

## **Drive a Mile in Their Car: Reflections on Working with Commuter Students**

Brittany Scancarella | Massachusetts Institute of Technology | @bnsncarella

There are dozens of quotes out there about what it means to “walk a mile in someone else’s shoes.” What I learned in my graduate work at Bridgewater State University was we actually do walk that mile more often than we think – the perception of our experience is really what draws our daily life to mirror that of those who we serve.

I completed my undergraduate education at the University of Vermont in 2011. I walked across the commencement stage a traditional aged college graduate who’d had a traditional experience. I lived on or near campus for the expected four years of my studies. As an out of state student, my parents had the storybook experience of moving their baby girl into her residence hall and leaving her behind in a foreign state. I attended classes during the day and participated in on campus activities in the evening hours. I made friends who I could see essentially whenever I wanted – we were all in the same place constantly, and griped about walking uphill in the snowstorms that would occur and not shut down the stoic university. Everything between the day I moved in and commencement revolved around a college experience that, more or less, was expected.

So in the winter of 2014, when Boston and the surrounding areas were being walloped with the major snowstorms I had thought I left in Vermont, I worried about how I’d get myself and my little compact sedan 45 minutes south to Bridgewater State University. I worried about how I’d get home if an oncoming snowstorm was, indeed, as bad as the weather was reporting. I worried about having to make a choice between attending my night classes and driving home safely in what was left of the daylight. This was a new sensation, and a really eye opening moment for me as a new professional. While this particular memory highlights the very specific concern of transportation, reflecting on it today makes me realize the ways commuter students have to plan meticulously in order to not only graduate from college, but experience it.

That winter was a real challenge in the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership, where I worked as the Graduate Assistant for Fraternity and Sorority Life. As a campus with approximately 60% of its student body registered as a commuter student, snow was a major factor in our planning. At Bridgewater, everything was scheduled weeks in advance. Panhellenic, Interfraternity Council, and Student Government meetings were held at a standing time each week in the early evening hours. These constants allowed the students to arrange their lives around their involvement and academic experiences, if they chose to do so. So when snowstorms hit nearly every Monday and Tuesday for over a month straight, shutting down the university and cancelling evening events, the card houses that were their schedules started to crumble.

It wasn't uncommon for one of my students to attend classes, be involved in at least one (but more likely two) student activities, and work at least one part time job. The most competitive positions on campus were those that paid: Orientation Leaders, Student Program Advisor, Building Manager. The availability of these roles were split between positions designated for work study/non work study

students. One of the hardest issues our office faced was the disappointment to know we couldn't hire every excellent candidate because of these limitations. We had to get creative in the ways we got those students involved and connected, knowing there had to be some other payoff so their time would not only be worthwhile for their development, but their needs. I won't lie, sometimes this was mutually beneficial – a practicum or internship created with the blessing of faculty to get additional work done surrounding a large campus program and connect a student leader with our office wasn't unheard of, but it had rewards for everyone involved. Students were able to gain additional benefits from their leadership work, our office was able to accommodate more students with the alternative staffing we were encouraged to try, and faculty were able to see how impactful our work was through an intensive lens focused on the student's work.

On the commuter campus, I learned flexibility was a naughty word. When a meeting or event gets rescheduled, particularly last minute, it could really impact the success of that program and the students' ability to enjoy and experience it. Events were most successful when planned well in advance and publicized through all channels early and often. Thursday and Friday nights were the least favored – students would head home for the weekend and motivation to drive back to campus was low. If possible, having the event right after the last classes of the day was the closest you could get to guaranteeing good turnout. The most successful way our office could impact the student experience was to keep our events and experiences as close to the academic schedule so students could easily fold it into their primary reason for coming to campus.

Panhellenic primary recruitment serves as an excellent microcosm of some of the concerns that arise with the commuter student. Because of the setup of recruitment, it is an intense time commitment over the course of a few days – something we may overlook when scheduling. For a small Panhellenic community like Bridgewater's, recruitment can easily be completed in a weekend over the course of two and a half days. Relative to other Panhellenic communities, one might think this is hardly a significant time commitment, but the strain of losing a full weekend to a campus program impacts the students greatly. Giving up a weekend's worth of work could be really challenging for a student, or it could severely cut into the time they put away for their studies during the week.

Moreover, no matter how many weeks in advance the women knew the dates they were expected to attend, there were always conflicts; nevermind the added challenge of encouraging students to participate if they lived off campus or far away. On a deferred recruitment campus in Massachusetts, where there is always the possibility of snow, everyone holds their breath that a last minute cancellation and reschedule won't be necessary. Following recruitment, a survey revealed there was no one consensus on the best way for scheduling to occur: some students hoped for a schedule that broke recruitment up over the course of two weekends, some wanted weeknight activities but feared the late hours that would come with it, and some wanted to keep the structure the way it was. When students juggle so many varied responsibilities alongside academics and travel to and from a campus, the structure we often take for granted are challenged and we are forced to think about what, and who, will be impacted when we make changes.

So what did I learn from my experience? Awareness, and the intent to create an environment where commuter students can participate without being made to feel separate or different, is key. As an office or department, identifying the best times for students on your campus and being sure the key events you are hosting or looking to host get first preference to those slots, will ensure you are creating an environment where the whole community can get involved. Think about the ways your students' needs can be met simultaneously. Do you have a great involvement opportunity that can be reconfigured to become an on campus part time job? What about working with your faculty to offer practicums through your office designed around involvement and leadership?

Above all, have sensitivity and empathy. Stop and think about how a component of your day would be impacted if you had another job to run to, homework waiting at home, and a meeting after your last class. If you commute to your place of work, think about how the traffic impacts you, and consider how it might impact your students. You'd be surprised how these moments of realization help you relate to the student body and think differently about the way in which you plan for your year.