
ADVISING ADULTS FROM THE COMMUTER PERSPECTIVE

This article redefines adult learners as part of the broader commuter student population and identifies four areas of concern common to students who commute: mobility, integrating support systems, multiple life roles, and involvement in campus life. Implications of these concerns in the advising setting are discussed, and four roles for advisors working with adult learners are proposed: (1) dealing with issues of transition, (2) translating the institution to the student, (3) assisting the student in forming campus connections, and (4) advocating on behalf of the student. Three case studies based on interviews with adult students are provided which illustrate practical applications of concepts developed in the article.

According to the United States Department of Education (1987), commuter students currently comprise 81 percent of the student population in American higher education; but on many campuses there still remains considerable confusion about this neglected majority. Are commuter students the same as off-campus students? Is commuter a synonym for adult learner? Are they students who attend only part-time? Do they attend only night classes?

This article answers these questions by proposing that although the population of adult students is itself a distinct group with needs and concerns in higher education, adult students are also part of the larger commuter population. By incorporating the commuter perspective into their advising practices, advisors will have another tool that enables them to increase the quality of the campus experience for adult students.

Redefining the Context: Adult Students as Commuters

Since the publication of Arthur Chickering's seminal *Commuting Versus Resident Students* (1974), the literature in the commuter area has become increasingly more precise in defining this population and its needs. Jacoby and Girrell (1981) define the commuter as "any student not living on campus" (p. 36). This definition has become the functional definition in the field. In the same article, the authors develop this definition further by explaining that within this context, commuters include a broad range of students from the traditional-aged, full-time undergraduate who lives at home with parents to a retiree who returns to study part-time on a non-degree basis.

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This wide spectrum of student types within the commuter population has been successfully categorized by Stewart and Rue (1983) who identify three variables present in the commuter population: (1) dependent (i.e., living with parents)/independent (i.e., living in own apartment, house, etc.), (2) traditional age (i.e., 18-22 years)/nontraditional age (i.e., over 25 years), and (3) part-time/full-time. Combinations of these variables yield eight types of undergraduate commuters: (1) dependent, traditional, full-time, (2) dependent, nontraditional, full-time, (3) dependent, nontraditional, part-time, (4) dependent, traditional, part-time, (5) independent, traditional, full-time, (6) independent, nontraditional, full-time, (7) independent, nontraditional, part-time, and (8) independent, traditional, part-time.

Types 2, 6, and 7 clearly describe the life situations of adult students. For example, Type 2 would include the single mother who is pursuing a degree and living with her parents. Type 6 could describe a man who is working part-time and attending college full-time. Type 7 might describe a woman in a full-time position taking classes at night to enhance her career skills. In addition to their needs as adults who are at a life stage different from traditional-aged college students, these students also share the same needs and concerns as all other commuter students.

Needs and Concerns Common to Students Who Commute

Despite the diversity inherent in the commuter population, these students share a common set of needs and concerns with respect to their educational experience. Wilmes and Quade (1986) note four main areas of concern unique to this population: (1) mobility issues, (2) multiple life roles, (3) integrating support systems, and (4) developing a sense of belonging. An understanding of these concerns is essential in providing quality advising to adult students.

Mobility Issues

Regardless of their mode of transportation, all commuter students face the uncertainties and hassles of getting to and from campus. Among the obstacles they face are inclement weather, sharing a family car, finding an alternative way to get to campus, and finding a parking space. The student who commutes has to commit considerable time and energy merely getting to campus. Life circumstances of the adult student often exclude the option of moving closer to campus, thereby necessitating a lengthy commute to the institution of choice. In many cases it is the mobility factor that determines which institution the student is able to attend. Mobility issues can become even more complex for adult students who must coordinate childcare arrangements with class and/or work schedules.

In order to function effectively many students seek ways to streamline their time on campus. The timing of courses becomes a critical factor in the process of course selection. Students may forego what they consider to be the luxury of free time between classes, not believing that this time is actually an integral part of the college experience. Convenience and easy access become critical issues for commuters in taking advantage of services offered by the university.

Mobility issues demand special attention from academic advising offices on campus. The advising staff has a responsibility to advocate for the necessary resources (i.e., budget, staff, and space) to effectively respond to commuter students' needs. Staff members also need to look critically at office policies and procedures to be sure that commuters are not inadvertently excluded.

Are advising offices open during the times commuters are likely to have free time (e.g., early morning if they have to arrive early in order to secure a parking space, throughout the lunch hour, and during the evening)?

Where are the advising offices located? Are they easy to find and convenient? Can advising "outposts" be established in the lobbies of heavily used classroom buildings or near parking lots?

Are commuters able to make appointments in advance so that they can make arrangements for child care, transportation, and work coverage in advance?

Do students have access to advising by telephone? Are they aware of this service? What other technologies might be adapted to help commuter students obtain information in a timely, efficient manner?

Certainly students share responsibility for seeking advising; however, the institution has a responsibility to consider whether its services are accessible to the students it chooses to admit. All too often, policies and procedures are maintained by tradition and do not keep pace with the needs of current students. Creative packaging of advising for efficiency and convenience can increase the commuter students' awareness of and access to one of the most critical campus resources.

Multiple Life Roles

For the majority of commuters, the student role is only one of many demanding life responsibilities. In addition to academic pursuits, the students may have to manage a household, care for family members, and meet job responsibilities. Banning (Sloan, 1988) describes the commuter's experience, from an ecological perspective, as an additive transition: The student adds school to work and the university campus to the home environment. In contrast, for students who live on campus, the transition is substitutional: They substitute the university for home and, in most cases, high school. The two types of transitions are substantially different, the additive type far more likely to increase the complexity of life. Regardless of how committed the student is to pursuing an education, his or her energy becomes a limited commodity that must be further divided among a variety of competing activities. For the adult student who has a pre-existing pattern of priorities, the addition of another life role is not only taxing, but may require disrupting and re-ordering a long-standing set of patterns. Difficult choices must often be made among competing demands: taking an exam or caring for a sick relative, responding to a critical deadline at work or attending class, fulfilling a personal goal or meeting a financial obligation.

Adjusting to new demands and setting personal priorities become critical issues in academic planning and success. To serve the advising needs of adult commuter students effectively, academic advising must encompass more than merely providing accurate information on course requirements. As O'Banion (1972) notes, effective educational advising must include an exploration of life goals, an exploration of educational/vocational goals, academic program choice, course choice, and course scheduling. In assessing the delivery of advising services to adult commuters who struggle with multiple life roles, advisors might find it helpful to consider the following points:

Are advisors familiar with theories which inform them about the developmental needs of adult students?

- *Are broader life planning issues considered part of the advising session? Does the advising session allow enough time to explore issues beyond course selection?*

Are advisors cognizant of the full range of demands and commitments which commuter students face? Do advisors understand that a student's scheduling constraints do not necessarily reflect a lack of commitment?

How do commuter students become aware that the advising office provides comprehensive assistance beyond a list of required academic courses?

Are there other effective ways to let adult students know about services?

Integrating Support Systems

Many commuter students are faced simultaneously with two issues related to their network of support. On the one hand, many commuters rely upon family, friends, and employers as significant resources for advice and encouragement. In order to maintain these support systems, they must find ways to bring these people into their campus lives, helping them to understand the new demands and challenges they are encountering. At the same time, there are limitations to the amount of support and advice that an individual who is not directly involved in the academic environment can reasonably provide, despite their best intentions. The commuter student must find new avenues of support and advice on the campus.

Our campuses often do little to help commuters manage these concerns. Opportunities do not exist for integrating pre-existing support systems into campus life. For example, spouses of adult students are often excluded from orientation programs and use of library and recreation facilities. In addition, institutions frequently fail to set up formal channels through which adult students can develop a new network of support. Even in those cases where the institution does make the effort to provide such opportunities, students are often not given the support and information they need to find and use these resources. Without being connected to an informal network of information, commuter students may not know that there is an adult student organization, a reading and study skills lab, support groups for adult students through the counseling center, or a resource center with copies of past exams and course syllabi.

For the commuter student, the advisor may be the first and only personal contact that the student has with the institution outside of the classroom. It is extremely important, therefore, for the advisor to understand the significance of his or her role as a potential source of support and information. Because of the nature of the advising relationship, the advisor can play an important role in helping students to become aware of campus resources and how to use them productively. In reflecting on their work with commuter students, advisors might wish to consider these issues:

Are there appropriate ways to help commuter students better use existing support systems? What new support systems need to be developed at the institution?

Do formalized channels exist at the institution that help commuter students acquire the information they need to survive and thrive at the institution?

How are students informed of these sources of information? Are there ways the advising environment could facilitate this?

Developing a Sense of Belonging

The college environment often works against the commuter student developing a sense of belonging. At the most fundamental level, commuters lack even the smallest space, such as a locker or designated lounge area, to call their own. The sense of disenfranchisement often permeates other areas of campus life as well. Faculty, staff, other students, and the media

often portray "real" college life as occurring in the dorm. Even on 100% commuter campuses, these stereotypes are perpetuated, often by the students themselves, as they complain that the campus is too much like high school.

For adult students this sense of isolation is accentuated by real and perceived differences from other students. For example, age can become a barrier (real or imagined) in the classroom, with faculty, and with other students. Because many adult students often have motivations for being in college besides seeking a degree, the structure of the classroom environment from lecture to homework to types of evaluation can be alienating. Furthermore, in a traditional college atmosphere, the non-campus experiences of the adult student are often devalued and not recognized as legitimate learning experiences.

While certainly not accountable for "fixing" the entire campus, the advisor can go a long way in helping commuter students develop a sense of belonging on the campus. Through understanding the connections between course requirements and the student's personal educational goals, the advisor can assist the student in finding involvement opportunities on campus which tie in with the student's needs and augment their education (e.g., leadership programs, faculty research positions, on-campus employment, work-study options, opportunities to tutor others, or recognition for community volunteer activity through a campus awards activity). While it is true that not every student wishes to be active in extracurricular events on campus, the mere fact that a student commutes and is older does not preclude the need for a sense of belonging or the desire to know that the institution cares. Some questions advisors might consider in conjunction with their campus colleagues are these:

- *Does the campus provide basic facilities which give commuters/adult students a sense of belonging (e.g., lockers, lounge space, accessible eating areas)?*
- *Are advisors and other campus personnel aware of stereotypes that promote a sense of isolation among adult commuter students?*
- *How can you assist commuters to make connections between their educational/vocational goals and extracurricular activities on campus?*
Do you define extracurricular activities in their most broad application?
- *What mechanisms exist for adult commuters to get credit for experiences based in the off-campus community?*
- *Do you let commuter students know about campus awards and systems of recognition?*

Implications for the Advising Role

As Baer and Carr (1985) note, the academic advisor can be "a catalyst, the resource person who facilitates and accelerates the interaction between the student and the academic institution" (p. 36). For the advisor who works with commuter students, such a role is critical. Given the four needs of commuter students identified in this article, the traditional advising role needs to be expanded to include the following functions:

■ *Dealing with issues of transition* ■

The transition into college (or back into college) is ongoing and fraught with challenges for the commuter. The student, living in several different "worlds," comes face-to-face with a multitude of personal struggles (e.g., fears regarding competency, questions of identity, adjustment to new roles). The advisor can assist students in clarifying personal and educational goals and can help them to evaluate their priorities as they negotiate multiple commitments.

■ *Translating the institution to the student* ■

The advisor plays a key role in helping the student match his or her educational goals with the opportunities available at the institution. This function is perhaps most obvious when helping a student select a particular course or helping the student to understand how a particular prerequisite relates to a desired course of study. Equally important, though, is the advisor's role in making explicit the link between suitable involvement experiences such as on-campus employment, faculty research opportunities, or advisory committee appointments and the students' personal or educational goals.

■ *Assisting the student in forming campus connections* ■

As one of the primary personal contacts the commuter student is likely to have with the institution, the advisor is important in helping the student make connections with others at the institution. Without an informal network of information, the commuter student must rely heavily on the formal advising relationship for survival tips and "insider" information. On a practical level, this may mean that the advisor needs to make explicit some of the institutional norms: exchange phone numbers with the students sitting near you in class; faculty want you to visit or call them during office hours even if you are not having trouble. As a knowledgeable source of campus resources, the advisor can connect the student with other appropriate individuals and offices accurately and efficiently. It is often the personalized referral that helps the student overcome the discomfort of seeking out an unknown office with unknown people in an unknown building.

Advocating on behalf of the student ■

The advisor is often in the best position to observe those policies and procedures (e.g., registration, waitlist, advising appointments, degree requirements, credit for prior experience) that work against commuter students and to provide appropriate feedback to the institution. Although this role has traditionally been outside of the academic advisor's realm, it is an important function if our campuses are to respond effectively to the needs of our commuter students.

CASE STUDIES

Thus far, this article has given a general overview of the characteristics of commuter students and how an awareness of their concerns can influence effective advising for adult students. The following three case studies, based on interviews with returning adult students on the University of Maryland at College Park campus, are included to illustrate how the commuter perspective might be applied when advising adult commuter students.

Case #1 • Arlene

Arlene is a 70-year-old white female who has returned to the university full-time to complete her degree in sociology. She is a retired government worker, widowed, living alone, and has four children and six grandchildren, many of whom live in the area. Arlene lives ten miles from campus and reports, "I enjoy driving." When asked about her educational goals she explains, "I need to put some structure back into my life. I am happier if I am productive. At this point, two and a half years after retiring, I feel the need to add substance to my day." She says that she deferred her education even further after retirement to stay with her sick husband: "When he died I did not go back; now I realize I needed guidance for my own growth. Instead, I jumped into work and family and outside community activities. I have not made the most of the last nine years." Arlene is very involved with four of her children who still

live nearby. She has many friends but maintains, "Deep down — I am a private person." In terms of what she expects from academic advising, she says, "I need help setting personal goals and priorities." She also says, "I think my age is the factor I cannot put in perspective." Although she describes herself in good health, she will soon have surgery on her shoulder to correct an old injury.

Using the Stewart and Rue (1983) model, Arlene can be described as an independent, non-traditional, full-time commuter. Her comments resonate with the need for guidance, goals, and growth. Rather than academic success or career concerns, she seems to be struggling for meaning in her life and looks to the university and her academic advisor to provide this. A variety of activities on campus could potentially help Arlene to satisfy her quest for meaning including involvement in cultural programs, faculty research projects, or a tutoring assistance program. The advisor can be instrumental in helping Arlene see the relationship between these involvements and her "desire for substance." As a "private person," she may need extra support from the advisor in connecting with these opportunities and the other campus support systems that can assist her. Given Arlene's long commute and full-time course load, the advisor needs to be sensitive to the pressure of the additive transition. Arlene's strong family connections pose a rigorous challenge for her, especially since she gave up her education at least once already for the needs of her husband. The advisor needs to help her articulate the factors that affect her academic life, guiding her through the difficult and ongoing process of setting priorities and helping her develop a flexible schedule that allows her to incorporate her multiple commitments. Although she does not currently mind the lengthy commute, she might eventually have transportation issues facing her as she recovers from surgery. Arlene's ability to continue her studies may at some point rely upon getting assistance from her advisor on how to join a carpool or make alternate transportation arrangements. Clearly, in Arlene's case, it is essential that the advisor understand her motives for attending college and the influences outside of campus that affect her.

Case #2 • Peter

Peter is a 26-year-old Creek-American male who has been living in the United States since he was 18 and gained citizenship when he was 23. He is working on a computer science degree part-time after having dropped out of the university to work full-time three years ago. Peter shares a house with three other men his age, none of whom attend college. He owns a car and commutes to campus three nights a week: "I am tired at night but I am a very good driver. Parking is not much of a problem that late. What I have trouble with is taking care of business — most of the offices have closed by the time I arrive." He works full-time as a bank teller and hopes that receiving his degree will facilitate advancement in the bank. "Doing it part-time,-- says Peter, "and paying for it myself makes it not a pleasure. But I do enjoy the classes that help me to improve my English." Peter has an uncle who lives in the area and who helped him get started when he first came to the United States. Otherwise, he sees his close relationship with his girlfriend as the one strong support system in his life. He is lucky if he is able to visit his family in Greece once a year; he is more likely to go for years without seeing them. Concerning his living situation he says, "My roommates make it difficult for me to study because they are working and just want to relax and have a good time when they come home." When asked about how he views the function of academic advising Peter says that he needs someone to help him understand degree requirements so he can complete the degree as quickly as possible.

Peter fits Rue and Stewart's description of the independent, nontraditional, part-time student. Commitment to academics is not an issue for Peter. His multiple life commitments, however, present a real conflict: The demands of a full-time job, the differing priorities of

his roommates, the time for his girlfriend and support he needs from her compete with the academic experience. Considering his financial burdens and his limited support system, it is no surprise that the college experience is not a pleasure for Peter. Institutional barriers, such as limited office hours, contribute additional obstacles. While the academic advisor certainly cannot "fix" Peter's problems, she or he can assist Peter in finding ways to move beyond simply coping with multiple demands to confronting them and finding creative alternatives. For example, Peter may be able to link his financial needs and his career aspirations with his academic program through the experiential learning program or an on-campus job. By finding a different living arrangement with other adult students, Peter might find more support for his role as student. While these may seem like obvious solutions, students in this type of situation frequently are so focused on survival that they do not consider change as an alternative. By understanding the issues Peter faces as a commuter student, the advisor can help him address factors that inhibit academic survival and success.

Case #3 • Brenda

Brenda is a 29-year-old white female who is currently separated from her husband and is studying at the university part-time. Although she has no children of her own, she was stepmother to four children in her marriage but is not living with them. She now lives in a rented house three miles from campus with a returning woman graduate student and a 20-year-old undergraduate male. Brenda reports that, "It is not a n ideal arrangement due to the age difference." Brenda has a car and a university parking permit, but her assigned lot is so far from campus that, "Physically it's difficult to walk that far." So, she usually rides the university shuttle or parks illegally "hoping they won't give me a ticket." Concerning her reasons for returning to school, Brenda says, "I couldn't support myself on a secretary's wages and the jobs I had were menial." She has enrolled in the pre-business curriculum but is leaning toward teaching. Her educational goals are to "replace the fear of the future with hope and faith" and she also hopes to improve her self-esteem. Brenda describes numerous roles in her life including daughter, sister, employee, ex-wife, stepmother, sponsor to recovering alcoholics and drug addicts, as well as the roles of roommate and student. She says that her graduate student roommate is supportive of her studying, but she has difficulty studying due to conflicts with her social life. She feels that the role of academic advising should be "To help me to get the most out of my education and the opportunities offered at this university. Also to offer support, direction, and empathy."

Struggles with parking, walking long distances, and facing the threat of frequent parking tickets are mobility issues influencing Brenda's perception of the institution and could hinder her persistence at the institution. The circumstances that brought Brenda back to college have apparently left her struggling with issues of identity and self-esteem. Not only does she face adding her student role to the many other roles in her life, the separation from her husband requires her to renegotiate roles with her stepchildren and form new relationships with roommates. Her advisor needs to help Brenda sort out the issues in her transition and, as Brenda clearly states, provide "support, direction, and empathy." The advising relationship will be very important to Brenda in alleviating anxiety and a sense of alienation from the institution. Brenda, like many adult students, has a lot to offer the university. Campus organizations, the health center, or academic departments such as health education or psychology may be able to profit from her expertise in working with individuals with alcohol or drug addictions. Through these activities Brenda can explore career interests, improve her self-esteem, and, hopefully, be successful in replacing "fear of the future with hope and faith." Once again, the advisor is an important source of information about potential campus opportunities and an important part of Brenda's on-campus support system until she finds her niche at the university.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is to provide advisors with another perspective for viewing the needs and concerns of adult students by incorporating a commuter perspective into advising practices. The authors recognize that the structure of advising systems at many institutions currently precludes advisors from assuming an expanded role such as the one this article recommends. This does not, however, remove our responsibilities for being a force for change on our own campuses. Regardless of our positions within the college or university, faculty, administrator, or student affairs professional, it is critical to our institutions and our students that we become advocates for an advising program that does more than give academic prescriptions. Instead, we should work toward an advising system that assists "students in the development of meaningful educational plans which are compatible with their life goals" (CAS, 1986) and which take into account the broad context of the student's life.

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