

Commuter Assessment Committee Report University of Rhode Island, July 19, 2007

Introduction

At the request of the Vice President for Student Affairs, students and staff from the Office of Student Life and Student Involvement/ Memorial Union started an assessment of programs, services and facilities for commuter students in January 2007.

Commuter student needs and services have not been assessed at URI for more than 25 years. UMass Amherst's Student Affairs research center, SARIS, has not surveyed commuter students in more than 12 years (see attached). The relationship between commuter students and colleges and universities has been changing over the years. Fewer students live at home and more live in towns near the campus. Complaints from permanent residents and concern about student well-being have caused many colleges to claim campus jurisdiction for off-campus conduct problems. Concerns about retention and commuter student engagement also prompt a look at this population.

Commuters Past and Present

In 1980, a URI Special Commission to Evaluate University Services for Commuter Students recommended an increase in staffing for this area. This is the last known formal reference to an assessment of commuter services. There hasn't been an active Commuter Association at URI since the 1994-95 academic year.

In the past, commuter students have been characterized in the following ways:

- living at home with parents, living at home with significant other/children, or living with friends down-the-line
- disenfranchised, disconnected
- low users of services and programs

While some of these descriptors remain accurate to a certain extent, the University and the surrounding community have changed in the last twenty years. Currently 60% of the URI student body commute and only first year students are guaranteed housing. The 50-50 ratio of in-state and out-of-state students has more out-of-state students living locally. The availability of nine month housing in Narragansett has increased as more family homes are converted to revenue producing rental units. Some neighborhoods in Narragansett have high concentrations of student renters with a minority of permanent residents.

Commuters and Retention

In 1975, Alexander Astin noted that "living in a dormitory is associated with ...decreases in chance of dropping out..." when compared with living in a private room or apartment.¹ Astin gives credit for residents' persistence to increased peer and campus life involvement. In 1975, living with parents was the second most common option to dormitory living and clearly had a negative effect on retention whether it happened in the first year or in years after living on campus. The literature from this era urges colleges interested in retaining commuters to

Astin, Alexander W. "Preventing Students from Dropping Out" p. 92 1975 Jossey-Bass

purposefully engage them in campus life. Colleges tried to simulate a kind of remedial campus living experience by supporting the formation of commuter student associations and day-time programming.

The “dormitories” of 1975 have become the “residence halls” of the twenty-first century. More recent retention studies are more sophisticated in considering many more complex variables than residential status. While involvement in campus life is still seen as important, more nuanced research includes many more confounding variables that affect retention. For example, higher socioeconomic status is associated with living in residence halls. Coincidentally, higher socioeconomic status is also positively linked with retention because of its positive association with higher GPA, less financial need, parents with college degrees, fewer hours worked, and less need for remedial education.

While national and local data are hard to come by, we speculate that living with parents is now the least popular living option for students. Where 9-month housing availability permits, renting or sharing rented homes and apartments is undoubtedly more common and popular than it was 35 years ago. In the neighborhoods surrounding many college campuses, clusters of student residents provide the peer support and interaction of a college environment, sometimes at the expense of the permanent residents. It is likely that students share rentals with those who have common interests, e.g., an academic major, athletics, membership in student groups. It is likely that this kind of off-campus living has a less deleterious effect on retention than does living at home without college peers.

Facilities and Services

While the University may not have consciously planned to improve the lot of commuter students, positive campus changes clearly reflect the awareness that we have more commuters than residents.

- Bus shelters and improved bus service
- RIPTA student discounts
- New parking lots with an additional 2000 parking spaces
- Campus shuttle bus route
- Installation of more than 60 emergency blue light phones across campus
- Commuter dining plan
- Student Senate purchase of 2 vehicles to help students with car and parking problems
- Students renting in Narragansett participate in the Narragansett-URI Coalition and sponsored activities such as food drives, clean ups, Neighborhood Days
- Limited jurisdiction allows the University to intervene in students’ dangerous conduct off campus
- 24 hour Library study room
- Union Board and the Student Entertainment Committee make substantial efforts to conduct day time programming (see attached)
- During spring semester 2007, Commuter Cornerstones were developed
- During spring semester 2007, almost 500 students were reached in 23 residence units with a Living Large Off Campus Workshop

Services and facilities specifically for commuters include the Commuter Housing Office and the Commuter Lounge in the Memorial Union. The Commuter Housing Office provides rental property listings and roommate listings on line as well as resources for commuters. The Commuter Lounge has a refrigerator, microwave and television and is conveniently across the hall from a computer lab. Locker facilities on the first floor of the Memorial Union have not yet caught on with commuter students.

Benchmarking

URI's membership in the National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs at the University of Maryland lapsed in 2005 and has just been renewed. That membership will enhance our ability to keep informed of commuter trends in the future.

The websites of ten peer institutions were reviewed to determine which schools were similar to URI in the residence/commuter ratio and what kind of services were provided (see attached). James Madison University, the University of Virginia and the University of New Hampshire were most alike in the size of their population. Services offered were similar to URI. However, web-based housing rental services were most frequently run by outside companies. Some schools had student associations for commuters. Delaware has a preferred tenant program offering discounts to good student renters. Information from a commuter survey conducted by Indiana State University helped improve the commuter survey conducted this semester at URI.

Commuter Survey

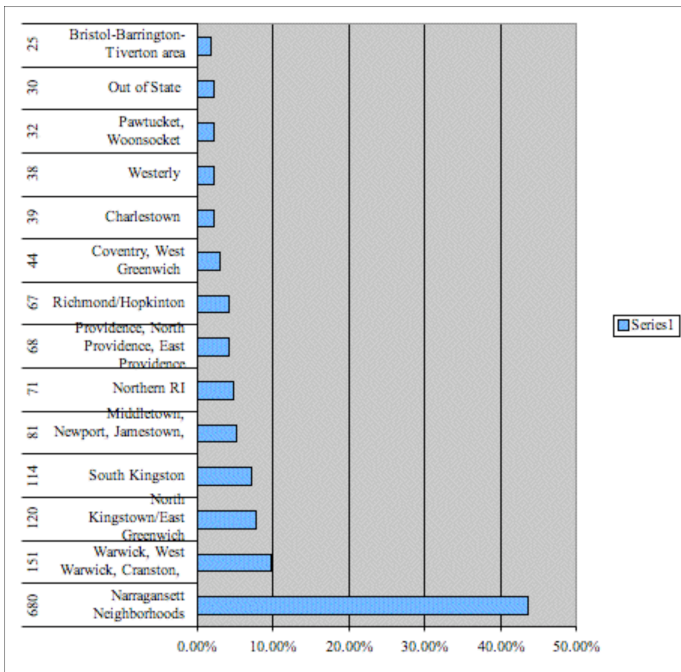
To gather current information about the URI commuter student population, a web-based Commuter Survey was conducted in April 2007. E-mail addresses for 5058 students with commuter car registrations were used to administer the Survey Monkey based questionnaire. 4918 accurate addresses yielded 1561 responses, a 32% response rate. Discussion and observations follow and the raw data are attached.

Who are the respondents?

- 25.8% of the respondents are in their first or second year
- 51.7% are upperclass students
- 20.8% are graduate students
- 85.8% were full time students
- 63.5% are female.

Where do they live?

50.4% of the respondents have lived in a residence hall on the URI campus. 48% live with friends and 50.5% live in Narragansett and South Kingstown. Below is a chart showing residency of respondents.



What about their neighbors?

59% report positive interactions with their neighbors and only 16% report negative interaction. 56% have hosted social events at their house and 65% have attended other students’ social events.

What are their habits, and service usage?

More than 84% of all respondents come to campus Mondays through Thursdays. While the percentage drops to 66.9% on Fridays, that is still a surprising commuter presence on all weekdays.

64.5% work during the academic year and the vast majority of those who work do so on weekdays. 47.3% of these students work near where their family lives. These students necessarily have less weekday time to spend on campus and or with their peer groups in their neighborhoods. 30% of respondents work 15 or fewer hours, 25% work 16-20 hours, 43% work 21 or more hours.

77.8% spend time between classes studying or hanging out at the library. 25% spend time at the Rams Den, 21% in their cars. 40% use the 24 hour room in the Library. Open ended responses reiterate these preferences with the additional mention of the Emporium (especially Bagelz), computer labs, friends’ rooms, and academic buildings that have lounge areas (Ballentine, White, FAC).

The only commuter-oriented services and facilities used by more than 15% of respondents were the Commuter Lounge study space, online rental listings, commuter meal plan, and public transportation.

Between 44% and 62% of respondents indicate they use Health Services, Counseling Center, Mackal Fitness, Intramural sports, and student organizations less than a resident.

What about their involvement with the campus?

In the course of a month, 40.4% attend 1-2 programs and activities; 46.6% attend none. 62.7% would like to attend them more often. 54.2% report their best time to do so is weekday evenings; 44.1% weekends. 62.2% want more social programming. 77.1% report they would come back for concerts at the Ryan Center and 55% would return for concerts, movies, comedy at Edwards Hall. 49.8% would come to campus to hang out with friends. 44.3% are likely to come to campus for study groups.

Respondents continue to be involved in a wide range of student organizations and activities while commuting. 670 respondents listed one or more groups when asked about their participation. The most cited category of activity was athletics followed closely by activities that focused on academic major, honors, and careers. The latter is not surprising as 3/4 of commuters responding are junior year and above. The next largest categories of involvement are campus leadership and service, music-dance-theater-entertainment and Greek activities.

Are they satisfied?

Respondents are neutral about eating facilities and the shuttle system, but 56% feel strongly that parking spaces are inadequate. 98.5% drive themselves to campus as opposed to using public transportation or car pooling. That makes parking the common issue for most respondents. In the open-ended question about services they wished URI had, 66% of respondents (470) wanted improvements in parking: better paving, more lots, parking garage, short term drop-off parking, no towing, resident parking in Keaney, different parking for graduate students, free parking.

8% wanted improvements in campus life: music, stores, concerts, events on the quad, better sport/athletics opportunities, nicer commuter lounge, weekend hang out spot, earlier meeting times for activities. 8% wanted improvements in the shuttle system: more buses running more frequently, expanded routes, posted routes and running times, night service. Just over 5% of the respondents cited the need for better communication (webpage, emails, newsletter) and/or better public transportation (park and ride from Narragansett, more buses, better routes, enclosed bus stops.)

What about safety?

51% check their smoke detectors and 78% lock their doors. Since moving off campus 69.1% report their use of alcohol has stayed the same. It has decreased for 14.6% and increased for 16.2%.

60.3% claim to update their local address on e-campus. 47.1% of those who don't say they didn't know they should. In open responses, a few students say they move too many times and prefer using their parents address or that they don't want everyone to know where they live. 48 students suggested it would be easier to update if they got a yearly e-mail reminder with a link to the update form. Other suggestions included that the update be linked to parking pass applications.

What did they wish they knew?

Open ended answers indicated 17% of respondents wish they knew how much traffic there would be and how difficult campus parking is for commuters. Other responses (less than 5% for each) indicated the need for more information about their roommates, commuting costs (gas, utilities), renters rights, unfriendly neighbors and police, questions to ask landlords and realtors, and the lack of a sense of community off campus.

The best thing about being a commuter?

32.6% talked about freedom, independence, lack of RA's and campus rules. 27.6% liked being out of residence halls (crowded, little space, noisy). Other comments included the ability to cook for themselves and choose roommates, and enjoying the separation of academic and social life.

Assessment Team Recommendations

Based on the semester's work and survey results, the assessment team offers the following recommendations.

1. Launch a campaign telling students why and how to update local address and cell phone information. Send email reminders every semester or yearly with a link to the update form. Make sure the update page is user-friendly. Assure students that addresses will not be made public.
2. Improve commuters' access to information about services and renting through improved websites.
3. Publicize availability of commuter services with yearly e-mails to students with commuter parking passes. Consider partnering with parking services to get these messages out effectively.
4. About a third of the respondents liked commuting because of freedom, independence, lack of RA's and campus rules. The Spring '07 Living Large Off Campus Workshops emphasized that there are more applicable rules and responsibilities off campus than there are on campus. It is important to continue to raise commuters' awareness of these responsibilities by publicizing the Commuter Cornerstones and offering workshops and web-based tutorials.
5. Students noted their frequent use of lounge areas in academic buildings and the Library. We need to encourage the development of student lounges in all academic buildings to increase opportunities for commuters to mingle with peers and faculty between classes.
6. Ask that Student Senate lighting reviews pay special attention to parking lot lighting.
7. Support Student Senate efforts to establish commuter parking in Narragansett and to improve local public transportation to and from campus.
8. Create an academic year position to work full time on outreach and education for URI's large commuter population.
9. Create a way for students to have effective input for the improvement of parking services and the shuttle service.
10. Continue to identify and publicize opportunities for positive student involvement in their residential neighborhoods.
11. Increase the attractiveness of the campus environment in order to strengthen and maintain commuter ties to the University community.

Summary

Today's commuters have good off-campus opportunities for socializing and gaining independent living skills. The University should work to enhance their positive engagement in the

communities in which they live. However, students who spend more than a year or two commuting to campus are also slowly separating from their alma mater. They use campus resources less. They are less likely to spend time with faculty and staff outside the classroom. Their sense of belonging, pride and loyalty shifts and changes earlier than for the student who remains on campus for three to four years. This may or may not affect retention, but it certainly does affect the quality of the University experience as well as the strength of alumni ties. The task at hand is to provide a campus environment that is vibrant enough to maintain the commuting student's link to the University community. The students surveyed indicate a willingness to return to campus for a variety of activities, including informal socializing with other students.

The city of Providence provides a handy example for envisioning a vibrant campus environment. Years ago, people living outside the city found little reason to go to Providence and seldom bothered. In its renaissance, Providence offers an attractive urban environment with rivers, bridges, parks, world class restaurants, a thriving arts culture, music, entertainment, ice skating, kayaking, shopping, all with relatively easy parking and access. There are multiple choices and venues for casually hanging out as well as for special events. The city has become a very sociable place and a source of pride for all Rhode Islanders. This is the kind of environment that will bind even commuting students to the University community.

The most glaring source of discontent among commuters is parking services. Students giving quick responses to an on-line survey came up with some good ideas (i.e., short term drop off parking) that have potential to increase convenience and reduce resentment. Students need to have a productive role in creating improvements.

Finally, we need to broaden our thinking about commuting students. Membership in the Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs will help keep us connected to best practices in the future. URI commuters live all over the state; they include undergraduate and graduate students; many remain active in the University community; they are both smart and naïve about living off campus. We need to dedicate the time and resources necessary to be sure that commuters, more than half of our student body, feel supported and connected until the day they graduate.

Respectfully submitted by the Commuter Assessment Committee, July 19, 2007
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Commuter Representative Josh Feinberg, Commuter Liaison Lori John, Fran Cohen, Chair.

To view survey results on-line, go to www.surveymonkey.com, Select member login on upper right. Login: lesliew@uri.edu Password: commuter
Select "my surveys" from gray bar at top, Select "Spring 2007 Survey of URI Commuter Students"
Select "analyze results" top left, Select "view all pages" top right under "total completed survey"