

Overview

Guest Editor

Michael J. Siegel

The articles that comprise this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* are an attempt to highlight the encouraging efforts of metropolitan institutions to promote the academic success and overall experiences of first-year commuter students. They document institutionally-based effective educational practices, examine important programs and structures that factor into the commuter student experience, and offer practical strategies and recommendations for improving the levels and kinds of institutional service to commuter students. Perhaps most importantly, these articles offer a glimpse into the lives of commuter students and describe the extraordinary demands of time and energy that are placed on these students. In exploring the struggles and challenges of commuter students, this issue asks educators to fundamentally re-examine the nature by which institutions of higher education organize the first year of college with respect to this growing segment of the student population.

The first year of college is the foundation upon which the entire college experience is built, and for many students it marks the most significant and critical transition they will ever make, academic or otherwise. And the degree to which students are successful during the first year will have a profound influence not only on their entire collegiate career, but also in terms of their future plans and endeavors. The habits of study, work, play, and academic and social engagement that students develop during the first year will likely persist throughout their college years and beyond; that is, students develop routines of behavior in the first year that typically guide future behaviors. For that reason alone, educators are faced with a significant challenge in promoting behaviors and habits of learning in the first year that support desired learning outcomes and ensure first-year student success. The challenge is even greater when you factor in the notion that the majority of the students institutions of higher education serve today are non-traditional, many of which are commuters.

The growing national conversation on student engagement has triggered a constant stream of appeals from educators about the need for students to take a more active role in their own learning. Moreover, students are increasingly encouraged to become more actively involved in the life and culture of their campuses, interact with faculty outside the classroom as well as inside, and develop relationships with fellow students or with affinity groups, all behaviors which are intended to facilitate student success. What we often fail to realize as educators, however, is that these behaviors must be balanced with other demands—family, work, and community responsibilities—that commuter students typically face. Institutions not only need to take stock of what they know and don't know about commuter students, they need to develop educationally effective practices that are suited to commuter students' needs and modes of learning on campus.

Great strides have been made in the study and analysis of the first year of college, but the experiences of first-year commuter students continues to merit closer attention and study. No matter how much we know about the effectiveness of first-year structures, policies, programs and the multitude of areas that have an impact on first-year students, educators must engage in a continual cycle of assessment, evaluation, and analysis in an effort to better understand the characteristics of entering students so that the first-year continues to have meaning and relevance. On many campuses, commuter students are in the difficult position of becoming socialized into an academic culture that traditionally caters and gives primary attention to residential students. Unless they undertake intentional efforts to successfully help first-year commuter students become acclimated to the academic and social culture of the college campus, many institutions run the risk of sending negative messages to commuter students that they must navigate the academic environment largely on their own.

Driving the concerns of educators across the country are the alarming first-to-second year retention rates that plague many of the nation's institutions of higher education. The first-year attrition problem has created a real fiscal crisis all over the country, dramatically affecting both public and private institutions. The institutions that have been hit the hardest are those whose budgets and operating expenses are primarily enrollment-driven, which are typically small, private, liberal arts campuses. There has been a steady decline in the matriculation of traditional-age college students and a corresponding increase in the matriculation of non-traditional students. Though this is true, many institutions are still creating first-year structures and delivering a curriculum and co-curriculum that is not designed for the current college-going population.

There is an increasing influx of college students in the educational pipeline whose needs the higher education community is less than adequately prepared to meet. Though trends in enrollment have drastically changed over the last quarter century, educators continue to perceive the average student as white, between the ages of 18 and 22, enrolled full-time, and living in residence halls on campus, and financially supported by a nuclear family that includes both parents. A recent study by Choy (2002)¹, however, suggests that only 40 percent of today's college students fit that description. More common on college campuses today than in the past is the student who is a non-white female, working full time, living off-campus and commuting to school, juggling family responsibilities, financing college herself or with assistance from the government, military, or an employer, focusing more on her career and the credentialing aspects of college than on other educational outcomes, and graduating in five or more years. Whether planning and implementing the first year of college is more perception-based or reality-based is a matter of speculation. What is clear, however, is that many of the structures and programs still in place to educate first-year students are a relic of the past and are no longer appropriate for today's college student.

¹ Choy, S. P., *Access & Persistence: Findings from 10 Years of Longitudinal Research on Students* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2002).

Historically, the first year of college on many college campuses has been relegated to a relatively low priority. And relatively few resources have been directed at the first year and first-year educators as a result. Though there has been widespread criticism about the quality of undergraduate education in general and the first year of college in particular, many institutions are making great progress in improving their approach to the first year and facilitating more effective means of engaging students in the culture of the campus.

We are honored to feature a diverse selection of articles that, taken together, provide a broad look at the lives of commuter students—including their struggles and challenges—and document the many efforts being made by colleges and universities to enrich the commuter student experience. Conceptually, the articles in the issue fit into three categories. Some of the articles are contextually-based and describe various approaches and strategies in the first year that have been used on one particular college campus. Other articles are issue-based and they discuss larger global issues and topics that influence the experiences of first-year commuter students and offer practitioner-based suggestions and recommendations for enhancing the commuter student experience. Finally, some of the articles are primarily focused on issues but draw upon case studies to explore how concepts and approaches are being used on any number of college campuses.

Barbara Jacoby's article launches the collection by examining various strategies institutions can use to encourage student involvement in their own learning. Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as a framework for engaging commuter students, she highlights five major areas of effective educational practice as they relate to the commuter student experience; further, she explores ideal methods for building a supportive campus environment with respect to the curriculum and co-curriculum and suggests strategies for conducting large-scale as well as small-scale interventions. Readers should take away from the article not only a good sense of the challenges of commuter students, but also real solutions for ameliorating their concerns. Following Jacoby's article is a piece by **Gary Kramer**, who focuses on the important role of effective academic advising with first-year students and offers a (baker's) dozen of suggestions to enhance the overall commuter experience through advising. Kramer makes the case that institutions will enjoy greater success in the advising process if they know more about the characteristics of entering students, and then tailor programs and services accordingly. The article should serve as an effective resource in helping practitioners fostering a positive climate for advising first-year commuter students.

Edward Zlotkowski and Judy Patton's chapter investigates the increasing popularity of service-learning as a powerful teaching and learning tool in higher education and discusses service-learning's usefulness in helping commuter students achieve academic success and build stronger bonds with their fellow students. Extraordinary demands are often placed on commuter students' time, but their familiarity with the local community makes them particularly good stewards of the service-learning concept.

The authors suggest that if faculty pay careful attention to the critical time demands and remain particularly flexible when making service-learning assignments, they as well as their students will be rewarded with a higher degree of engagement.

Taking a somewhat more global approach to first-year related issues, **Carol Twigg** discusses the ways in which technology can be used to enhance and improve the quality of learning in the first year of college. Drawing on her work with the Center for Academic Transformation and its partnership with 30 colleges and universities, she describes the powerful role of technology in improving the quality of student learning, increasing retention, and reducing the costs by redesigning large-enrollment introductory courses, the failure rates of which often contribute to large institutional drop-out rates from the first to second year. Of the 30 campus projects, 22 have increased student learning and retention, and all 30 have reduced instructional costs. The article discusses six common characteristics all projects share and illustrates how these characteristics play out among urban and metropolitan universities, using five case studies.

Vic Borden, Michele Hansen, Gayle Williams, and Scott Evenbeck from Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis lead off a strand of articles that are institutionally-based and deal with commuter student issues from the campus perspective. Using as a backdrop the multiple demands placed on commuter students, including work, family, and community obligations, the authors suggest that students entering metropolitan or urban universities have notably different experiences than their counterparts at traditional residential colleges and universities. Further, they make the case that faculty and staff need to develop programs, practices, and policies that accommodate the commuter student lifestyle and promote enhanced opportunities for learning and engagement. In that same vein, **Nancy Mansfield, Nanette Commander, and William Fritz** discuss the use of learning communities at Georgia State University as a way to engage commuter students in the learning process. Their article describes the institutional context at GSU, a large, urban research university, and discusses the challenges the institution faces in meeting the needs of commuter students. Additionally, the assessment data referenced in the article that outline the GPA and retention rates of first-year students at Georgia State, provide evidence that learning communities can have a significant impact on the academic experiences and lives of students.

Unique among the chapters is a contribution by **Gail Mellow and Paul Arcario** from LaGuardia Community College, a dynamic, urban two-year college which boasts one of the most diverse student bodies in the country and has a long history of innovation and community building. Through intentional efforts to meet the demands and needs of an ever-changing student population, the College has implemented a very successful first year experience, which is highlighted in detail in the chapter. The authors outline the nature by which the College has implemented first-year programs and structures and developed a strong commitment on the part of both faculty and staff to enhance the learning experiences of its students through effective educational practices.

Also included is an essay that takes a presidential perspective on commuter students and the success one institution has had as a result of a long tradition of administrative support for the first year of college. **Betty Siegel**, one of the longest serving college presidents in the country, reflects back on her twenty-two year career as president of Kennesaw State University and details the rise of several successful campus initiatives which have had an extraordinary impact on the lives of first-year students. The collaboration among faculty and staff at Kennesaw, which is continually encouraged and rewarded by the president, has been a highly productive force in the ongoing success of the program and the learning experiences of students, particularly commuters. Drawing on the words and actions of some of the foremost educators in the country, Siegel strongly makes the case that student success on campus results from the effective alignment of people, policies, programs, places, and processes.

As the authors collectively point out, more resources need to be invested in developing and implementing effective educational practices in the first year of college in general and with commuter students in particular. Doing so for many campuses will yield rewarding results in terms of student learning and retention, two of the most critical issues in higher education today. Taken together, the articles that appear in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* provide unique insight into the challenges commuter students face during their first year of college. Further, they offer useful and practical illustrations of initiatives being undertaken at many colleges and universities to support the successful first-year commuter student experience.

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