Involving Commuters in Campus Activities

By Jennifer M. Mussi

Commuter students are an essential component of campus life at many schools and their experience is unique. Commuter students often live at home with their families and travel to campus by car or public transportation, while others live with classmates in communities surrounding campus. Whether your campus is entirely commuter or is composed of a healthy mix consisting of residential and commuter students, it is essential for the successful campus programmer to be aware of the commuter student experience, learn how to reach this mobile population and plan programs directed at its specific needs and schedules.
Step One: Learning More About Commuters

The first step to better serve the commuter student population is to learn more about its experience. If your campus has a Commuter Student Services office or a Commuter Student Association, inquire about the assessment tools and resources that may be available to you as a student programmer. If these campus groups already survey the commuter population, you may want to ask if you may add a question or two to their surveys so that you can assess what programs commuters have an interest in attending and in what programs they are more likely to participate. This information will provide the groundwork necessary to begin involving more commuters in campus-wide programs as well as create new, commuter-specific programs for this defined population.

Hosting a commuter focus group is another opportunity for programmers to learn more about commuter students and their programming interests. A focus group is a discussion group lead by a facilitator. Its purpose is to obtain specific feedback about programs, services and initiatives. A focus group can help programmers determine what impressions and opinions commuter students have of the existing program offerings and what new programs they would like to see organized on campus. Through the personal interaction in a focus group, it is also possible to recruit commuter students to help plan and execute programs on campus.

It is important to have specific questions to which you want answers when attempting to assess commuters. You may want to identify what days of the week and parts of the day (early/late morning, afternoon, early evening) are most convenient for commuter students. Adjusting popular late-night programming (such as a comedian or open-mic) to periodically take place in the late afternoon when more commuters are likely to attend after their classes may help garner more commuter interest. It is also important to identify what challenges commuters face because this information may help you develop programs that will specifically address commuter concerns. If you learn that a majority of commuter students leave campus after class to go to an off-campus job, you may want to build a program around that concept. A commuter coffee program, where commuter students can pick up a complimentary cup of coffee during certain hours of the day, to give them a “pick me up” to get them through the rest of the day, can be a successful program that students will attend.

Step Two: Making Programming Choices that Appeal to Commuters

Once you have assessed the needs and interests of commuter students, it is helpful to base your program offerings on this new information. By taking advantage of daytime hours between classes and before students would leave campus for the day, campus programmers will have more opportunity to reach commuter students.

Commuter-specific programs like weekly free breakfasts or lunches sponsored by a different office or student group can also help get students more involved in campus life. By providing commuters with the opportunity to grab a quick, free bite and information about the next big social event on campus, you can enhance your programming as well as advertise campus-wide events to this specific population.

Sponsoring a Local Pride Day program can also attract commuter students to programs. Encourage students to wear an item of clothing that represents the region where they live and they can pick up a free gift or raffle ticket at the event. Successful local pride events have surrounded watching a local sporting event on a big screen television or coincide with a cultural event in the neighborhood surrounding campus.

Offering commuter student appreciation programs can also get commuters more involved in campus life. By planning an annual program dedicated to celebrating and appreciating commuter students you can build tradition, create a sense of community within the commuter population and establish a sense of campus and commuting pride.
Think about the commuting experience. What are some of the challenges of being a commuter? By thinking about the experience, you can generate a list of programs and promotional items that may make a commuter more likely to participate in an event.

Step Three: Keeping Commuters Informed

Keeping commuters informed of on-campus programs is perhaps the most important component of planning events. Programmers need to take advantage of highly visible advertising opportunities. Where do commuters spend their “down-time” on campus? Where are they likely to see the information about your programs? Giving out leaflets in the student center, advertising in the student newspaper, placing table tents on cafeteria, coffee house or student lounge tables and tying balloons with ads onto car antennas are just a few ideas of placing advertising in strategic commuter locations. Every campus is different, but by thinking about high-traffic locations during high-traffic times at your campus, you can better tailor your promotions and advertising to reach more commuter students.

Developing a targeted commuter e-mail list can also help you get the word out about programs. Commuter students may not have the time to browse event ads on a bulletin board in the student center or student lounge, but they may take the time to read a weekly events calendar if it is e-mailed directly to their inbox. Often this service is already provided by your campus student activities office, so make sure you seek guidance before attempting to generate an e-mail list of your own.

Advertising in your campus commuter newsletter is also helpful. Many campuses offer specific mailings to commuter students containing information about upcoming programs and services. Strategically placing information about commuter-specific programming and general programming you want commuters to become involved in can help bolster attendance numbers and involve the commuter population.

Step Four: Keeping Commuters Interested

Active participation is essential to ensuring commuter student interest and involvement in on-campus programs. By offering commuter-specific programs and giving participation incentives to program participants, you can involve large numbers of commuter students who may have otherwise skipped your program.

Think about the commuting experience. What are some of the challenges of being a commuter? By thinking about the experience, you can generate a list of programs and promotional items that may make a commuter more likely to participate in an event. Some incentive ideas include: free commuter passes for public transportation, free parking permits, free travel coffee mugs with coffee shop gift cards tucked inside, portable CD cases, gift certificates to the bookstore, backpacks full of school supplies and personalized items like T-shirts, ID holders, key chains and ice scrapers that promote campus and commuter pride. By giving out a few of these items at events or offering door prizes for participating in programs, you are sending a message to commuters: “We want you here and you can win items that will make your life easier.”

Supporting and celebrating commuter students is an important component of a successful campus activities program. By taking the time to learn more about this mobile population, you will strengthen your programming initiatives and make an important contribution to building community at your campus.

About the Author:

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