Serving Commuter Students: Programs that Work

By Lucia Gemma-Connolly

Serving commuter students with activities and other programs on campus can certainly be a challenge for student programmers. If commuter students are a part of your student population, you probably already know that you don't exactly have a captive audience. But there are ways to successfully reach these students (see Page 42 for an article on how to learn about and better serve this population). There are also some specific program ideas that work well with commuter students. Here are a few that can be easily implemented on most campuses—including yours.
Help your commuting student population remember the sweet benefits of being a commuter with an event they will remember for a long time.

“Sweet Shop” in a visible place many commuters frequent throughout the day, such as in the parking lot, in the student lounge or outside the cafeteria. Serve ice cream to students with a “make-your-own sundae station” nearby. Serve cookies and have colored frosting available so that commuters can decorate their cookies.

You can also sponsor candy-themed contests where commuter students can guess the number of jellybeans in glass jars for the chance to win a cool prize.

Another fun activity can be easily created by filling brown paper bags with common items, such as soda, Jell-O, cookies, and candy bars. List the ingredients of each item on the front of a bag, and have students guess the bag’s contents. Those who guess correctly win what is inside the bag.

Distribute bunches of candy bars with ribbons tied around them and the following note attached, “Commuter students, we appreciate you!”

Magazine Swap Program

This easy program is a sure-fire way to make your students happy and get more commuter students into your student activities office. Order subscriptions to a variety of popular magazines, and set up an area in your office to display the collection. Post signs around campus inviting students to swipe up their commute by borrowing a magazine to enjoy during breaks between classes and on their way home. Encourage commuters to return magazines when they are finished with them and “swap” their magazines with yours, so that your collection doesn’t disappear. Also, make sure to order multiple subscriptions to magazines that circulate weekly.

Local Pride Day

Designate one day as “Local Pride Day” and give your commuter students an opportunity to pay tribute to their hometowns. Ideas include inviting them to wear local pride attire, such as baseball jerseys, T-shirts and hats, or asking them to jot down a few reasons why their classmates should visit their hometown. In return, give away compact disc holders, T-shirts or commuter coffee mugs as an incentive to get students to participate.
Specific commuter events can also serve as a great publicity tool to inform commuters about other large-scale events you are planning for the entire campus community.

"Taste of New York" Program

Each month, feature a "taste" of the different cultural and ethnic groups that comprise your commuting student population. If you're featuring a "Taste of Italy," serve Italian pastries and coffee. If you're sponsoring a "Taste of Latino Cultures," have a make-your-own taco station. Play music from the featured culture in the background and distribute information about restaurants, landmarks and festivals in your area that students can visit. If possible, host the event in a student lounge with chairs and tables so that students can linger, enjoy the atmosphere and each other's company. Forge a relationship with your university's various cultural groups and invite them to co-sponsor the event.

Commuter Student Appreciation Week

Round up students in your university's Commuter Students Association and together plan a week of fun, commuter-specific programming. Consider offering a coffee break, give-aways and other on-campus programs to let the commuters on your campus know that they are important and appreciated.

Commuter Tuesday Breakfasts

Sponsoring a recurring program like a free breakfast every week can help build traditional programs that commuters can depend on and anticipate participating in. By introducing a comedian, fortuneteller or arts and crafts activity to the event, you can get commuter students familiar with other traditional programs offered by your program board. Specific commuter events can also serve as a great publicity tool to inform commuters about other large-scale events you are planning for the entire campus community.

About the Author

Lucia Gemma-Connelly is the graduate intern for Commuter Student Services at the Lincoln Center Campus of Fordham University (NY). She is enrolled in the Fordham University Graduate School of Education, where she is pursuing her master's of education and professional diploma in school psychology. She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Notre Dame (IN).