COMMUTER AND RESIDENT STUDENTS: ATTITUDES, EXPECTATIONS, AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON INTEGRATION AND PERSISTENCE

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In the past twenty years, the proportion of undergraduates who commute to primarily residential institutions of higher education – like the proportions of other nontraditional students – has risen dramatically. The increase in the commuter student population has resulted from improvements in educational access for previously underserved groups (e.g., underrepresented minorities; lower-income students; Jacoby, 2000a). This shift, unfortunately, has not often been accompanied by changes in institutional policies that are pertinent to commuters (Wittkopf, 1994). Meanwhile, traditional resident-oriented policies have not adequately addressed ongoing difficulties in retaining commuters.

Numerous educational researchers have observed the influence of the freshman residential experience at four-year institutions, and virtually all have reached the same conclusion: Students who live on or near campus during their first year are more likely to persist and to complete their baccalaureate degrees (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Even when researchers control for prior academic achievement (e.g., high school grade point average; SAT scores), gender, race, and socioeconomic status, first-year residence exerts a unique, positive effect on persistence to degree. The importance of these findings is underscored by the finding that 86% of all students nationally commuted (i.e., did not live on or near campus) in academic year 1995-96 (Horn & Berktold, 1998). Many of these commuters did not attend traditionally commuter-oriented institutions.

Tinto's (1975) student integration model is the most common and best-supported paradigm used to explain the impact of on-campus residence. Integration may be defined as an actual or perceived fit between a student and an institution. Tinto holds that students are prone to drop out of an institution when they fail to achieve sufficient integration within the academic or social systems of that institution. On-campus residence is a means for students to transition from the social structures of their high school and home lives to their new college society. Resident students together can learn the norms of their institution and find niches that give them a stake in their collegiate futures. The residential experience retains its power even when students live on campus only as freshmen, as is common today. In fact, on-campus residence appears to have its greatest impact on such students at their lowest levels of integration (Bean, 1985).

Those who do not embrace the opportunities presented in their new campus residences and instead remain strongly linked to high school social networks often report feeling relatively "out of touch" and more dissatisfied with their college experiences (Christie & Dinham, 1991). In contrast, those who immerse themselves in campus residential culture typically take on attitudes and values more in line with the goals of the institution (e.g., academic achievement orientation; cultural interests; multiculturalism; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Those who are less active in the culture of the institution are prone to dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and dropping out (Finn & Voelkl, 1993).

Tinto's model provides a clear precedent for explaining how commuters become increasingly different from residents after matriculation. Although Tinto observes that pre-matriculation attitudes can give rise to varying initial levels of institutional commitment, comparatively little research has explored the impact of these pre-existing, external differences on integration and persistence (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). In any social group, proximity and the ability to easily exchange information tends to more greatly polarize attitudes (Anderson & Graser, 1976). It is not unreasonable to expect that these conditions might exacerbate existing differences between residents and commuters.

Some theorists, most notably Bean (1980), suggest that Tinto's student integration model unduly de-emphasizes the impact of external demands on commuters. The most elementary of these demands may be transportation related (e.g., cost; maintenance; parking; scheduling; alternative arrangement). Commuters are more likely to have multiple life roles and responsibilities than residents. They more frequently have responsibilities as spouses, parents, and employees as well as students. Similarly, commuters tend to have more diverse support systems than residents and rely to a greater extent on spouses, relatives, friends, employers, and others off campus to negotiate the demands of a college education (Jacoby, 2000a).

Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992) have indicated that student integration and external demands each exert unique effects on persistence. The present research attempted to extend this work to a somewhat different institutional setting (e.g., size, geography, and mission varied noticeably). We examined local differences between commuters and residents on student integration and external demand variables. Where between-group differences existed, we assessed the relative impact of student integration and external demands on long-term persistence and graduation rates.

Methodology and Data

Our institution is an urban research university located in Western New York State. It enrolls approximately 27,000 students each fall, of which about 17,000 are undergraduates. A substantial minority of our first-time freshmen claims a permanent residence in one of the eight Western New York counties (i.e., Erie, Niagara, Orleans, Genesee, Wyoming, Allegany, Cattaraugus, or Chautauqua; 42% did in Fall 2003) and commutes from an off-campus residence (30%).

We collected primary data during the University's annual administration of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) freshman survey in the summer of 1997. The CIRP survey is a well-known, nationally normed paper-and-pencil instrument developed by Alexander Astin and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). First-time, full-time freshmen intending to enroll in Fall 1997 and attending our on-campus summer orientation program completed the survey.

We obtained secondary, follow-up data from our institutional data warehouse. These data included enrollment status for each semester as well as any degree dates.

For the purposes of this study, we defined residents as all students who reported on the CIRP survey that they intended to live in a dorm during their freshman year and considered all others to be commuters. This definition contrasted slightly with the

traditional notion that residents may live on or near campus. Due to the physical layout of our campus, however, students were highly unlikely to live in the areas adjacent to campus as they might at other institutions. Students who did not live on campus were unlikely to be able to walk to classes and to other on-campus activities and to truly have the experience of on-campus life that students in dorms did.

In addition, we defined retention as either the completion of a baccalaureate degree at this institution or enrollment in the Spring 2003 semester, regardless of whether the student had stopped out in prior semesters.

Results

During the summer of 1997, 1477 first-time, full-time freshmen completed the CIRP survey. Of these freshmen, 998 (68.1%) expected to live in on-campus dormitories during their first year at the university. We assumed that these expectations would translate into actual on-campus residence during the year, due to the proximity of the July survey to the start of the Fall semester.

We observed that 87% of all respondents were either commuters from Western New York (WNY) or residents from other geographic regions. Had we simply compared residents and commuters, our results would likely have been confounded by the effects of cultural differences between WNY and other parts of New York State. We therefore chose to conduct three-group comparisons of commuters, WNY residents, and residents from other geographic areas (hereafter, "non-WNY"). Thirteen students claiming to commute from non-WNY areas were dropped from our analysis.

Commuters were more likely than others to be female (48.9% vs. 43.8% for WNY residents vs. 43.2% for non-WNY residents) and less likely to be underrepresented minority students (10.4% vs. 12.1% vs. 16.3%). They had high school grade-point averages of A- or better more often than non-WNY residents (49.9% vs. 28.8%) but did not perform as well as WNY residents (56.8% had high school grades averaging in the A range). Commuters were most likely to cite this institution as their first choice (72.0% vs. 50.3% for WNY residents vs. 47.7% for non-WNY residents). Nonetheless, commuters less often came from households with annual incomes of $75,000 or higher (25.1% vs. 34.4 vs. 37.6%), had lower mean SATs (1139 vs. 1193 vs. 1140), and were least likely to persist to the six-year follow-up (58.4% vs. 68.2% vs. 65.1%).

We conducted a logistic regression analysis to assess the unique contributions of gender, minority status, high school GPA, SAT totals, household income, and commuter status to six-year persistence. With all other variables partialled out of the regression analysis, commuter status still predicted a significant reduction in the likelihood of student persistence.

Clear patterns of between-group background differences appeared in our analyses of college choice issues and future expectations. When asked why they chose to attend college in general, WNY residents most often stated a desire to become more cultured (Table 1). Commuters were less interested in culture and in general education and were more influenced by a parent's wish or by the desire to earn more money.

In choosing this institution in particular, non-WNY students most often valued its social reputation and its size. Commuters were most responsive to the school's low

tuition. In general, others' wishes had little differential impact on the choice of our institution, although WNY residents were somewhat less influenced by guidance counselors' recommendations than others. The influence of financial aid, unlike that of tuition, was consistent across residential groups. The residential groups also did not differ in the impact of special programs or recruitment by college representatives.

Table 1. Percentages of students endorsing selected reasons as very important to their college matriculation decisions

	Resident		Commuter
	Non-WNY	WNY	WNY
	(n=822)	(n=176)	(n=454)
Reasons for attending college			
Improve study skills	**40.3**	33.9	37.0
Get a better job	**72.7**	77.6	76.2
Become more cultured	36.9	**42.9**	**26.6**
Gain a general education	62.5	64.0	**57.2**
Parent's wish	29.3	30.7	**34.2**
Make more money	72.7	73.7	**79.0**
Reasons for choosing this institution			
Good social reputation	**35.8**	25.6	25.8
Size of college	**24.2**	21.6	19.1
Guidance counselor's advice	7.8	**4.1**	8.6
Recruited by athletic department	3.2	**7.1**	1.7
Low tuition	53.3	**47.7**	**60.6**

Looking toward their futures, non-WNY residents most often stated desires to influence social values, to help others in difficulty, and to promote racial understanding (Table 2). WNY residents most often wished to obtain authority in their chosen field, to contribute to science, to achieve in the performing arts, to create artistic work, to write original works, and to develop meaningful life philosophies. They were less interested than others in raising families, gaining wealth, and taking administrative responsibility, though clearly many in this group did value these pursuits. Aside from a slightly greater inclination for commuters to take community action, the groups did not differ in their political motivations (e.g., recognition from colleagues; political influence and leadership; environmental cleanups).

As undergraduates, non-WNY students most often expected to play varsity athletics or join a Greek organization and least often considered that they might obtain a job to pay college expenses (Table 3). WNY residents most frequently reported that they would likely graduate with honors, serve in a student office, or join in student protests. Commuters were most prone to work full-time, get married while in college, and need extra time to earn their degree. Commuters were least inclined to transfer to another institution prior to earning their baccalaureate or to seek counseling. The three residential groups were similar in their expectations that they would gain entry to an honor society,

earn at least a B average, receive a baccalaureate, drop out permanently, and be satisfied at our institution.

Table 2. Percentages of students stating that selected goals are very important or essential

	Resident		Commuter
	Non-WNY	WNY	Non-WNY
Student goals			
Influence social values	**32.2**	27.9	29.6
Help others in difficulty	**59.8**	53.7	56.6
Promote racial understanding	**36.1**	31.9	24.5
Become authority in my field	64.3	**68.3**	61.9
Make contribution to science	20.0	**25.2**	20.4
Achieve in a performing art	9.4	**16.0**	9.9
Create artistic work	15.7	**19.5**	11.9
Write original works	13.1	**17.8**	10.5
Develop meaningful life philosophy	39.7	**44.8**	40.6
Raise a family	70.6	**59.2**	73.2
Be well off financially	80.7	**76.8**	83.0
Have administrative responsibility	37.2	**33.3**	39.1
Take part in community action	18.4	15.3	**19.6**

Table 3. Percentages of students perceiving some chance or a very good chance that selected college events will occur

	Resident		Commuter
	Non-WNY	WNY	Non-WNY
Expected college events			
Play varsity athletics	**38.6**	35.0	31.1
Join fraternity or sorority	**62.5**	46.3	56.2
Get job to pay expenses	**75.3**	84.1	84.3
Graduate with honors	76.7	**80.4**	74.2
Be elected to student office	23.8	**31.3**	26.2
Take part in student protests	36.9	**48.8**	32.7
Drop out temporarily	3.6	**8.1**	3.9
Work full-time	9.3	14.8	**25.8**
Marry while in college	13.0	19.3	**25.5**
Need extra time for degree	43.7	41.9	**49.4**
Transfer to another institution	37.7	39.5	**31.5**
Seek personal counseling	37.1	40.9	**31.4**

The impact of college choice considerations on six-year persistence rates varied considerably for commuters (Table 4). Commuters who attended college due to a

parent's wish or the prospect of making more money were more likely to persist, as were those who chose this institution due to its low tuition. These concerns were more characteristic of commuters than they were of residents. However, commuters who did not consider a general education important in attending college – a relatively common stance within this group - less often persisted to the six-year mark.

Table 4. Percentages of commuter students persisting when stated concerns are more or less important in college matriculation decisions

	Rating	
	Not Important or Somewhat Important	Very Important
Reasons for attending college		
Parent's wish	57.1	60.1
Make more money	54.8	58.9
Gain a general education	*54.7*	*60.7*
Become more cultured	*58.4*	*57.1*
Reasons for choosing this institution		
Low tuition	55.6	60.8
Guidance counselor's advice	58.8	59.5
Recruited by athletic department	*58.4*	*57.1*

Relationships between baseline values and six-year persistence often varied substantially between commuters and their WNY residential counterparts. For the latter group, parents' wishes and students' interests in general education were not related to persistence. WNY residents attending college in order to make more money were less likely to persist. Concerns with low tuition in the college choice process, however, were related to increased persistence among WNY residents as well as commuters.

Commuters' predisposition toward goals of financial security was related to increased persistence (see Table 5). Their lesser interest in many traditional academic goals (e.g., contribution to science; writing original works; developing a meaningful life philosophy), in contrast, appeared to handicap their chances of persisting and graduating because each was related to increased retention among commuters. These patterns did not translate similarly to the WNY resident group, in which those seeking to create artistic works or to develop meaningful philosophies were less apt to persist.

Commuters' persistence was negatively associated with their tendencies to work full-time, to marry while in college, and to join a Greek organization more often than WNY residents and with their reduced expectations of graduating with honors (Table 6). Commuters' lesser inclinations to be involved with student government, varsity athletics, and student protests were related to increased persistence, as were their resistances to dropping out, transferring, and seeking counseling. For WNY residents, relationships between college expectations and six-year persistence were strikingly similar; with the exception that marriage was linked to increased retention for them.

Table 5. Percentages of commuter students persisting when selected goals are considered more or less important

	Rating	
	Not Important or Somewhat Important	Very Important or Essential
Student goals		
Be well off financially	51.4	60.7
Have administrative responsibility	59.0	58.8
Raise a family	58.4	59.6
Engage in community action	58.5	59.8
Become authority in field	*52.8*	*63.0*
Make contribution to science	*56.9*	*67.4*
Achieve in performing arts	*57.9*	*66.7*
Create artistic work	*57.7*	*68.0*
Write original works	*58.4*	*65.9*
Develop meaningful life philosophy	*56.3*	*63.3*
Promote racial understanding	*59.3*	*57.3*

Table 6. Percentages of commuter students persisting when selected college events are perceived as having a greater or lesser chance of occurring

	Rating	
	No Chance or Very Little Chance	Some Chance or Very Good Chance
Expected college events		
Work full-time	62.3	49.5
Marry while in college	60.1	54.8
Need extra time for degree	58.4	59.8
Join fraternity or sorority	60.2	57.8
Graduate with honors	*53.7*	*60.8*
Be elected to student office	*61.9*	*51.4*
Play varsity athletics	*60.4*	*55.5*
Take part in student protests	*60.1*	*57.0*
Drop out temporarily	*60.5*	*25.0*
Transfer to another college	*63.0*	*50.8*
Seek personal counseling	*61.7*	*53.5*

Discussion & Implications

It was hardly surprising that commuters in our Fall 1997 entering cohort persisted to the six-year follow-up less often than both groups of residents. True, these commuters were more predominantly Caucasian and female than both groups of residents and were

more often attending their first-choice institution – trends strongly associated with increased persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Nonetheless, commuters came from less affluent backgrounds and their academic credentials were weaker than those of WNY residents. These differences did not wholly explain the differences in retention between the commuter and resident groups, as the impact of commuter status remained even when we controlled for demographic and academic achievement variables.

The three residential groups differed dramatically on several pre-enrollment attitudinal indicators. The non-WNY residents clearly were the most socially oriented of the groups. Their college choice was often based on considerations that might improve their social lives, and their goals for their college and postgraduate lives typically reflected social motivations.

WNY residents appeared to maintain the most traditionally academic approaches to college and to life. They were more oriented toward achievement (e.g., authority in their discipline; scientific contribution; honor society membership) and cultural pursuits (e.g., artistic work; philosophy) than others. Their profile was that of a group that enjoyed learning for its own sake, rather than as a means of achieving power or security.

Commuters were the most pragmatic of the three groups. They most often expected to juggle occupational and familial responsibilities while in college and typically endorsed financial aspects of a college education as critical to their decision to enroll. Though often necessary, these attitudes are not conducive to student integration. While non-WNY residents appeared predisposed to the highest levels of social integration and WNY residents were likely to be more academically integrated, commuters were less apt to become integrated in either fashion. Commuters also faced competing demands that did not strongly impact other students. When commuters saw transfer to another institution as unlikely, that expectation may have been due more to these external demands – particularly those binding them to the local area – than it was to integration.

Commuters' reduced interest in social and intellectual aspects of college life, which preceded their on-campus counterparts' residential experiences, apparently inhibited retention. Commuters who were less interested in cultural pursuits or the traditional features of a liberal education persisted at a lesser rate. Although immersion in some campus social activities (e.g., Greek organizations; student government; student protests) is not necessarily beneficial to the long-term academic progress of commuters, some interest in the campus environment seems necessary for adequate integration.

When commuters are not well integrated into the campus culture, administrators may wish to create new ways of slowly introducing traditional academic values while not alienating commuters with different baseline concerns. Programs should optimally indicate movement toward a model of equitable experience for commuters and residents (Jacoby, 2000b), with separate commuter-oriented programs serving as a stopgap measure rather than an endpoint:

- Increase the convenience, flexibility, and inclusiveness of orientation activities; orientation might focus increasingly on institutional features that are not part of the commuter's usual culture (e.g., liberal education; on-campus organizations)
- Create centrally located on-campus learning centers that encourage commuters to connect with each other and with residents while at the university

- Develop commuter-oriented social groups and e-lists that can focus on common concerns (e.g., balancing work and school; applying academic materials in the workplace; child care)
- Implement block course scheduling and evening classes that do not conflict with competing activities
- Incorporate applied and interactive elements, in keeping with commuters' more practical approach, into curricula

Our commuters' competing demands appeared to further hinder their ability to persist. Commuters who expected to get a full-time job in order to meet expenses were substantially less likely to persist, as might be suggested by the copious research demonstrating a negative relationship between employment and persistence in the general college-going population (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Commitment to marriage also diminished students' chances of persisting. The competing demands of presumably off-campus employment and marriage have been shown to reduce students' academic and social integration elsewhere. These demands exert a negative influence on persistence that precedes and is independent of the socializing influence of dorm life on residents.

Nonetheless, the financial issues faced by many commuters constitute a formidable hurdle. More students are finding it difficult to pay for college with personal or family resources (St. John, Hu, & Tuttle, 2000). Simultaneously, budgets have tightened at public institutions and institutional scholarship money has become scarcer. Increasing financial aid for middle-income students is not an option in most cases. Nonetheless, some of the following policies may ameliorate financial concerns:

- Increase the prominence of financial benefits (e.g., low tuition investment; long-term monetary rewards of higher education) in local marketing
- Expand marketing to be inclusive of parents and other family members who may have a financial stake in college decisions and who are likely to influence decisions whether or not to attend college in the first place
- Increase the prominence of any scholarships and grants available to students not eligible for need-based financial aid via campus literature

We cannot increase retention among commuters by teaching them to be more like on-campus residents. They are unique. To fulfill commuters' needs sufficiently to retain them, we should address issues that reduce student integration and increase competing demands. These proactive measures, however, are no substitute for aggressive student advisement policies. When commuters find themselves in academic difficulty, they are not likely to move to another institution but may struggle on their own until the situation is dire. We must be proactive if we wish to reach and retain our commuter students as well as our residents. Such an approach provides us with the best opportunity to moderate the impact of behavior that diminishes academic success among commuters.

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