

The Disengaged Commuter Student: Fact or Fiction?

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The majority of college students today commute to campus (Horn & Berkold, 1998), yet many misunderstandings about these students persist. The stereotypical view is that commuters are less committed to academic pursuits compared with their counterparts who go away to college and live on campus (Jacoby, 2000a; National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition [NRC], 2001). They're distracted by too many competing demands on their time because of work or family commitments. As a result they aren't as involved as other students.

This is problematic because what students gain from their college experience depends a lot on how much time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities (Pascarella, 2001). We call this concept student engagement, which includes activities that are traditionally associated with learning, such as reading and writing, preparing for class, and interacting with instructors about various matters (Kuh, 2001). The engagement concept also encompasses some other key activities that more recently have come to the fore as being important, such as collaborating with peers on projects, problem solving tasks, and community service.

Are commuters less engaged than students who live on campus? The answer to this question is important if we are to insure that *all* students acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to live self sufficient, responsible, productive lives after college.

To answer this question we draw on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) database. Our analyses are based on responses to the NSSE survey in 2000 and 2001 from more than 105,000 first-year and senior students at 470 different four-year colleges and universities.

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NSSE (pronounced “nessie”) annually assesses the extent to which students at four-year colleges and universities take part in educational practices that hundreds of research studies indicate are strongly associated with high levels of learning and personal development. For example, the classic report, "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) indicates that level of academic challenge, time on task, and participating in other educationally purposeful activities directly influence the quality of students' learning and their overall educational experience (Pascarella, 2001). We've identified five clusters of such activities that we call benchmarks of effective educational practices. These benchmarks capture some key dimensions of the undergraduate experience (Figure 1).

To provide a context for examining commuter student engagement we describe some of the characteristics of commuter students from the NSSE database. Then we'll compare student engagement, satisfaction, and the progress commuters say they make with students who live on campus. Keep in mind that commuters comprise a very diverse population of students, so what is true for commuters as a group may not hold for individual students or subgroups of commuters.

Who Are Commuter Students?

Commuters are usually defined as those students whose place of residence while attending college is not in a campus residence hall or in a fraternity or sorority house (Jacoby, 2000a; NRC 2001). Some may argue to limit the definition to those whose residence is beyond walking distance from the institution thereby sorting out those who live near enough to the

campus to be able to take advantage of most of the resources and facilities without much undue effort.

Figure 1: Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Level of Academic Challenge

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance. 10 questions:

- Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other activities related to your academic program)
- Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings
- Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more
- Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages

Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college. 7 questions:

- Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
- Made a class presentation

Student Interactions with Faculty Members

Through interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom students see first-hand how experts think about and solve practical problems. As a result their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life-long learning. 6 questions:

- Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
- Discussed ideas from your reading or classes with faculty members outside of class

Enriching Educational Experiences

Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment the academic program. Experiencing diversity teaches students valuable things about themselves and other cultures. Used appropriately, technology facilitates learning and promotes collaboration between peers and instructors. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide students with opportunities to synthesize, integrate, and apply their knowledge. Such experiences make learning more meaningful and, ultimately, more useful because what students know becomes a part of who they are. 11 questions:

Supportive Campus Environment

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus. 6 questions:

- Campus environment provides support you need to help you succeed academically
- Campus environment helps you cop with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)

- Number of written papers or reports fewer than 5 pages
- Coursework emphasizes: Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory
- Coursework emphasizes: Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences
- Coursework emphasizes: Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods
- Coursework emphasizes: Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
- Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations

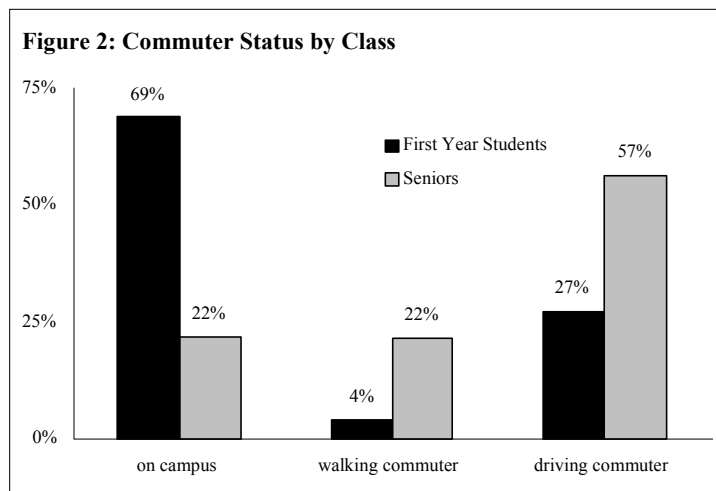
- Worked with other students on projects during class
- Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- Tutored or taught other students
- Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course
- Discussed ideas from your reading or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)

- Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student-life activities, etc.)
- Received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance
- Worked with a faculty member on a research project

- Talking with students with different religious beliefs, political opinions, or values
- Talking with students of a different race or ethnicity
- An institutional climate that encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds
- Using electronic technology to discuss or complete assignments
- Participation in internships or field experiences, community service or volunteer work, foreign language coursework, study abroad, independent study or self-designed major, culminating senior experience, co-curricular activities

- Campus environment provides the support you need to thrive socially
- Quality of relationships with other students
- Quality of relationships with faculty members
- Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and office

NSSE determines commuter status by asking the following question: Which of the following best describes where you are living now while attending college? (a) Dormitory or other campus housing (not fraternity/sorority house), (b) Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within walking distance of the institution, (c) Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within driving distance, and (c) Fraternity or sorority house. Therefore, we're able to divide students into three groups: (a) those living on-campus (including residence hall, fraternity and sorority house); (b) those living off-campus, but still within walking distance; and (c) those living off-campus but at driving distance of the institution. The percentages of NSSE respondents in these groups are shown in Figure 2 according to their year in school.



First-year commuter students differ from senior commuters on certain characteristics. For example, more than two-thirds of first-year students live on campus and nearly all the rest live at some driving distance from the institution. This is not surprising since most traditional age first-year students, particularly at residential colleges, live on campus. This is thought to help them make a successful transition to college life. First-year students who don't live on campus are more likely to be living with their parents or be older students with a permanent residence near campus.

In contrast nearly four out of five seniors live off campus and the majority of these are driving commuters. For this reason, senior commuter students are more diverse compared with their first-year counterparts and not as easy to characterize. They are a mix of traditional-age

students who lived on campus for at least a year and older students who have always commuted to college.

Table 1 shows the percentage of NSSE respondents in seven background categories according to their living arrangements. First-year and senior students are about equally

	First-Year Students			Seniors		
	living on campus	walking commuters	driving commuters	living on campus	walking commuters	driving commuters
Sex						
Male	34%	41%	33%	36%	40%	33%
Female	67%	59%	68%	64%	60%	68%
Age						
19 or younger	75%	49%	54%			
20-23	25%	38%	28%	91%	77%	43%
24 or older	1%	13%	18%	9%	23%	57%
Race/Ethnicity						
African American/Black	7%	9%	10%	6%	4%	8%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4%	8%	7%	4%	4%	5%
Caucasian/White	80%	64%	61%	81%	81%	73%
Hispanic	3%	10%	14%	3%	4%	8%
Other	7%	10%	8%	6%	8%	7%
Enrollment Status						
Full-time	99%	89%	82%	97%	91%	73%
Less than full-time	1%	11%	18%	3%	9%	27%
Time Spent Caring for Dependents						
5 or fewer hours/week	97%	78%	63%	96%	90%	60%
6 or more hours/week	3%	22%	37%	4%	10%	40%
Time Spent Working Off Campus						
5 or fewer hours/week	85%	57%	32%	72%	58%	32%
6 - 20 hours/week	12%	21%	28%	21%	25%	25%
More than 20 hours/week	3%	22%	40%	7%	17%	44%
Parental Education Level						
First generation college student	32%	43%	53%	32%	34%	51%
One or both parents college graduated from college	67%	56%	45%	68%	66%	49%

distributed by sex among the different living options. But the proportion of both first-year and senior men who live within walking distance is higher than those who live on or drive to campus.

Students who drive to campus differ in some key ways from their peers who walk to class or live on campus. For example, they are more likely to be non-traditional age students, first-generation, and students of color. They also spend more time caring for dependents and work more hours off campus, which may also explain in part why they are more likely to be part-time students. Given these factors it would not be surprising if commuters – especially those who live at a distance from the campus that requires them to drive to class – would be less engaged in many aspects of college. Indeed, their responses to most items on the NSSE survey essentially confirm this.

What Commuter Students Say About Their Engagement in College

Table 2 compares the two groups of commuter students with students who live on campus on the five NSSE benchmarks and on three factors of self-reported gains.¹ The “mean” represents the arithmetic average of the students’ benchmark scores. The “effect size” represents the magnitude of the difference between the mean scores of walking commuters and driving commuters and students who live on campus.² The effect size is a more robust indicator of group differences than a statistical significance test in that it represents the magnitude of the difference between the groups. In other words, it tells us whether a difference is large enough that the groups of students really do have qualitatively different educational experiences.

All the effect sizes associated with significant mean differences on the benchmarks in Table 2 are positive, indicating that students who live on campus had higher benchmark scores across the board. This means residential students were more engaged in effective educational practices and -- in all likelihood -- were benefiting more from their college experience.

Now let's look at the effect sizes of the comparisons of the benchmark scores of commuters and residential students. An effect size in the range of .1 to .3 is relatively small since the mean difference accounts for less than a third of a standard deviation. It's clear that most effect sizes are not very large between commuters and residential, meaning that the differences between the groups are not that great. However, for commuters who drive to campus two

Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice	Commuter Status	First-Year Students			Seniors		
		Mean	Effect Size (vs. on campus)		Mean	Effect Size (vs. on campus)	
			Sig.	Sig.		Sig.	
Level of Academic Challenge	on campus	53.7			58.2		
	walking commuter	51.6	.15	***	56.7	.10	***
	driving commuter	51.1	.20	***	55.8	.17	***
Active and Collaborative Learning	on campus	41.2			51.5		
	walking commuter	39.3	.13	***	49.9	.10	***
	driving commuter	38.0	.22	***	48.2	.21	***
Student Interactions with Faculty Members	on campus	36.4			47.1		
	walking commuter	34.7	.09	**	42.6	.22	***
	driving commuter	31.5	.25	***	38.1	.43	***
Enriching Educational Experiences	on campus	57.4			53.7		
	walking commuter	52.2	.28	***	49.6	.25	***
	driving commuter	44.7	.68	***	43.0	.66	***
Supportive Campus Environment	on campus	61.4			60.2		
	walking commuter	57.1	.24	***	56.5	.20	***
	driving commuter	56.1	.30	***	54.2	.33	***
Gains Factors							
Gains in personal and social competence	on campus	18.2			19.5		
	walking commuter	17.8	.10	**	19.1	.09	***
	driving commuter	17.3	.20	***	18.4	.25	***
Gains in practical competence	on campus	7.9			8.9		
	walking commuter	7.9	-.01		8.9	.00	
	driving commuter	7.8	.06	***	8.9	.03	
Gains in general education	on campus	11.6			12.9		
	walking commuter	11.5	.04		12.6	.11	***
	driving commuter	11.7	-.02		12.5	.15	***

** p<.01

*** p<.001

benchmarks have somewhat larger effect sizes -- student interactions with faculty members and enriching educational experiences benchmarks. This means that driving commuters really do have less contact with their teachers (especially seniors) and do not take advantage of such opportunities as co-curricular activities, community service, study abroad, internships and so forth. The enriching educational experiences benchmark also contains a set of items that reflect the climate for diversity on the campus.

The three gains factors at the bottom of Table 2 are the combinations of several self-reported gains items on the NSSE instrument. *Gains in personal and social competence* is the sum of gains in ethical development, appreciation for diversity, understanding of self, community awareness, citizenship, inquiry, and getting along with others. *Gains in practical competence* is the sum of progress made in computer and information technologies, quantitative skills, and knowledge and skills for work. *Gains in general education* is the combination of self-reported gains in writing and speaking skills, general education, and analytical skills.

Once again, all the effect sizes associated with significant mean differences are positive, indicating that residential students reported higher gains than students living off campus. But again, the effect sizes are relatively small. Both first-year and senior students who live on campus report higher gains in personal and social competence than their counterparts who walk or drive to campus. This may be the natural result of the intense interpersonal and social dynamics that exist in residence halls between roommates, floormates, and other student clusters. However, it may also affirm the work many student affairs and housing professionals put into shaping their residential environments to be positive communities for learning.

Gains in practical competence reflect only small differences in terms of where students live. Indeed, the effect sizes are trivial. Likewise, gains in general education show weak effect sizes, although on campus seniors score higher than both walking and driving commuters.

That said, commuter students were as engaged as their non-commuting counterparts on several activities that reflect key aspects of learning during college. For example, they were just as likely as other students:

- ✓ to work harder than they thought they could to meet an instructor's standards,
- ✓ to work with other students on projects during class,
- ✓ to ask questions or contribute to class discussions,
- ✓ to discuss ideas from readings with others outside of class,
- ✓ to write long papers (20 pages or more), and
- ✓ to read on their own for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment.

Taken together, these items suggest that although many commuter students may have constraints on their time associated with work, family responsibilities and other matters they put forth just as much effort as other students in areas that are primarily related to what goes on inside the classroom. Moreover, they are very similar to their peers who live on campus in terms of taking classes that require higher order intellectual skills and they report making as much progress in desired outcomes of college.

Conclusion

It's true that students who live on campus are more engaged overall compared with students who commute. These findings are consistent with previous research (Chickering, 1974; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, it appears that the further away from campus (walking distance, driving distance) the less likely a student is to take advantage of the educational resources the institution provides. Thus, proximity to campus makes a difference in commuter students' level of engagement, with the caveat that in certain aspects of the classroom experience commuters are comparable to their campus-based counterparts.

The mixed results from this study suggest that much more must be done “to deepen commuter students’ involvement in learning” (Jacoby, 2000b, p. 81). We must develop richer, more meaningful understandings of the commuter student experience, how we define commuter students, and in what ways different definitions yield different conclusions about this growing segment of American higher education. Such work is essential if we are to fashion programs and services that will effectively meet the educational needs of commuter students.

Research Notes:

- ¹ This analysis was conducted using separate one-way ANOVAs for both first-year and senior students with the benchmarks and gains factors as dependent variables and commuter status as the grouping variable. Benchmarks are weighted to adjust for differences in sex and full-time/part-time enrollment status.
- ² Effect size is calculated by dividing the mean difference by the standard deviation of the mean of the group that is being compared (in this instance, on campus students).

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