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COMPUTER STUDENTS: A CHALLENGE FOR THE FUTURE

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Today, as with many other characteristics of early American colleges and universities, the live-in experience has changed. There has been an increasing commitment to enhancing the development of the whole student, a process which takes place primarily in the residence hall setting. Alexander Astin comments on this process in his forward to Chickering's book, Communing Versus Resident Students (1974):

"Chickering's data suggest strongly that significant benefits accrue to students who go away from home to attend college."
(Chickering, 1974, p. 9).

However, an increasing percentage of students are not taking part in any type of residential program. It is estimated that between two-thirds and three-fourths of today's American college students are commuters. (Hardwick, 1974 and Schuchman, 1974) With the onslaught of non-traditional students, this number will most likely increase.

In order to be accountable to the realistic needs of students, we need to make a concerted effort to collect data which will be reflective of actual conditions. (Hardwick, 1974) Consider such factors as the widening age group attending college, the financial impact of a college education, the availability of higher education to an expanding milieu of the population.

These issues directly relate to the future of the residential college, which has historically catered to affluent, white 18 year olds. Again, Astin speaks to this point:

"...highly able and affluent students are

much likely to live in a dormitory during the college years than are the less able and less affluent students." (Chickering, 1974, p. 10)

In the sense that these "traditional" students will continue to come to college and will most likely participate and benefit from the live-in experience, we must not discount the values of such opportunities. However, we cannot ignore the increasing influx of non-traditional students, nor their need for an equally enriching total learning experience. This situation begs a shift in priorities according to factual data showing the characteristics and needs of the total student population.

In response to the needs of students, student personnel workers have stated a commitment to the concept of student development. Chickering (1969) sites seven areas of human potential which merits attention in a higher educational setting. These are: 1. Achieving competence, 2. Managing emotion, 3. Becoming autonomous, 4. Establishing identity, 5. Freeing interpersonal relationships, 6. Clarifying purposes and 7. Developing integrity. We are moving closer towards meeting these objectives for today's students through a variety of approaches. However, these seem to be centered mainly around residence hall programs.

Indeed, Chickering's findings say to us that residence halls are the optimum environment in which not only is programming most effective, but where the experiential living situation enhances a student's total development.

"While it is clearly important to know that going away from home to live in a college residence tends to produce positive educational results, it is equally important to be able to know how to structure the residential experience in order to maximize these benefits." (Chickering, 1974, p. 10)

Astin's point here is well taken. But reality tells us that it simply is not feasible to believe that we can create a traditional live-in situation for well over the majority of today's college students. It would seem logical that a representative portion of attention and resources should be focused upon accommodating the needs of the bulk of the population, as opposed to the current practice of providing only for the select few for whom it is feasible to partake of a residential experience.

Perhaps at this point it would be helpful to define our terms. Splaver defines traditional students and then goes on to say that these characteristics no longer define today's college students:

"College students are no longer the traditional, 'mostly male, white, middle-class high achievers, between the ages of 18 and 22.'" (Splaver, 1975, p. 10)

She then describes a multitude of characteristics, including ethnic minorities, older returning students (many of whom are married), students of lower socioeconomic status, early high school graduates, and students who choose an individualistic degree program entailing off-campus experiences. These non-traditional students generally tend to live off-campus for financial, cultural or other reasons related to divergent lifestyles.

Thus, the new students are not a part of the current residence hall programs. In fact, studies have shown that they have chosen the commuter lifestyle by preference. (Sedlacek, 1974) In accordance with this shift in priorities on the part of students, it would only seem logical that the university respond through a re-evaluation of its priorities and resources.

The Carnegie Commission has spoken directly to the issue of the priorities of today's higher education.

"The main direction of development in this period (near future) will be an effort to create a more diverse series of optimal learning environments to meet more precisely the needs of each person." (Hennelly, 1974, p. 135)

It must be mentioned that along with those who choose an alternate style of education also comes that increasing number of students to whom higher education is just beginning to open its doors. These students tend to have a history of low achievement and low socioeconomic status. There were opportunity to attend classes is a big step for them. Residential living is out of the question for a variety of reasons, including financial and family pressures.

"...the family's SES is significantly related to the decision to be a resident student or a commuting student. Students whose fathers were engaged in a professional-managerial occupation were more likely to attend school away from home." (George, 1971, p. 219)

Yet, should these economically less fortunate students be denied that great dream of "total development"? Indeed, they seem to be in a position of extreme pressure to mature quickly in order to meet the demands of the "real world" in which they (unlike many traditional residential students) immediately find themselves. In this sense, their earlier exposure to life's hardships contributes to a completely different, but a type of growth that is just as real. They will learn early to manage their money, smooth out family conflicts and juggle their school and work schedules. (Schuchman, 1974) In keeping with our commitment to facilitate student development, it would follow that we should concern ourselves with those areas of development for which commuting students have particular need.

In order to determine and meet these needs, and to assure equitable allocation of resources, the issue of commuter student representation needs to be explored. Previously, student involvement was a product of the effect that residential life had on the student's perception of his/her involvement in the university. Now there is an increasing need for student personnel workers to encourage the process of involvement for those living off-campus who may desire to take part in administrative decision making, but reluctant or ignorant of the opportunities. Most commuters feel they are second class citizens when compared with the staffing and funding that go towards enhancing the lives of their residential counterparts.

A review of the pitifully sparse and superficial literature on commuter students reveals a lack of serious thought given to their needs and importance in the educational community. Chickering seems to have produced the only serious, in-depth work on the subject. He even comments on this fact:

"No systematically organized body of research and theory directly addresses the commuting student.... Most of the references...report more general research and theory concerning college influences on student development and the dynamics by which such influences occur." (Chickering, 1974, p. 137)

The attitude is generally one that points out the deficits of such a lifestyle in relation to residential living, with very few positive or realistic suggestions.

The belief that the solution will be achieved through some quick revamping or adding on to current structures is clearly indicative of the naiveté of the researchers in this area. The following statement represents an effort to dispel

the myth that we have been harboring under for too long:

"Too many universities are assuming without verification that commuter student needs are being met by existing services and facilities." (Hardwick, 1974, p. 225)

It is just beginning to be acknowledged that installing a few lockers in the union is a completely insufficient response to the diverse lifestyles of today's American college students.

A more careful look may tell us that, in return for a commitment to recognizing and enhancing the lifestyles and experiences of our commuter students, we may just find a wealth of variety, enthusiasm and character which our commuter population has to offer to the higher education community. This newly found treasure is waiting to be cultivated by those of us who have the resources through which to channel the expression of ideas in an institution created just for that purpose.

"Diversity among institutions and within them should be a major goal of higher education, and one test of institutions... should be how successful they have been in defining their special characters and how successful they are in defining them." (Hennelly, 1974, p. 130)

Perhaps instead of concluding that commuters are the less fortunate group, we need to change our focus a bit. There exists some very unique aspects of the commuter lifestyle which could be enhanced through increasing the availability of opportunities for total development of the college student. For example, through the off-campus cooperative housing alternatives which are being instituted, students live in an atmosphere which encourages responsibility and cooperation. Students choosing to reside in apartments with fellow

classmates are stepping even further into "real world" experiences as they battle landlords, bills, transportation, meal preparation and general self-sufficiency. Commuters also tend to have a greater sense of individuality in the intimate living situation of a family or just a few peers, as opposed to living in residence halls designed to house and feed en masse. In addition, while some refer to the commuter schedule as fragmented, the amount of diversity and variation in daily experiences through work and/or community involvement may result in very positive growth experiences.

The discussion of solutions such as those briefly touched on above, is one which so far has yielded a comparatively small number of active responses by student personnel workers. A few campuses have instituted actual commuter student programs specifically designed to facilitate and enhance the development of these students. These programs are generally set up to meet the student half-way by offering night programs in the community in which they live, with topics relating to their needs, or topics designed to pull them in closer to the university community. Other campuses have begun to show their awareness and concern through the delivery of services germane to commuter needs.

For many institutions however, the first step would be to acknowledge a commitment to the existence of a need for action. The overt recognition of commuters as being a distinct, yet equally deserving population of university resources would be a big step for the majority of U.S. campuses. Such recognition clearly depends on the type of institution. Perhaps the greatest response to commuters has already occurred in the community college setting, where residence halls generally do not exist. But, there is a lack of acknowledgement of those people who desire the benefits of a university setting without the commitment to a residential experience. This is true for both public and private universities. Within these

institutions, the area in which commuters are most likely to find a refuge is the continuing education program. The very nature of such programs attracts commuters almost exclusively. Therefore, within the continuing education program's realm of services, the commuter lifestyle is recognized and sought to be enhanced.

In conclusion, it cannot be emphasized enough that the commuter lifestyle will become the lifestyle of an increasing majority of tomorrow's students in higher education. It must become a priority of student personnel workers to apply their expertise and resources to insure that commuter students receive all the benefits which the institution offers, and are challenged to their full potential as students and as human beings.

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