ACADEMIC LIBRARIES FOR COMMUTER STUDENTS

Research-Based Strategies

EDITED BY
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MAURA A. SMALE and
MARIANA REGALADO

1
Situating Commuter Undergraduates

It's a crisp fall morning as a New York City College of Technology student leaves her apartment in the Bronx to head to class in Brooklyn. Her commute takes nearly two hours and includes a short leg on the bus and a longer leg on the subway; while the morning rush hour can be crowded, she gets on the subway early enough in its route that she can usually get a seat. Some days she spends the commute just listening to music or reading for fun, though other days she'll review schoolwork on her smartphone, reading a screenshot she took of online course materials so she has access to them while the subway is underground.

Meanwhile, in North Carolina, a UNC Charlotte student gets ready to drive to campus for the day. Her commute takes about forty-five minutes door to door, and she parks on campus because she has paid the parking permit fee for the semester. Even with a permit the parking options on campus vary, and parking in part shapes the structure of her days. If she gets a parking place on the outskirts of campus, she'll sometimes use her long break between classes to run errands, but if she ends up with a good parking spot she tends to stay on campus for the day, studying in the library between classes.

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Later that day, across the country in northern California, a Modesto Junior College student heads to work. He drives to commute between his work, school, home, and other responsibilities. While his commute isn't long, he makes the most of his time in the car by listening to audio recordings of his course readings while he drives, though he admits that this multitasking can be somewhat distracting. He fits in studying and homework when and where he can: at work during slow times, at the college library during class breaks (which he prefers for its distraction-free environment), and at home in the evenings after the library is closed.

■■■

Like these three undergraduates, the majority of American college students are commuters. While undergraduates who commute to campus are as diverse in their demographics as all college students, there are a number of important considerations specific to living off campus and commuting to school. Most notably, commuter students are much more likely than residential students to have responsibilities apart from their roles on campus. These responsibilities may be as basic as cooking their own meals, but they are also likely to include working full- or part-time, child care, family or community obligations, and more. Students who live off campus often must negotiate living spaces with family, roommates, or others outside of the learning institution. Moreover, the mode of each student's commute may deeply impact her days, and possibly involve a considerable time commitment. Yet, despite the large numbers of commuter students in the United States, and the complexities of their lives, there is a need for research and publications on the "overlooked majority" of commuter college students (Biddix 2015; Dugan et al. 2008), and, specifically, on how academic libraries serve this population.

In this volume we bring together studies undertaken by librarians and researchers at community and baccalaureate colleges and universities from locations across the United States, covering commuter institutions and those with both commuter and residential populations. Each chapter is a case study of research on serving commuter students at a particular institution, encompassing a detailed description of the research methods used, analysis of what was learned during the research, and specific interventions or changes made in library services, resources, or facilities as a result. Taking into account the lived experiences of commuter students at our institutions can enable librarians to design and develop services, resources, and facilities to best meet the needs of these students.

DEFINING UNDERGRADUATE COMMUTER STUDENTS

Contrary to the popular view of "traditional" college students—those who are between 18 and 24 years old and who live in dormitories or residence halls on

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their college or university campus—the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that close to 87 percent of students at U.S. colleges and universities are commuters (NCES 2012). Yet, while most students commute, they have not been the focus of research studies to the same degree as have "traditional" students. There is no single definition of commuter college students; rather, the broad category of "commuter" incorporates a wide range of attributes and many nuances, as the case studies in this volume explore.

The NCES subdivides the commuter student population into those who live off campus with their parents, just under 37 percent, and those who live off campus but not with their parents—about 50 percent of all undergraduates (NCES 2012). However, these categories do not encompass all of the potential variation in commuter students' living arrangements. Students may live in campus housing for their first year before moving to housing that is not owned by the university, though remaining close to campus. Others may live in residence halls that are owned by the institution but are far enough away from the main areas of campus to require a commute by car or bus. Students who live off campus may live with roommates or with extended family. For the purposes of this discussion, commuters are students who do not live in college-provided housing on campus, for them, "home" is a place independent from the institution, no matter what their physical distance from the institution is.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) further differentiates between commuters who walk to campus and those who drive (Jacoby 2015a, 290). Yet this distinction does not take into account differences in commuting to colleges in urban, suburban, and rural areas, including transit times. In urban areas, where more American undergraduates attend college than in all suburban and rural areas combined (Florida 2016), reliance on public transportation may supersede the distinction between walking or driving to campus (Clark 2006, 3). Suburban students or those on physically large campuses may also rely on intra-campus or public buses, especially if they cannot afford to drive; other transportation options include carpooling, car-sharing, or bicycling. Intriguingly, recent research suggests that many students do not consider those who live close enough to campus to walk there to fit into the category of "commuters" (Badger 2014). The cost and reliability of transportation can seriously affect students' opportunities to participate in their academic commitments (Jacoby 2015a, 292). Indeed, understanding students' commutes is highly relevant to their experiences in our institutions (Clark 2006; Delcore, Mullooly, and Scroggins 2009).

Adding further to this complexity, commuter students are typically found to share at least some of the characteristics of nontraditional college students (Jacoby 2015a, 290; Newbold, Mehta, and Forbus 2011), who are defined as

> being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time. (NCES 2015, 1)

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While there is overlap between the categories of commuter and nontraditional students, considering them as coterminous elides their distinctions. For example, most students work for pay at some point in college, though not all students work full-time (Alfano and Eduljee 2013). Furthermore, students at predominantly or solely commuter institutions may share a majority of characteristics with their "traditional" peers at residential campuses, such as age (18–24), work status (part-time or not at all), and enrollment status (full-time).

However, many commuter students have responsibilities outside of their academic work, sometimes quite significant and time-consuming ones (Burlison 2015; Perna 2010). They may work part-time or full-time, and it is likely that their jobs are off campus. They may care for children, siblings, parents, or other family members. Commuters who remain in their homes and communities are more likely to retain involvement in nonacademic activities in these locations, such as participating in religious communities, volunteer work, or other community commitments. These activities are often valued by students, but may constrain their time available for on-campus commitments beyond their coursework.

Institutions with a majority of residential students may not be as welcoming to their commuter students, since "facilities, class schedules, and campus life are still frequently designed to suit traditional-age, full-time, often residential students" (Jacoby 2015b, 9). Even those colleges and universities in which most or all students commute may lack accommodations that could benefit commuter students specifically; for example, clustering required courses to reduce the number of days on which students must come to campus, or offering facilities and services specifically for students who cannot return to their homes during the school day or who are primarily on campus on evenings and weekends. Considering support networks for commuter students—both on campus and in students' lives outside of the institution—as well as advisement and orientation for commuter students can help ameliorate their marginality (Jacoby and Garland 2004). While the chapters in this volume explore the ways in which academic libraries can support commuter students, it is useful to consider previous case studies on the commuter student experience.

RESEARCH ON THE COMMUTER STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Since commuters are such a large percentage of college students overall, examining research on them can add context to inform our understanding of the spaces, resources, instruction, and other services that academic libraries provide. Much published research has focused on commuters who are in the minority of students enrolled at predominantly residential institutions. Overall, literature on the experiences of commuter undergraduates is primarily concerned with discussion of student engagement and academic success.

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Student Engagement and Academic Success

Student engagement has been shown to positively impact the standard measures of student success, including grade point average (GPA), year-to-year retention rate (also referred to as academic persistence), and graduation rate. As defined by the NSSE, student engagement includes both "the amount of time and effort" students spend on academics as well as "how the institution deploys its resources" to provide students with opportunities "to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning" (NSSE 2017).

Nearly two decades ago, Jacoby (2000b, 4) expressed concern about commuter students' involvement in their education, since "uninvolved students tend to not study enough, spend little time on campus, not be involved in student life, and have few contacts with faculty and fellow students." She further suggested that, despite educational goals that "are just as high as those of residential students," commuters "simply cannot always make education their primary focus" (5). Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer (2001, 1) reiterated that commuters are less involved in college life than residential students "who go away to college," and that commuters are "distracted by too many competing demands on their time because of work or family commitments." Using NSSE data, these authors concluded that "residential students were more engaged in effective educational practices and—in all likelihood—were benefiting more from their college experience" than were commuter students (6).

While Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer (2001, 9) acknowledged that "the effect sizes are relatively small" in their research, the sense of commuter students as a population of concern within undergraduate institutions persists. While commuter students clearly have different attributes and needs than their residential peers, the continued framing of commuter students as a problem in need of fixing has permeated much research in the past two decades, despite many changes in higher education during that time. More recent research has begun to complicate and extend the picture of commuter students' experiences.

A survey of students at a private college with a mixed commuter and residential population found that participation in extracurricular activities was lower for commuters than for residential students, and more commuters than residential students wished they were more connected with campus life, though some residential students wished for more connection as well (Alfano and Eduljee 2013). Institutional research at a large, predominantly commuter university revealed that in-state and Hispanic students were more likely to be commuters, while black students and those of higher socioeconomic status were more likely to be residential. However, no significant difference was found for GPA and other academic success measures between commuter and residential students (Gianoutsos and Rosser 2014). Researchers who examined NCES data have also found that commuting had no significant effect on student persistence from the first to second year (Ishitani and Reid 2015, 22).

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Finally, a survey at a large university examined commuters and distance traveled and found no evidence that living farther away from campus impacted students' GPA (Nelson et al. 2016).

A 2016 study using NSSE data to specifically examine living environments and student engagement significantly updates our understanding of the commuter student experience (Gonyea, Hurtado, and Graham 2017). This research found "subdued" effects of students' living environment on a range of measures. While there was a positive effect for residential students on retention and graduation, there were negative effects on residential students' psychological well-being in the first year especially, and inconclusive effects on cognitive outcomes, diversity attitudes, and academic self-concept. The researchers posit that commuter students in general are more engaged than in the past, and note that previous research did not account for the nuances between residential and commuter student experiences. They concluded by asserting that if "institutions have made headway in integrating off campus students into the academic and social community, then the benefits of living on campus have not declined, rather the ill-effects of living off campus have been attenuated" (21).

Student Identity and Multiple Life Roles

Several studies have examined identity in commuter undergraduates. A qualitative study by Clark (2005) at an urban commuter college highlighted students' inexperience with their roles as college students. This unfamiliarity prevented students from strategizing effectively; she suggested that "common experiences" and a focus on finding time and space to study can be effective ways to help students be successful. A survey of commuter students at a university with a mixed commuter and residential population disclosed that commuters were more likely to be nontraditional students, worked more hours than residential students, and were less likely to participate in campus activities than residential students, confirming prior research (Newbold, Mehta, and Forbus 2011, 149). Results from a focus group and survey at a university with both residential and commuter students focused on "the sources of [commuter students'] stress with college life and the coping strategies they employ" (Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta 2010). They found that while commuter students did report more stress, they had developed more effective strategies to deal with stress than had residential students.

A focus on commuter students' identities and multiple life roles includes several studies that specifically examined aspects of student engagement. Research using NSSE results found higher engagement levels for black students at an urban commuter university who were involved in Greek organizations, interacted often with faculty, and participated in cocurricular activities (Yearwood and Jones 2012). Studies at a private college and urban public

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university with mixed residential and commuter enrollment explored living situations and family commitments that commuter students may have in addition to their required coursework. Findings revealed that students perceive the support and understanding of their families to be important to their success, though a lack of family adaptation to a student's academic role could be a challenge (Burlison 2015, 30; see also Badger 2014). A survey of freshman student adjustment at an urban commuter college also had mixed results: student athletes found it easier to adjust to the social component of college, while women had an easier time adjusting to the academics of college than men (Melendez 2016).

Research on faculty perceptions of the experience of commuter students is also relevant to the study of commuter students' experiences. Focus group research conducted with faculty at two commuter universities and a community college suggested that faculty understood that working commuter students have multiple life roles (Ziskin, Zerquera, and Torres 2010, 11), realized the many challenges of working students, and knew about student strategies and their lives (Zerquera, Ziskin, and Torres 2016). Interviews conducted with faculty at several urban commuter colleges revealed similar insights (Smale and Regalado 2014). Interestingly, while faculty acknowledge that students "compartmentalize these roles, . . . findings also suggest that these faculty and practitioners believe students *should* compartmentalize their multiple roles to promote their academic success" (Ziskin, Zerquera, and Torres 2010, 11, emphasis added). Further, most of the faculty interviewed had a traditional college experience themselves, which required them to adapt their understanding of their students' lives (12).

Students and the Commute

The student experience while commuting has also been the focus of a few studies. In interviews with urban students who use public transportation, researchers found that many students were eager to take advantage of commute time for schoolwork, though the realities of crowded buses and subway cars could make this difficult (Regalado and Smale 2015a). These students were more likely to engage in reading or writing than the average urban public transit commuter (Lopatovska et al. 2011). Latino commuter students interviewed at a large university shared their concerns about "the high level of traffic, taking the bus to school, and the amount of time and energy involved in commuting to campus" (Hernandez 2002, 75). A study of the scholarly activities of undergraduates in suburban California found that they often used their cars as private study spaces while on campus (Delcore, Mullooly, and Scroggins 2009). Other studies of students who drive to campus have found high levels of stress among students who drive, stress that is related to traffic and the need to find parking in particular (Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta 2010).

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Technology and Commuter Students

Though technology is especially relevant to academic libraries, research on commuter student experiences has not explored the impact of technology on higher education, especially the development of the Internet, instructional technology, and personal mobile devices like smartphones. Some scholars have suggested that technology might be used to increase the amount of contact between faculty and commuter students, both to "create academic community" and to increase "student learning outside the curriculum" (Kruger 2000, 66) and between the institution and commuter students, especially by using social media to promote programs and events and to provide useful information (Yearwood and Jones 2012, 122). Recent surveys of U.S. college students' technology use reveal that undergraduates own more computing devices than does the population as a whole, and that they "use their devices extensively and view them as important to their academic success" (Brooks 2016, 5). Other studies found that students "prefer courses that use technology" (Buckenmeyer et al. 2016), and that commuters in particular rely on their smartphones to complete schoolwork while in transit (Smale and Regalado 2017). Ultimately, many hope that technology may be used to increase commuter students' engagement with the institution (Kretovics 2015; Yearwood and Jones 2012). However, it is important to note the persistence of the digital divide in the United States: smartphone ownership and home broadband access decrease along with household income, and in 2016 only 64 percent of those with household incomes of less than $30,000 a year owned a smartphone (Rainie 2017). This unequal access may hinder commuter students especially.

COMMUTER STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Understanding the practices of commuter students in college and university libraries is critical to planning and deploying resources and services to meet their needs. Previous research on commuter students in the academic library literature has centered on three themes: the library as place, studies of information literacy and library instruction for commuter students, and technology that commuter students use for their academic work.

A number of studies have acknowledged the important role that academic libraries play as a place for student work on campus, and have sought to understand how commuters use their academic libraries in order to better serve those students. Some have focused on or revealed insight into subgroups of the commuter student population. Qualitative research with Hispanic students at an urban university revealed that they "are trying to balance work and school, spend significant time commuting, and have limited access to quiet space for studying"; they highly valued the library as a study location

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(Green 2012, 97). A recent study using ethnographic methods at a small, urban, primarily commuter college at which a majority of students are black and female found that commuter students appreciated the library as a place to build community, though they acknowledged the tension between collaborative work and the need for quiet work space (Manley 2015). Research at an urban commuter college examined student use of the 24-hour study space, a new service offered during finals week, and learned that the heaviest users of the study space tended to be younger and full-time students early in their college careers who lived with their parents (Richards 2016, 11).

Other research has examined multiple institutions and libraries revealing both specific, local needs as well as common themes. Using surveys and seating sweeps, researchers in five Canadian academic libraries with a mix of commuter and residential populations suggested that "students perceive the combination of setting, resources, and community that the library provides as an incubator for learning and that, by virtue of being among these things, they believe they will learn" (May and Swabey 2015, 790); this is congruent with findings from other studies (Khoo et al. 2016; Regalado and Smale 2015b). Research at an urban library that serves three predominantly commuter colleges also highlighted the centrality of library resources and services to their academic work; students requested more computers and more quiet space for studying (Brown-Sica 2012). A study of five regional, solely commuter campuses of a state university system created a survey to learn more about the specific needs of each regional campus (Dryden and Roseman 2010). Importantly, some of these researchers were able to leverage their data to create renovation plans or add services to better meet the needs of their commuter students (Dryden and Roseman 2010; Brown-Sica 2012; Richards 2016).

While information literacy and library instruction is a heavily researched topic in academic libraries, there are few studies of information literacy specifically for commuter college and university students. Studies on library instruction at community colleges partially fill this gap, since the overwhelming majority of community college students are commuters rather than residential students. A review of the literature on the information needs of mature—that is, over age twenty-four—community college students reveals that they bring a range of prior experiences with libraries and information literacy (Zeit 2014). These authors suggest that a focus on the unique needs of these students, especially for those who don't plan to go on to seek a baccalaureate degree, can contribute to their success in college and in their careers.

In recent years there has been an increasing focus on technology for information literacy and library instruction, and the use of technology more generally to support all students in academic libraries. Librarians at an urban commuter college note that commuter students rely heavily on mobile devices for their academic work, both on and off campus and on the commute. In order to accommodate and support these students, they began to offer library instruction specifically focused on using mobile devices to access the library

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and do research (Havelka and Verbovetskaya 2012). Much has been written about library support for online learning, and commuter students share some attributes of distance-learning students as well: they may have limited time on campus or fit their homework into times in their schedule when the library is closed, and thus may benefit from increased online access to library resources and services. Research on strategies to engage distance-learning students with the library—such as online reference available twenty-four hours a day, online tutorials and research guides, and embedding librarians into course websites or learning management systems—may also be relevant to commuter students in college and university libraries (Hedreen 2012).

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book aims to make a significant contribution to the academic library literature by focusing specifically on research with commuter students, in order to help academic librarians understand the unique needs of commuters and contribute to their success in college. We have sought here to include a wide range of U.S. colleges and universities that serve commuter students. Institutions large and small from urban and suburban locations all over the country are represented. Some are solely (or almost solely) commuter campuses, while others serve a mix of commuter and residential students in varying proportions; flagship, regional, and single-campus institutions are included. The transportation that students use to attend these colleges and universities also varies, from driving with its attendant need for parking, to public transportation like buses, subways, or regional rail, to bicycling or walking. Housing situations—determined in large part by the cost of living in a particular area—differ for students between and within these institutions, as does the availability of other spaces for students to engage in academic work, such as public libraries, their jobs, cafes, and parks, among others. These variations in space availability have an impact on commuter students that may not be felt among their residential counterparts. The studies in this book further seek to complement and complicate existing research on commuter students. Many of the researchers use qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, or a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, which provide different insight into the lived experiences of commuter students than the primarily quantitative research published in the higher education literature (Badger 2014).

The chapters in this volume present case studies of research on commuter students at college and university libraries. The chapters are organized by institution type, beginning with large universities with some residential students, and moving on to institutions that almost exclusively enroll commuter students, most of which are community colleges. All chapter authors explain the research question or aim of the research project and describe the institutional context, with special consideration of the needs of commuter and

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residential students for institutions that serve both. In addition to sharing the results of their research, chapter authors discuss what was learned during their studies with a focus on specific interventions or initiatives that have been undertaken (or are planned) in their libraries to better serve commuter students. Authors describe the research methods used in detail so that readers may replicate the research at their own institutions if desired.

In chapter 2, M. Sara Lowe, Willie Miller, and Paul Moffett share their work on two space assessment projects at the main library at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). Traditionally a commuter campus, IUPUI has substantially increased the number of residential students in the last decade, which has introduced new patterns of library use. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, their research revealed important ways that the library could move ahead to best meet the changing needs of both populations of students.

Donna Lanclos and Rachael Winterling discuss the implementation of the Family Friendly Library Room at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, in chapter 3. This innovative library space is intended to address the unique needs of commuter students and their children. This chapter demonstrates how the project was grounded in prior space-use studies and an initial assessment of student needs. Subsequent interviews with students about how they actually used the room provided critical information for assessing the project's successes and suggesting areas for improvement.

Chapter 4, by Juliann Couture, brings us to the University of Colorado Boulder, where mapping and interviews were used to learn more about the lived experiences of students who often begin their college careers in campus housing and then move off campus. This research has helped interrogate the place of the library within the "campus bubble" that defines much of the student experience on this large public university's flagship campus, and has informed space planning decisions.

In chapter 5, Jean Amaral, Mariana Regalado, and Maura Smale discuss their qualitative research with students at seven colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY), the largest urban public university in the United States and a predominantly commuter institution. Incorporating both community colleges and four-year schools and spanning nearly a decade, their research projects have explored the experiences and frustrations of this diverse student body. In particular, this research illuminates strategies for completing academic work among urban students who primarily commute via public transportation.

Chapters 6 through 8 present research from community colleges in the United States, a population that is not well studied even though 45 percent of U.S. undergraduates attend a community college (American Association of Community Colleges 2016). Most, though not all, community colleges do not offer campus housing, thus community college students make up a large proportion of commuter undergraduates in the United States.

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In chapter 6, Brian Greene and Elizabeth Horan examine the lived experiences of students at Modesto Junior College in northern California and Coastline Community College in southern California. Both are community colleges, yet they differ in location and the prevalence of online learning at each institution. Research into the nonacademic commitments of students, their living situations, and transportation requirements revealed much about student study habits, and suggests strategies that both libraries—despite their differences—can implement to better serve their students.

In chapter 7, Tanner Wray and Nancy Fried Foster share research into the place of the library in the student experience at the three campuses of Montgomery College in Maryland. This large study involved participation from multiple stakeholders across all three campuses to learn about student academic work practices and faculty and staff experiences in the libraries and beyond, and has illuminated the differing needs of each campus while leading to a more solid embedding of the libraries into the life of this community college.

Chapter 8, by Ted Chodock, discusses the assessment of instruction and information literacy at the College of Southern Nevada, a highly diverse community college in the Las Vegas metropolitan area. Drawing on research performed as a participant in the Association of College & Research Libraries' Assessment in Action program, this chapter explores the effect of student engagement in different types of library instruction on student success outcomes.

We conclude the volume in chapter 9 by bringing together insights gained from the research studies included here and suggestions for future research. We have learned about the centrality of the commute to students' lives, the importance of place on campus for commuter students, the value of collaborating within and beyond the library, and the benefits of listening to students' experiences and ideas. We hope that readers not only find the information shared in this volume to be useful in their own practice as academic librarians, but are also inspired to learn more about their own commuter students.

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