Theory helps us understand commuter students and develop environments, policies, and practices that enhance their educational experience.

Enhancing Commuter Student Success: What’s Theory Got to Do With It?

Barbara Jacoby

There is nothing so practical as a good theory.
(Lewin, 1951, p. 169)

Although theories and models cannot capture the complexity of human beings or environments, they can serve as lenses that bring relationships and situations into sharper focus. I have long held and acted upon the belief that educators make better decisions when we use relevant theories, models, and frameworks to guide our practice. McEwen (2003) noted, “Theory is used to describe human behavior, to explain, predict, and to generate new knowledge, [practices], and research” (p. 166). The use of theory to inform practice is the foundation of best practice in the work of student affairs educators. In Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience, the authors concluded that:

student affairs preparation must be broad-based, interdisciplinary, grounded in theory, and designed to prepare forward-thinking, confident, and competent educators who will see the big picture and work effectively with other institutional agents to ensure that colleges and universities become learning communities in which students develop the skills they need to enter the rapidly changing world in which we now live. (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004, p. 32)

Theory also informs research that can answer questions about why certain effects occur in particular situations and the conditions under which they do and do not occur.

This chapter is based on the premise that theory and high-quality, intentional practice are inextricably bound. The theories, models, and
frameworks it describes range from classic to contemporary and include those useful in understanding commuter students, institutional environments, and the nature of interactions between them.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow’s (1982) hierarchy of needs provides a time-honored framework for understanding the experience of commuter students both on and off the campus. Maslow conceptualized human needs as a pyramid, with the most basic physiological needs such as food, water, shelter, and sleep at the bottom. Needs progress to those involving safety and security and then on to more social and psychological needs, including love, friendship, and self-esteem. At the top of the pyramid is self-actualization, which Maslow defined as fulfilling one’s potential. According to Maslow, an individual cannot attend to higher-level needs when the basic needs are not met.

Because of their various life situations, commuter students are often preoccupied with satisfying their lower-level needs. As a result, it is essential that institutions provide services to meet their basic needs for housing, transportation, security, food, health care, and child care. A student who has not found satisfactory living or transportation arrangements simply cannot focus sufficiently on learning or achieving educational goals. Moving up the pyramid, all students need to feel a sense of inclusion and belonging to the campus community. Before commuter students can take full advantage of the institution’s myriad opportunities to achieve self-actualization, their need for self-esteem must be met: “A student who feels like a second-class citizen would most likely not seek out within the campus community the kinds of risk-taking experiences that lead to deep learning and personal growth” (Jacoby, 2000, p. 9).

**Mattering and Marginality**

The concept of mattering is closely related to the needs for belonging and esteem in Maslow’s (1982) hierarchy. Mattering is defined as “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, [and] are concerned about our fate” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164). Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) applied the concept of mattering to higher education environments by examining to what extent policies, practices, and classroom experiences were designed to make adult students feel that they matter. They believe that the value of every policy and practice should be based on how much it facilitates or contributes to the success of adult students at the institution. This concept can and should be broadened to include all commuter students.

Schlossberg (1985) identified the concept of marginality as the polar opposite of mattering. Commuter students have been, and have felt,
marginal on college campuses since they first participated in American higher education (Jacoby, 1989). Although feeling marginal during one's transition to a new environment is expected, institutional policies and practices should make all students feel that they matter, that they are central rather than marginal.

**Transition Theory**

According to Schlossberg (2008), a transition is any event or nonevent that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. For some college students, their transitions are apparent, traditional, and clearly marked, such as when a first-time college student leaves home and moves into a residence hall to begin a new life on campus. For commuter students, as well as for their family and friends, their transitions are often perceived as nonevents, such as when a fully employed adult begins taking courses part-time at the nearby community college while keeping the other aspects of her life basically intact. Similarly, commuter students of traditional age, generally considered to be 18 to 22, beginning college full-time while living at home, continuing to work at the job they held during high school, eating dinner with the family, and hanging out with high school friends may feel that they are not really experiencing a transition. Students transferring from community colleges to 4-year institutions (and perhaps back again) and those who alternate semesters of part- and full-time enrollment may also perceive these transitions as nonevents.

However, many students returning to college after a break in their education do so because of a life transition. Examples include employed individuals seeking advancement, unemployed individuals trying to acquire skills to enter a changing work environment, stay-at-home parents whose children are in school or are grown, divorcees, and those who have lost a spouse or family member. The essence of transition theory is that regardless of whether students realize they are in transition, transitions that are both events and nonevents are challenging. They can be quite troubling and distract students from putting sufficient time and concentration into their schoolwork. It is incumbent upon colleges to recognize these transitions, educate faculty and staff members about them, and provide appropriate supports.

Schlossberg et al. (1989) also identified college and life challenges that commuter students are likely to experience in the process of moving in, moving through, and moving on. As far as moving in is concerned, they noted that commuter students finding their way into (or back into) college may struggle with figuring out how things work, what are the many opportunities available to them, and how to make college part of their already busy lives. Many commuter students find that they feel like strangers in a new world, fear that they are not in control of their lives, and lack
confidence in their ability to meet their professors’ expectations. Students who feel marginal are also less likely to engage in the types of college experiences that lead to educational success (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

Issues for commuter students moving through college include balancing competing demands, managing stressors, mastering skills, building self-esteem, and handling the academic and life transitions that are certain to occur along the way. The reality of moving through for many commuter students is that, regardless of their desire and dedication to graduate, they may need to stop out as a result of family or financial priorities. As students approach the transition out of college (moving on), new uncertainties and challenges arise. Among these are conflicting feelings about whether the hard work and sacrifices were worth it and whether the degree will really pay off in terms of getting a job or promotion. Schlossberg et al. (1989) urged institutions to put transition theory, together with others described in this chapter, into practice by developing a concerted, integrated set of strategies to enhance commuter student success in terms of moving in, moving through, and moving on.

### Student Engagement

A substantial body of research clearly indicates that the more time and effort students invest in their learning and the more intensely they engage in their education overall, the greater the likelihood that they will achieve their college goals and be satisfied with their college experience. In this vein, student engagement includes activities that have been traditionally associated with learning, like reading, writing, and preparing for class, as well as others that have more recently emerged as being important high-impact educational practices. These high-impact practices include common intellectual experiences, collaborative projects, undergraduate research, service learning, internships, and global, diversity-rich experiences. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) explained that student engagement is fundamentally based on two critical features:

The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. . . . The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation. (p. 44)

There is also a large volume of empirical evidence confirming that it is indeed a worthwhile endeavor to develop and implement strategies to increase the engagement of student populations for whom engagement is known to be problematic, including commuter students (Harper & Quaye, 2015).
Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer (2001), in an analysis of data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), compared levels of engagement of on-campus residents, walking commuters, and driving commuters. Although some of the differences were relatively small, the researchers found that both first-year students and seniors who lived on campus scored higher on all the benchmarks of effective educational practice than commuters who lived near or farther from the campus. Some of the largest differences were in interactions with faculty members and enriching educational experiences, including complementary learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, experiencing diversity, and opportunities to synthesize and apply knowledge. Results also indicated that, although many commuter students’ time was limited by work and family matters, they put forth just as much effort as resident students in areas that related directly to the classroom (Kuh et al., 2001).

**Student Development**

Human development is essentially a redefining of the self in more complex and distinct ways, while at the same time putting all the parts together in an integrated fashion. Two conditions must exist for development to occur: readiness of the individual and stimuli that sufficiently challenge the individual to upset his or her psychological equilibrium (Sanford, 1962, 1967). Several families of student development theories inform the design of educational environments and interventions.

*Cognitive–structural development* theories are helpful in understanding how students think—the process of their thinking, rather than the content. Within this group of theories fall intellectual development, moral and ethical development, gender-based patterns of thinking, and spiritual development. *Psychosocial development* refers to the content of students’ development. It focuses on the various issues and developmental tasks that students grapple with during college. Career development and adult development theories fall into this category. Applicable to students of all ages, theories of career development address self-concept and career choice, person–environment interactions, and self-efficacy and outcome expectations related to career goals. *Social identity development* theories address how students understand the multiple aspects of their own identity, including race, ethnicity, social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. They also describe how students think about their specific identities and how they understand the intersection of these identities.

Readers who would like to delve more deeply into student development theories in consideration of their application to the experience of commuter students should consult *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd edition (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Integrative developmental frameworks such as Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of *self-authorship* are particularly useful in understanding...
the developmental journeys of traditional-age college students. The journey toward self-authorship involves movement from external to internal self-definition. Although the students in Baxter Magolda’s studies were of traditional college age, the tasks and phases of the path to self-authorship are also applicable to students of all ages, including commuter students (Evans et al., 2010).

In Phase 1: Following formulas, young adults generally follow the plans that external authorities have laid out for them, although they may frame these plans to sound as if they are their own. They tend to allow others to define who they are. Sources of external formulas include parents and other adults with whom they interact, peers, and what they view as societal expectations. Phase 2: Crossroads involves students discovering that the plans and formulas they have followed do not work well enough and that they need to develop new plans that better suit them. They become dissatisfied with how others have defined them and see that they need to create their own sense of self. Students at Phase 3: Becoming the author of one’s life begin to choose their own beliefs and establish their own plans. They become increasingly able to stand up for their beliefs in the face of conflicting external viewpoints and pressures. They are also aware that belief systems can change, that these systems are contextual, and that they are never as clear and certain as one might wish. For Baxter Magolda, young adults (I would add older adults as well) who successfully negotiate Phase 4: Internal foundation are solidly grounded in their self-determined belief system and in their sense of who they are, and yet accept ambiguity and are open to change. Although they are aware of external influences, they trust their own feelings and make thoughtful and rational decisions based on them (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Evans et al., 2010).

This theory suggests that we view students as capable participants in their own journey to self-authorship, provide direction and practice in establishing internal authority, help students find and engage in opportunities to define their own beliefs and sense of self, develop a community among their peers, and support them in their struggle to advance from their older, simpler perspectives to newer, more complex ones. There are important implications for supporting the development of commuter students in many aspects of environmental design, formation of policies, teaching, student affairs practice, and academic and career advising.

Environmental Models

The social and environmental milieux of institutions of higher education affect student learning for better or for worse (Jacoby, 2000). Environments may nourish, stimulate, support, and challenge individuals to learn and grow. On the other hand, individuals may perceive environments as unwelcoming, intimidating, or threatening, causing withdrawal and reducing the
likelihood that learning and growth will occur (Newton & Smith, 1996). The nature and effects of human environments can be viewed as four basic models (Strange, 1991). The physical model involves the natural and constructed features of the environment, including buildings, furnishings, equipment, technology, landscape, and other physical resources that either encourage or constrain human engagement. The human aggregate model comprises the collective characteristics of the people who inhabit the space. It includes customs, social norms, reputation, traditions, and demographics. The organizational model reflects the purposes, goals, and priorities that enhance or inhibit positive interactions with the environment. Finally, the perceptual model addresses the fact that a critical element of how individuals experience an environment is their subjective interpretation of that environment and their relationship to it. Factors that contribute to subjective interpretation of an environment include assumptions, expectations, and prior experiences.

Each of these environmental models influences the ability of commuter students to transition and function successfully. Commuter students often feel that institutional environments offer too little in the way of accommodation of their needs. Physical facilities, class schedules, and campus life are still frequently designed to suit traditional-age, full-time, often residential students. Additionally, other environmental factors may not engender commuter students’ feelings of belonging and mattering.

Astin’s (1985) influential work clearly demonstrates that the effectiveness of all educational policies and practices, certainly including environmental factors, is directly related to their capacity to increase and sustain student engagement. The reality is, however, that most commuter students cannot become involved in the ways that traditional-aged, full-time, residential students can. Nevertheless, we can and must create and promote opportunities for commuter students that enhance their engagement in ways that meet their needs and accommodate their lifestyles. Rather than expecting commuter students to adjust their lifestyles and schedules, higher education institutions must design curricular and cocurricular environments and experiences that intentionally engage commuter students deeply in learning and encourage their success.

**Ackell’s Model of Institutional Integration**

If an institution really wanted to provide an optimum educational environment for commuter student engagement and success, what would it look like? Considerable change would be necessary to create such an environment. Ackell (1986) described the process of institutional adaptation to the presence of adult students in three progressive developmental stages. As Schlossberg et al.’s (1989) application of the concept of mattering to adult students can be effectively broadened to address all commuter students,
Ackell’s developmental stages apply equally well to the process of institutional adaptation to the presence and success of the broader commuter student population (Jacoby, 1989).

**Stage 1: The “Laissez-Faire” Stage.** Institutions in this stage simply remove obvious barriers or constraints and permit students to do the best they can within a system that works neither for nor against them. Students are allowed to be as entrepreneurial and aggressive as they like in dealing with the institution, but no organized or official administrative intervention is offered on their behalf. The operating assumption is that variables such as age, residence, and attendance status are not significant. It is not known whether some students leave the institution at a higher rate than others or whether some are less successful or satisfied with their experiences (Ackell, 1986; Jacoby, 1989).

**Stage 2: The “Separatist” Stage.** In this stage, certain groups of students (for example, commuters on a residential campus, part-time students when most attend full-time) are viewed as essentially separate from the majority of the student body. Some separate, specific programs and services are offered for them, but these programs and services have lower institutional priority and status than traditional ones. In this stage, commuter students are clearly marginalized. It could even be argued that they are subject to a subtle form of economic exploitation, as the institution expects them to manage with substantially less support than is appropriated for programs and services for mainstream students. Marginalized student populations are consistently less satisfied and successful and leave the institution at a higher rate (Ackell, 1986; Jacoby, 1989).

**Stage 3: The “Equity” Stage.** Equity, according to Ackell (1986), is an “active use of the principles of justice and fairness to correct inequities in a system that de facto discriminates against one group in favor of another” (p. 3). An institution that has begun to evolve toward the final or equity stage takes concrete steps toward treating all students fairly and providing the same quality experience for all. It is probable that no institution at the fully developed equity stage exists today, but some institutions have moved sufficiently beyond the separatist stage that some of the characteristics of a full equity institution can be discerned. Few differences among student groups regarding degree attainment and satisfaction with the college experience would be expected (Ackell, 1986; Jacoby, 1989).

**Conclusion**

As commuter students continue to become more diverse and attend an increasingly wide variety of institutions, educators, administrators, and policy makers must develop a thorough understanding of their needs, relevant theoretical frameworks, and strategies to increase their persistence and engage them deeply and productively in learning. This chapter has provided
an overview of a variety of theories, frameworks, and models that are useful in creating environments, cultures, and structures that intentionally enable commuter students to attain their educational goals. The following chapters in this volume offer valuable perspectives and strategies, grounded in some of the theories reviewed in this chapter, that foster the success of commuter students.

References


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