Students to Programs
Attract Commuter
Simple Ways to

Feature
Assess the Student Population and Its Interests

One of the toughest aspects of attracting commuter students to events is planning programs that will spark their interest as well as meet the educational goals of the institution. A very important tool in finding exciting programs students will want to attend is assessment. Gather data to determine the type of student population you are dealing with and what their interests are. If you work at a community college where you learn from institutional assessment that 85% of your students are over the age of 30 and married with children, then midnight programs on Saturday nights are probably not going to be successful.

You can also use assessment tools to survey students to learn more about their interests. As a programmer, you may think students are interested in monthly comedy shows, but before spending large amounts of your activity budget on such programming, use a paper survey, a focus group or direct one-on-one interviews to validate your assumption.

In addition to assessing what interests students, you should also assess the college’s institutional values. You can accomplish this by reviewing your college mission statement.

Determine the Best Times for Events

Once you know your target population and its interests, a key to attracting commuter students is finding the right time for events. Because commuter students do not live on campus, it can be more challenging to find a time when they are able to attend events. Even though you might find a program that is of high interest to the student population, students may still have other commitments outside of school and may not be able to return to campus in the evenings or on weekends.

By the same token, you do not want to plan programs when the majority of classes are in session because you don’t want to encourage students to skip classes, thereby causing a conflict with academic interests. If your college offers a common hour during the day in which few or no classes are offered, take advantage of it for programming. Common hour programming can be very successful at colleges with commuter student populations.

If your college does not currently offer a common hour, but you do have a majority of commuter students within your campus population, you might want to encourage your administration to look into creating one.

Choose the Best Locations for Events

At both residential and commuter colleges, location is very important in program planning. Because students at commuter colleges do not have residence halls to go back to during the day, the space you choose for your event can be essential. If you find your student population travels from one part of campus to another throughout the day, it’s a good idea to place the event in the destination location. For instance, if your students travel from an academic building through a multipurpose space in your student union to the dining hall for lunch, you have an optimal space for programming if you plan your events in the dining hall at lunchtime.

If you are planning an event for evening students who come only to the academic building, you might consider planning a social event in the lobby of that building.

Track where your student population is and where it goes and plan accordingly with respect to location. Putting the event in their face, so to speak, is probably the most successful and simplest form of promoting it in these kinds of instances.

Market and Promote Events

It goes without saying that marketing and promoting events is essential on both commuter and residential campuses. One way to be successful in marketing events is to collaborate with others on campus. If you are planning an event that can tie into an academic program, see if members of the pertinent academic department will allow students to attend the event for extra credit.

If you have a large population of student athletes and are planning a program on alcohol abuse, date rape or other topics that might be of value or interest to athletes, see if the athletic director will require student athlete attendance.

When promoting events on campus, there are many ways to get the word out. The most traditional are posters and flyers, but many students pass those by on the way to class without a second glance. On commuter campuses, you must be sure to find where the students congregate for placement of promotion. If a lot of students eat in the dining hall, small signs placed on tables can be effective. You can also put posters on easels along a crowded walk. And, believe it or not, you can also get the attention of commuters on the backs of doors to bathroom stalls.

Electronic media has become a great resource for event promotion, too. If your campus has a portal system that students use, consider placing promotion on it that appears when students log on. If you have access to a distribution list for all students, you might find mass e-mails to be effective. Be careful not to overdo it with mass e-mail, though, or students may begin deleting, but not reading, them.

The most successful form of promotion I have found, though, is still word of mouth. If students get excited about a program, they will tell their friends, who will tell their friends, etc. A great way to get students excited is by recruiting a large active programming board and student government. If your college offers a freshmen seminar, speak at each session to recruit members. A club fair at the beginning of
school is also a valuable way to recruit members.
Once you have a strong student programming
board in place, make sure the students themselves
play a large part in the planning and implementation
of events. They are then more fully vested in pro-
grams and have a greater desire to see them be-
successful.

Evaluate Programs

Another key to effective programming is evaluating
the success of each program after it takes place
to determine if it should be offered again and, if so,
what changes should occur. Just because a program
had a large turnout does not necessarily mean it was
a success. If students are not pleased with the pro-
grams they attend, they will not continue to attend.

Like the planning stage of programming, the evalua-
tion stage requires strong assessment as to what
students gained from the program and if it offered
something they enjoyed. Successful program evalua-
tion can also validate student activities professionals
and the work they do on campus.

Programming Ideas for Commuter
Students

Now that you have some basic tips on how to
attract commuter students, here are some ideas for
commuter student programs that have been success-
ful on my campus.

Family Programs

Many residential campuses offer a parents week-
end. At Hilbert College (NY), a good portion of our
commuter students have children of their own, so we
thought it would be nice to offer a program that not
only could attract parents to the college along with
their students, but also could encourage non-tradition-
al students to bring their families. This year, we
planned a dinner and show with a Beatles tribute
band. The event was very successful. We also plan
annual parties for children around Halloween, Christ-
mas and Easter. These parties are very successful,
attracting our non-traditional students and their
children, our faculty and staff with their children and
many members of our local community.

Evening Student Breaks

Many commuter students are working part-
or full-time jobs, taking care of families and have other
obligations outside of college. This makes it very dif-
ficult for them to attend lengthy events. But in their
few moments of free time on campus, many of these
students are looking for opportunities to socialize
outside of the classroom. We have had success in
offering a social gathering with food during the time
before night classes begin and throughout the night
class time block, including the breaks that students
usually have during class. This gives the evening stu-
dents a chance to get together briefly to chat with
other students and relax. We have implemented
these evening programs once a month on a different
night each month.

Quad Party

Many residential campuses offer a large-scale
event in the fall or the spring with major performing
acts. A number of commuter-based colleges I have
spoken with feel this programming concept will not
work for their campuses. However, that has not been
the case at Hilbert College. Quad Party, a large-scale event that takes place on the last day of classes, is the event that has drawn our largest turnout. We will hold our ninth annual Quad Party this year. We believe a major reason for the success of Quad Party is that we hold it on a weekday evening. Students look forward to finishing up their last classes and coming out for the festivities.

Events that Highlight Students
One of the most successful events we planned this year was our Mr. Hilbert Pageant. Male students competed for the crown of Mr. Hilbert and a $200 cash prize in a spoof of the Ms. America pageant. We believe the reason this event is so successful is because it highlights our students. They are the "performers" and their friends come out to see them. Other successful programs we've planned that highlighted our students included Hilbert Survivor, Hilbert Fear Factor and a Battle of the Bands.

Contractual Programs
Just because you program at a commuter college, don't dismiss contractual programs. Students like to see comedians, magicians, hypnotists, bands and the rest of the attractions we see at NACA National Conventions and regional conferences. The most important thing for many of us at primarily commuter colleges to keep in mind is that we are working with tight budgets. Let agents know this right away. Most are willing to work with you to find an attraction that will fit your budget and excite your students.

About the Author
Jason Enser is director of Student Activities at Hilbert College (NY), where more than 85% of the students are commuters. He previously served as director of Campus Life at Jamestown Community College (NY), a campus with 100% commuter students. He holds a master's degree in student personnel administration from State University of New York-Buffalo and a bachelor's degree in communication and political science from the State University of New York-Fredonia. In NACA, he has won graphics competition awards on the regional level.

Performing All Their Hits
- I BELIEVE—#1 HIT
- HEY LEONARDO (SHE LIKES ME FOR ME)—TOP 10 HIT
- LIGHT IN YOUR EYES—TOP 10 HIT
- LET ME BE THE ONE—TOP 20 HIT
- I WANNA BE THERE—TOP 20 HIT
- ALL ALONG—TOP 20 HIT
- OH VIRGINIA—TOP 20 HIT
- STORYBOOK LIFE—TOP 40 HIT
...and many more!

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