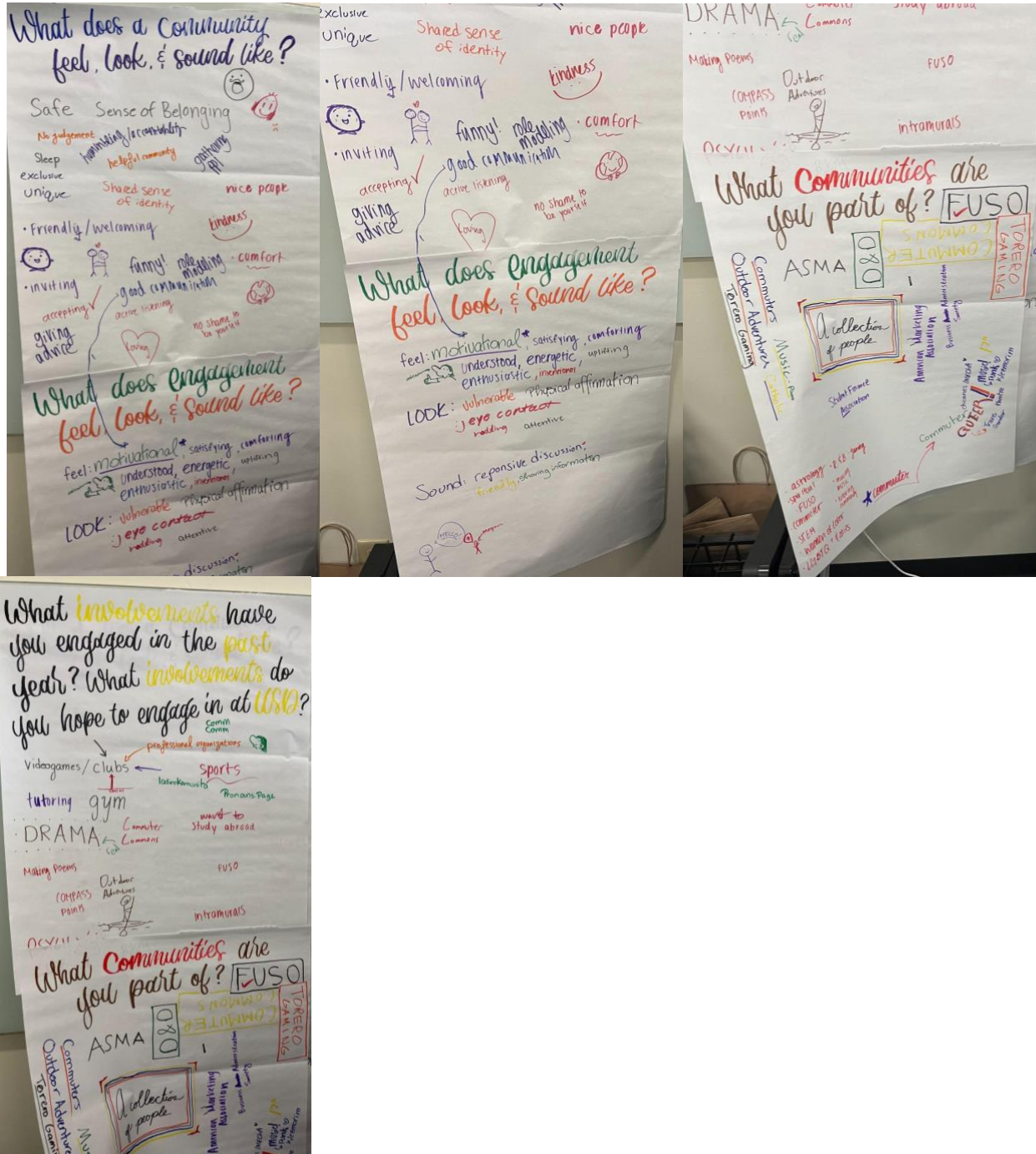
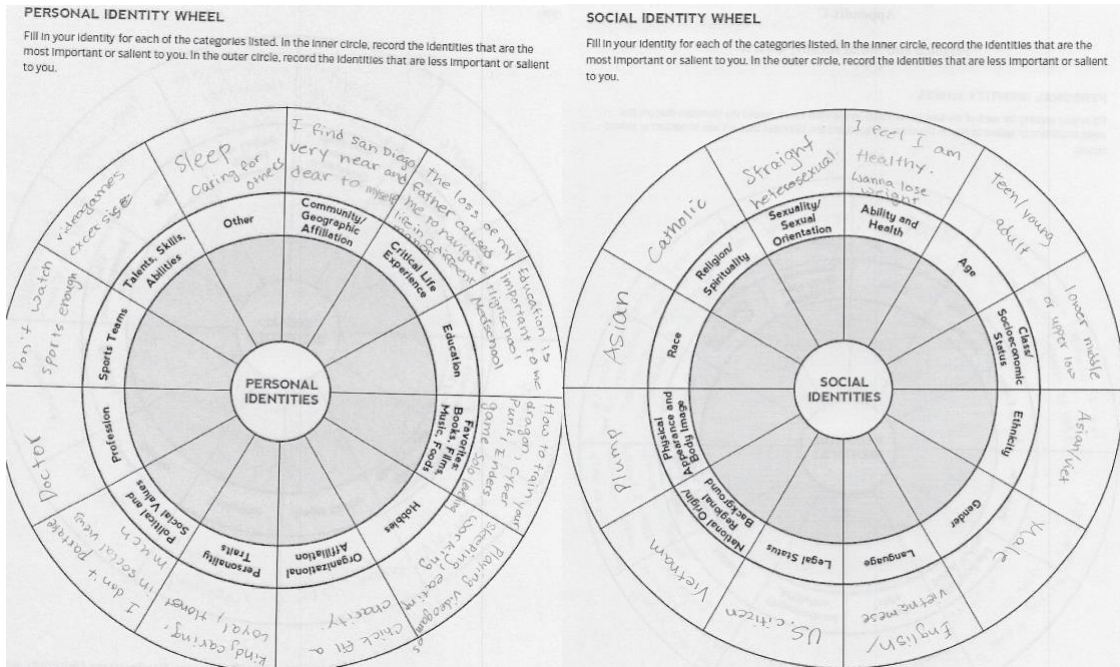
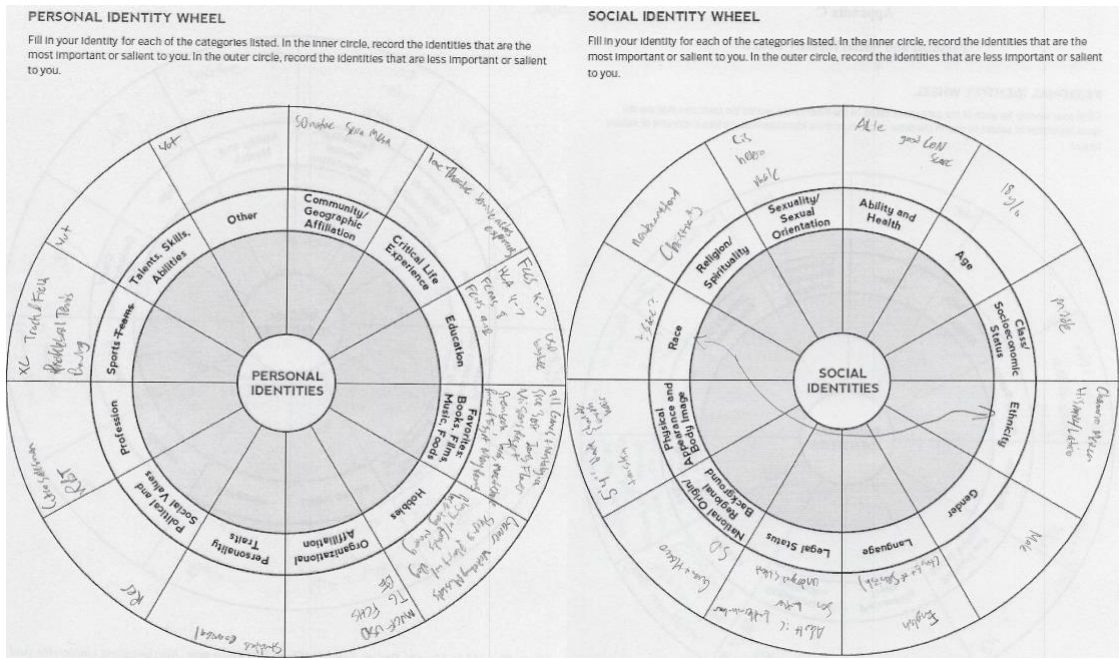


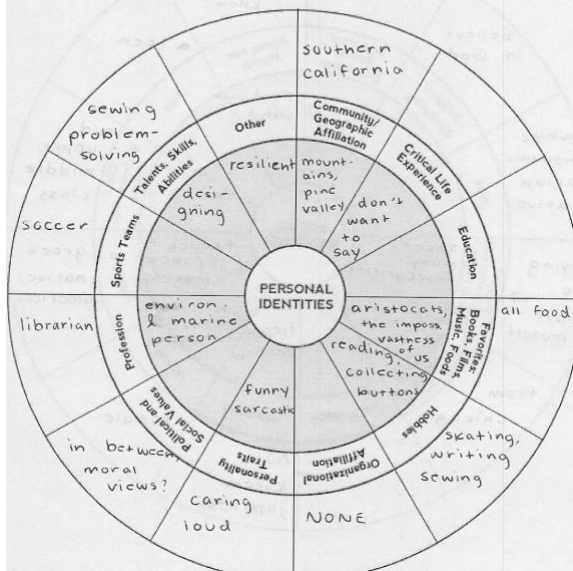
Figure 2B.

Individual Social & Personal Identity Charts



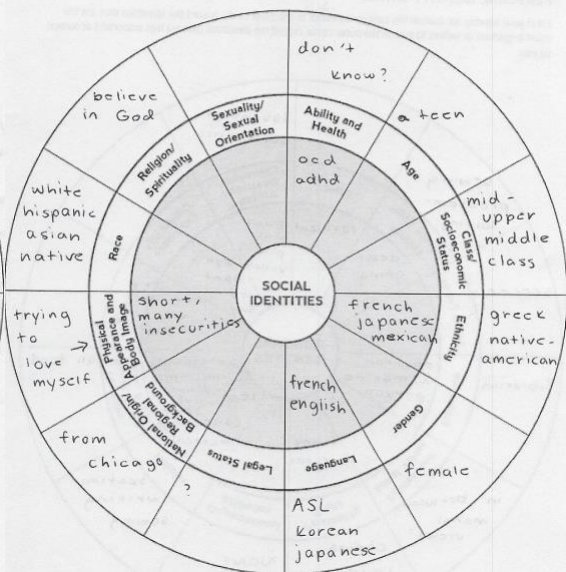
PERSONAL IDENTITY WHEEL

Fill in your identity for each of the categories listed. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you. In the outer circle, record the identities that are less important or salient to you.



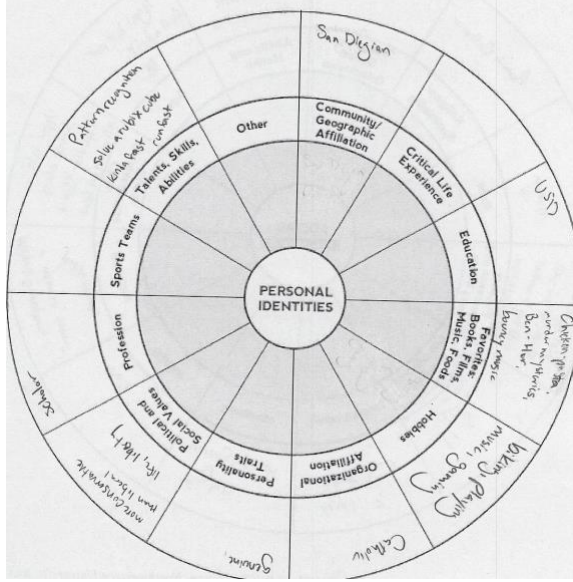
SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL

Fill in your identity for each of the categories listed. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you. In the outer circle, record the identities that are less important or salient to you.



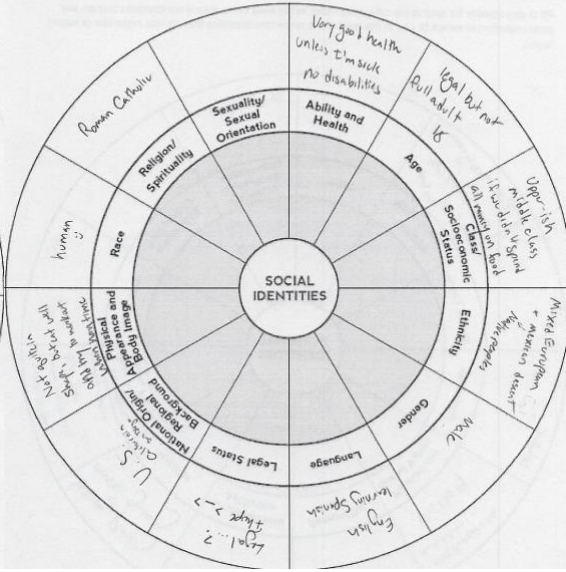
PERSONAL IDENTITY WHEEL

Fill in your identity for each of the categories listed. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you. In the outer circle, record the identities that are less important or salient to you.



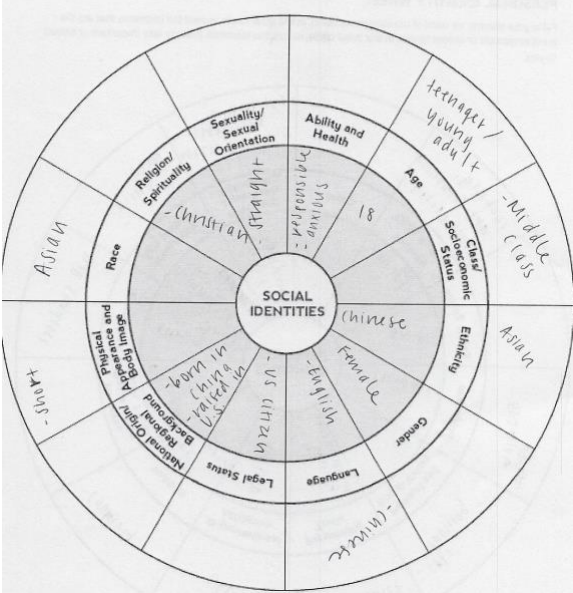
SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL

Fill in your identity for each of the categories listed. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you. In the outer circle, record the identities that are less important or salient to you.



SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL

Fill in your identity for each of the categories listed. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you. In the outer circle, record the identities that are less important or salient to you.



PERSONAL IDENTITY WHEEL

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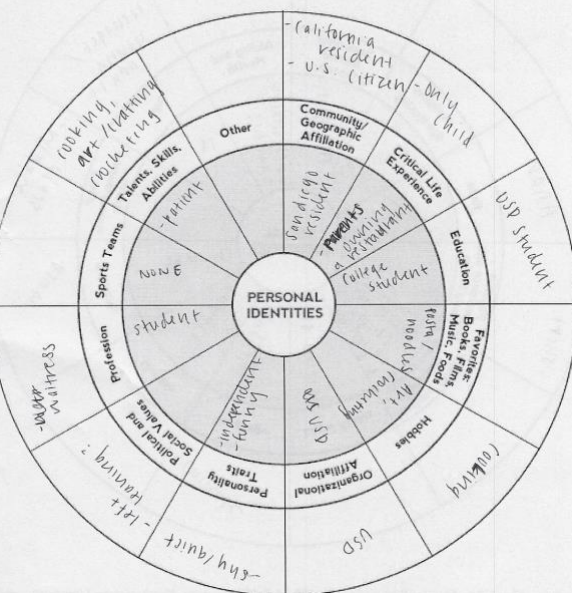
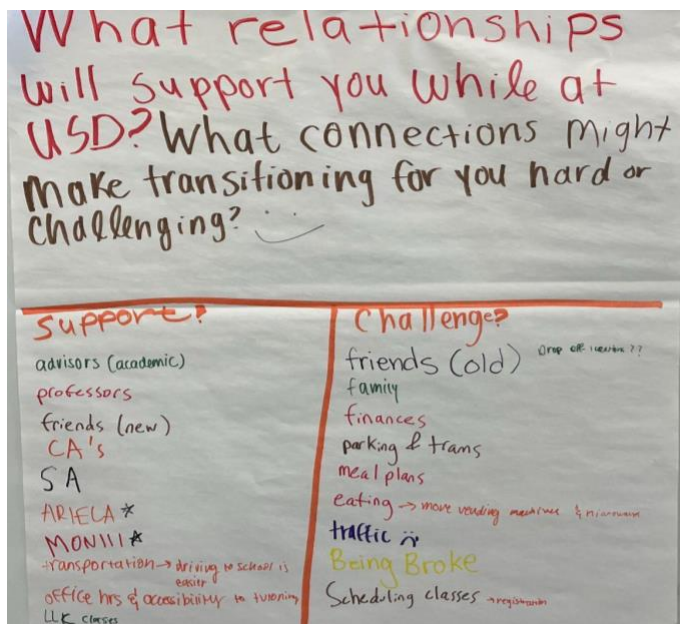
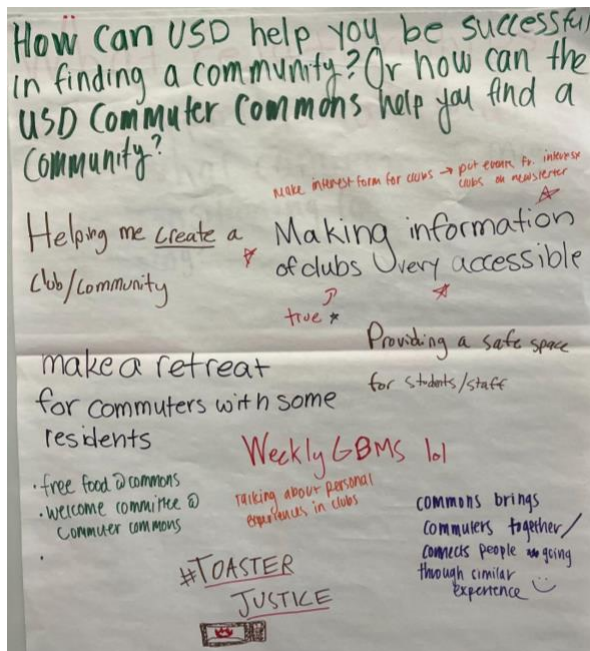
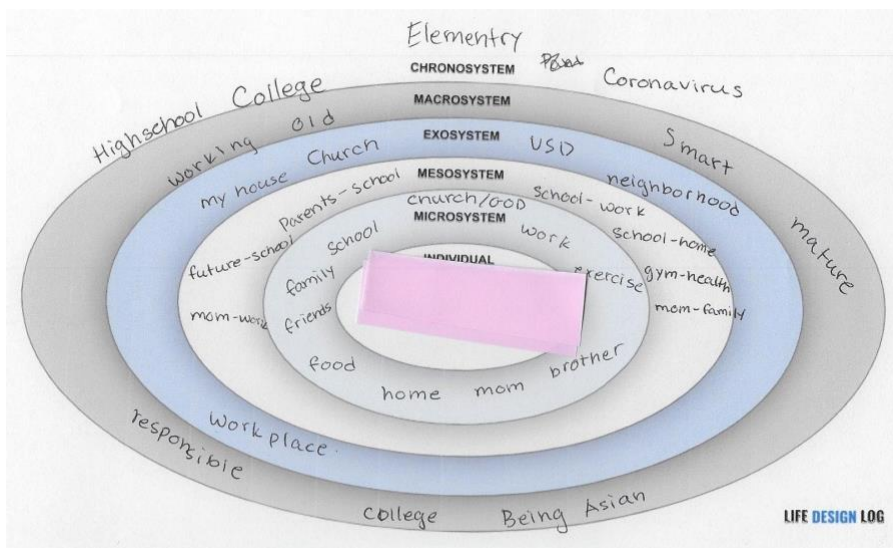
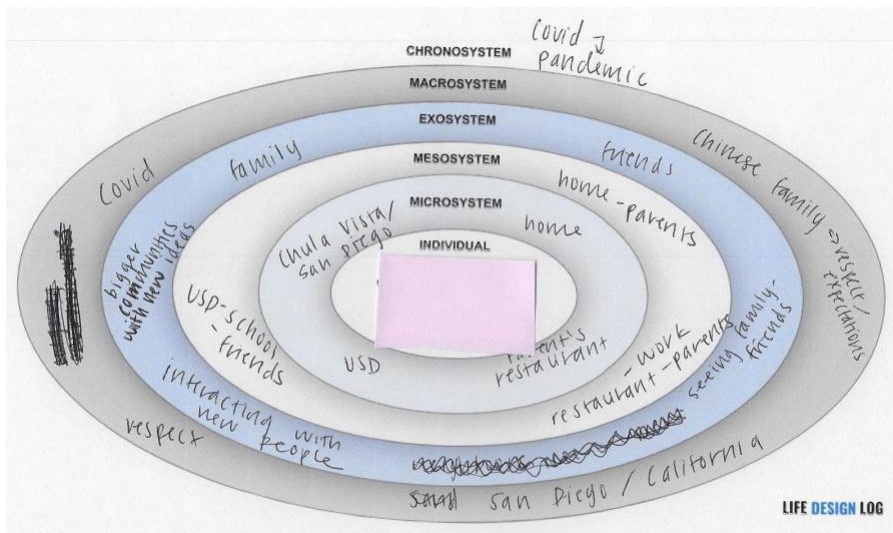
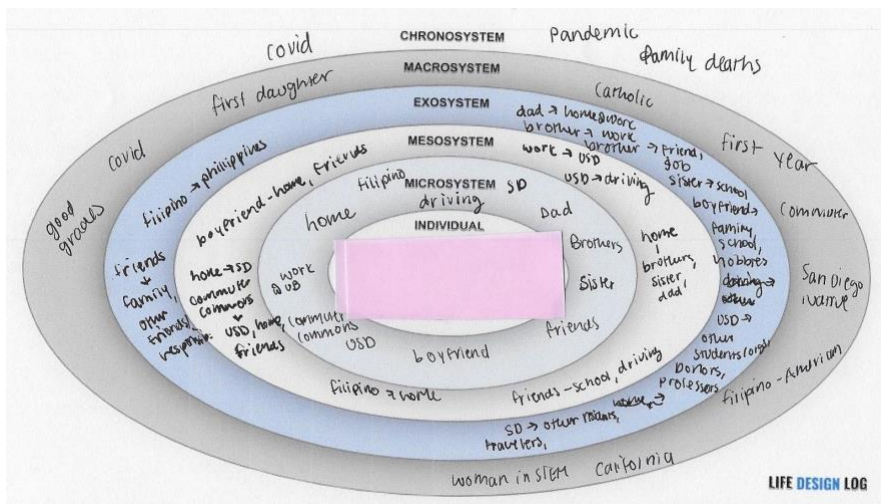


Figure 4B.

Ecosystem Mapping Group Debrief and Individual Ecosystem Maps





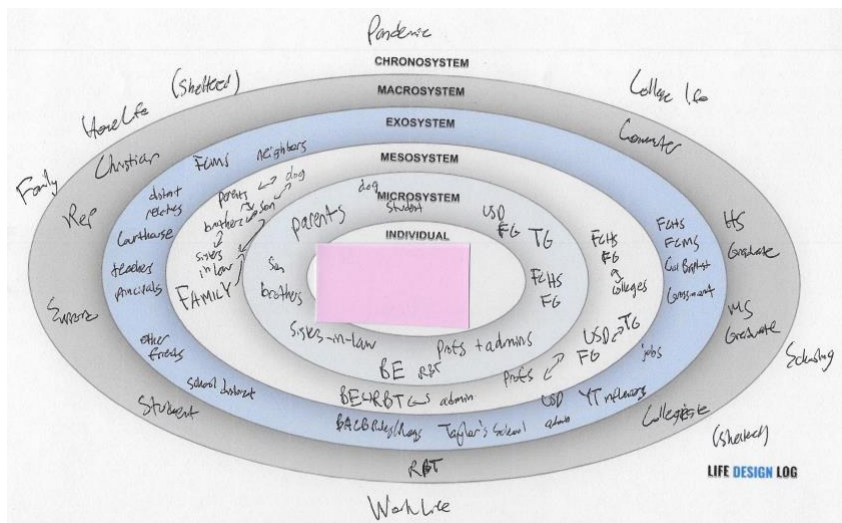
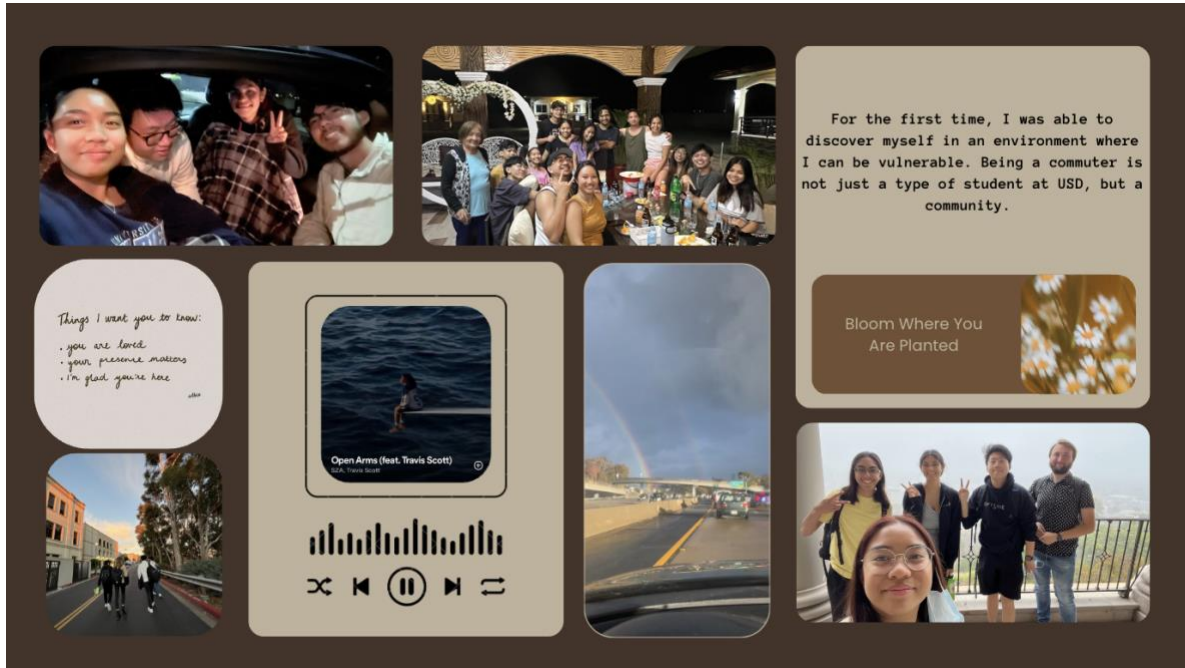


Figure 5B.

Individual Digital Art Pieces



Collaborate commuters!!! Where you at!?

MAHER SPOOKY MOVIE NIGHT

OCTOBER 4TH 2022 | 8:30PM ONWARDS

IMMACULATA LAWN/AROMA PATIO

POPCORN & HOT CHOCOLATE BARS!

@usd_collaborate

usd_commuter 1h

Watch Full Reel

FRONT MULTICULTURAL CO

0:03

CHURRAY FOR LATINX HERITAGE MONTH!

POP UP

THURS, 9 22 @ 12:30 PM

COLACHIS PLAZA

To kick off Latinx Heritage Month, stop by our tent, enjoy a sweet

usdufmc learn about the history of churros.

You want some Churros!? 🤔🤔

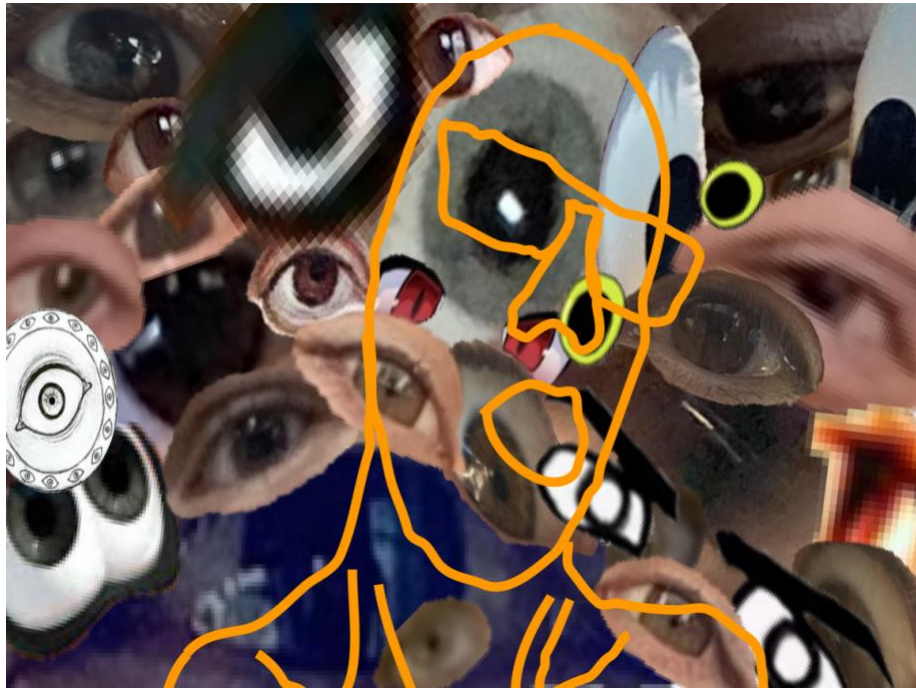
Commuter Life at USD ❤️

USD when commuters roll up an hour before anyone is awake

$y = x$ $y = x^2$ $y = x^3$ $y = \sin x$ $y = \cos x$

$y = \tan x$ $y = \cot x$ $y = \frac{1}{x}$ $y = -\frac{1}{x}$ $y = |x|$

$y = -|x|$ $y = -x$ $y = \log_2 x$ $y = a^x$ x^2, y^2, a^2






Life As a Commuter

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer and Email

THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF COMMUTERS:
ENGAGING FACULTY AND STAFF TO FOSTER
A COMMUTER INCLUSIVE SPACE AND
STUDENT INTEREST AT USD

**ARE YOU AN
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT? FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER
STUDENT BETWEEN 18 TO 23 YEARS OLD?**



THIS VOLUNTARY STUDY INCLUDES:

- FIVE-1 HOUR IN-PERSON INTERACTIVE SESSIONS THROUGHOUT THE 22-23 ACADEMIC YEAR

ACTIVITIES INVOLVE:

- COMMUNITY BUILDING, SELF-REFLECTION, DISCUSSIONS, DIGITAL ART CREATION, AND GALLERY WALK

LOCATION:

- UNIVERSITY CENTER 119 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT
MONICA GONZALEZ AT
MGONZALEZHERRERA@SANDIEGO.EDU**

PARTICIPANTS WILL RECEIVE LIGHT REFRESHMENTS AND SNACKS!

Email

Greetings, USD Commuter Toreros,

My name is Monica Gonzalez, and I am the current graduate assistant of the Commuter Commons, a space dedicated to fitting the needs of USD commuter students. I am contacting you because you are part of the University of San Diego First-Year Commuter Listserv.

I am conducting a research project through the USD School of Leadership and Education Sciences as part of my master's program. I am conducting qualitative research on first-year commuter engagement and a sense of belonging called "The Untapped Potential of Commuters: Engaging Faculty and Staff to Foster a Commuter Inclusive Space and Student Interest at USD."

This study aims to use action research to explore first-year commuter students' experiences in community, leadership, and engagement as they transition into college and to create program initiatives to support commuter students' engagement. This study aims to understand first-year commuter engagement at the University of San Diego and support their sense of belonging.

The study includes five-1hr interactive sessions (in-person) held throughout the 22-23 academic year. It will involve community building, self-reflection, discussion, digital art creation, and a gallery walk. All events are held at University Center 119 at USD. Additionally, participants will receive light refreshments and snacks for participating. For more information, please see the flyer attached.

If you are interested in participating in this voluntary study and meet the following requirements: undergraduate student, first-year commuter student, between ages 18-23, please contact me at xxx@sandiego.edu. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Best,
Monica Gonzalez
Graduate Assistant for the Commuter Commons
Department of Community, Leadership, and Development (CLD)
E: xxx@sandiego.edu

Appendix D

4 Corners of Community and Engagement Poster

Directions: Around the room, you will find four posters with the following questions:

1. What does a community feel, look, and sound like?
2. What does engagement feel, look, and sound like?
3. What communities are you part of?
4. What involvements have you engaged in the past year? What involvements do you hope to engage in at USD?

You will divide into two groups, one group will answer questions 2/3, and the other will do 1/4. Then you will rotate questions. You will have 15 minutes per rotation before answering the following questions. You will answer the questions on the poster paper.

Debriefing Group Questions (*Ask two from the list below*)

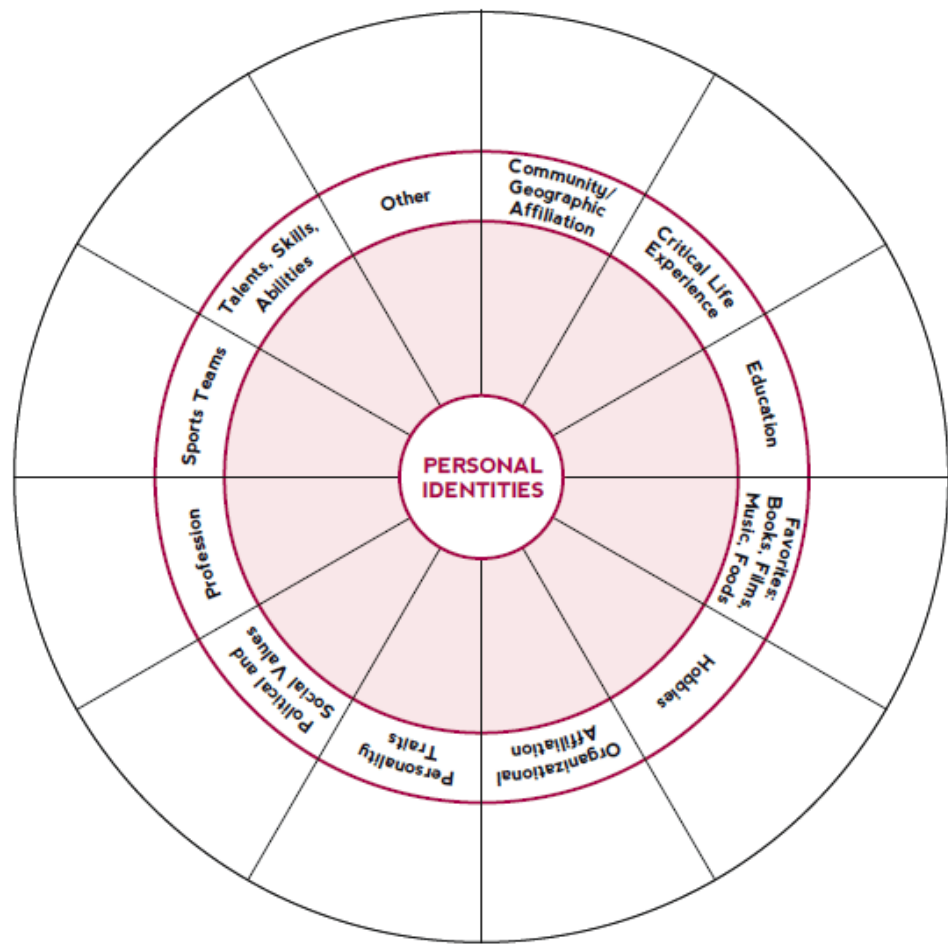
1. What surprised you?
2. What challenged your thinking about engagement or community?
3. What adjective would you use to define this experience?
4. Describe what you experienced during this experience. - one word
5. What feelings came up for you during this activity?
6. What are some common themes you see among the responses to each question?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add to these questions?

Appendix E

Personal and Social Identity Chart

PERSONAL IDENTITY WHEEL

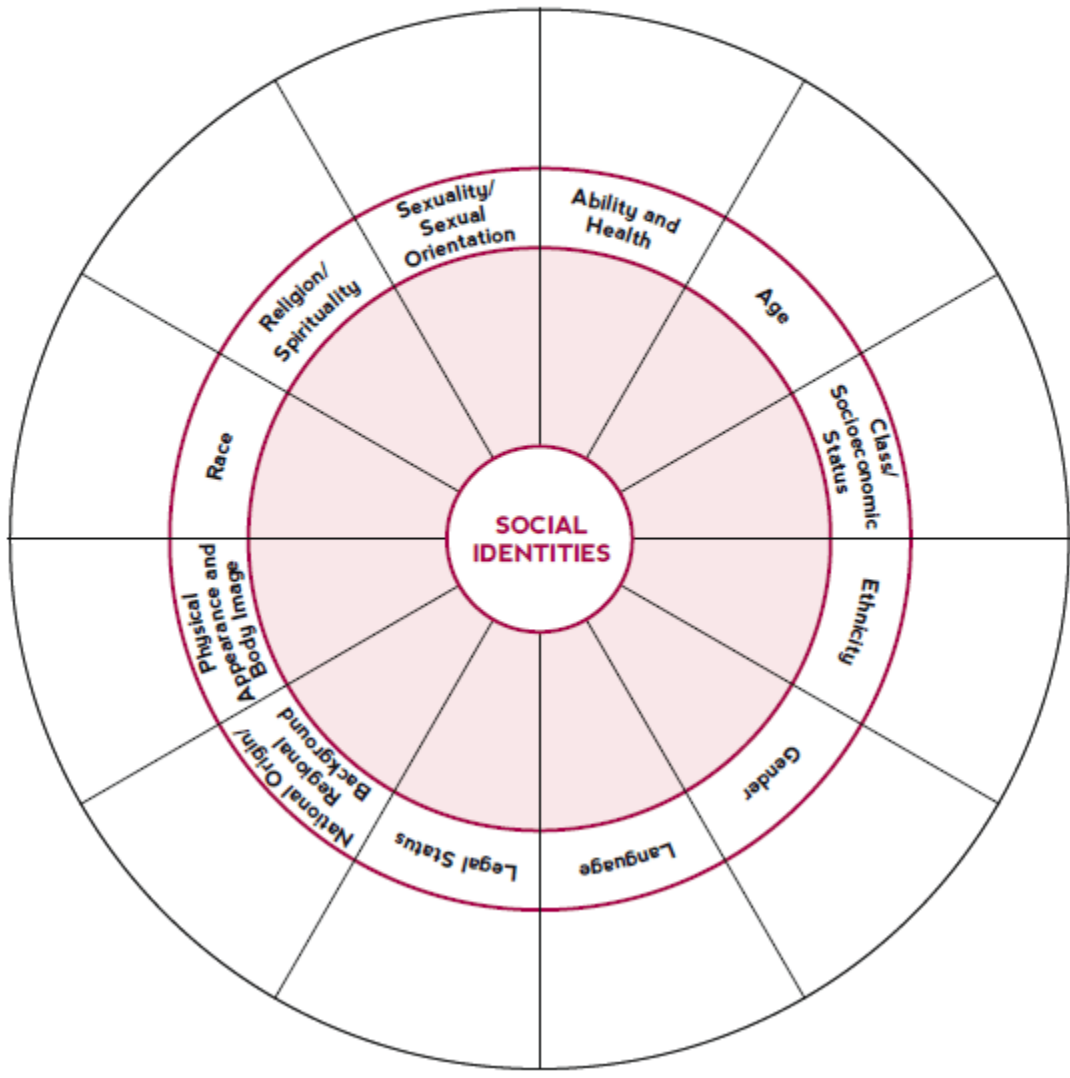
Fill in your identity for each of the categories listed. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you. In the outer circle, record the identities that are less important or salient to you.



maa1321. (2020). Image From “The ‘I’ in Identity Series: Identity Wheel Self Reflection” [Digital image]. MSA News and Update, Northwestern University.
<https://sites.northwestern.edu/msaatnu/2020/07/09/the-i-in-identity-series-identity-wheel-self-reflection/>

SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL

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maa1321. (2020). Image From “The ‘I’ in Identity Series: Identity Wheel Self Reflection” [Digital image]. MSA News and Update, Northwestern University.
<https://sites.northwestern.edu/msaatnu/2020/07/09/the-i-in-identity-series-identity-wheel-self-reflection/>

Group Discussion: Select four questions for each section.

Personal Identity

1. Which components of the personal identity wheel were hard to fill out?
2. Which components of your identity were harder to share out?
3. Which, if any, personal identities are informed by your social identities (age, race, gender, sex, etc.
4. Can anyone share the skill they are proud of?
5. Who would like to share the three adjectives they used to describe themselves?
6. Can anyone share their motto?
7. What were some things people found in common with each other?

Social Identity

1. Why is it important to reflect critically on our identities?
2. What is the value of completing activities like this?
3. How have one or more of your identities developed throughout your life?
4. When was the first time you FELT a social identity?

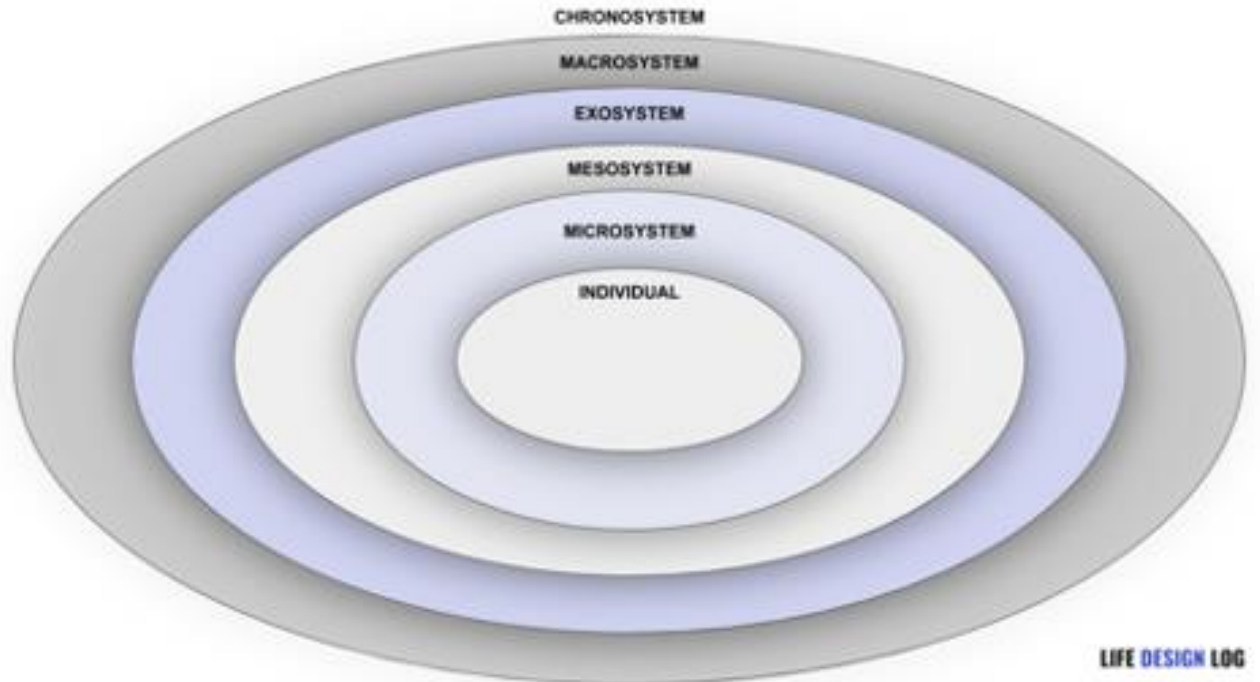
maa1321. (2020). Image From “The ‘I’ in Identity Series: Identity Wheel Self Reflection”

[Digital image]. MSA News and Update, Northwestern University.

<https://sites.northwestern.edu/msaatnu/2020/07/09/the-i-in-identity-series-identity-wheel-self-reflection/>

Appendix F

Mapping Your Ecosystem



Reflection Questions: (Ask 2 Questions)

- Explain one of the relationships in your ecosystem map
- How does arriving at USD change your ecosystem?
- What relationship will support you while at USD? What connections might make transitioning for you a challenge?
- How can USD help you be successful in finding a community? Or how can the USD Commuter Commons help you find a community?

Nathan, S. (2021). Mapping Your Social Ecosystem [Image representation]. Life Design Log.

Retrieved from <https://lifedesignlog.com/mapping-your-social-ecosystem/>

Appendix G

Leadership Journey Mapping Exercise

Directions: Pick up paper, crayons, and colored markers to draw your journey map. This map will depict your journey around issues of leadership. You can use a combination of timelines, images, and words. Note that this is not about fine art! Start your map at whatever point you feel is the beginning of your journey into leadership. See below for some questions to spark your memory about the influences that have been important to your leadership journey. You may start your map with the day of your birth, a specific moment in your personal history, or historical events that happened to your community, ancestors, or cultural group.

Take note of the moments and events when you first became aware of or recognized a pull toward becoming a leader and what created that pull. Perhaps it was a perceived need in your family, an event in your community, or when you witnessed or experienced something so powerful that you were moved to respond personally. Include in your maps people who significantly influenced you and those whose shoulders you stand on today.

Consider:

- Cultural Themes
- Ancestral stories or themes
- Family of origin experiences
- Historical events
- People of influence
- Personal experiences
- Relationship experiences
- Adult family role and experiences
- Professional experiences
- Experiences in leadership programs

As your map comes together, look for metaphors and archetypal themes: are you playing the role of provider, healer, nurturer, community builder, instigator, or restorer of justice? What else shows up on your map?

REFLECTION: Take a few moments to collect your thoughts about the themes, issues, and insights this activity has surfaced in the space below:

“Leadership journey mapping exercise,” CompassPoint. (n.d.). Retrieved February 14, 2023, from https://www.compasspoint.org/sites/default/files/documents/HIVE_2_LeadershipJourneyMapping.pdf

Appendix H

Digital Art Prompt

We want each of you to share your learning in the form of art and creativity. These visual reflections can be anything that drew you into navigating and transitioning into the 2022-2023 academic year as an incoming commuter student and your salient identities. You will create a visual for this final reflection section using Jam board, Padlet, Canva, Google Slide, or Abode.

These visual presentations will be shared with University of San Diego staff and faculty at a Gallery Walk in the Commuter Commons and posted in the Commuter Commons. The goal of this exhibition is for the commuter experience to be illustrated at USD for future generations. Staff and allies will be welcome to come and view your student work.

This visual project is an opportunity to share about yourself, things you care about, lessons learned, and what's next for you as a USD commuter student. Questions to consider as you are creating your digital art:

1. What surprised you about these workshops?
2. What do you hope to continue to learn?
3. What were some of the most interesting or challenging discoveries you made while working and evolving as a first-year student, peer, friend, student, etc.?
4. What got in the way of your goals - interpersonally, socially, and intrapersonally?
5. What would you do differently?
6. What moments were you most surprised to experience?

Canizal, A. (n.d.). LEAD:387P: Student Leadership Practical Experience "Final Assignment" [Adaptation of course materials]. Retrieved April 9, 2023, from [Google Drive LEAD:387P]