Many institutions struggle to find ways to connect commuter students with the involvement opportunities available to them. Because commuters are on our campuses for such little time, the connections we make with them must be immediate and high impact. With nearly two-thirds (875) of our undergraduate students commuting to campus, Dominican University (IL) faces this challenge daily. As a small, private institution located just 10 miles from downtown Chicago, our struggle is compounded with an additional factor. Many of our commuter students live within 20 miles of campus and continue their involvement in their hometowns or seek out involvement opportunities in the surrounding suburbs or in the city of Chicago.

The Office of Student Involvement, along with many other offices and departments, has been working to find an approach to reach commuter students and provide them information about campus offerings to help create more intentional campus experiences. Our primary approach has been to make a simple change in how we orient students and how we interact with them during the first month of classes. By creating a culture of involvement and information sharing at the beginning of their collegiate career, we have been able to maintain our connections with commuter students throughout their time on campus.
First Impressions

Welcome x Three

As most any admissions counselor might tell you, it all starts with the initial welcome from the institution. The acceptance letter sets the tone for a student starting out at a new institution. Our university’s mission emphasizes student involvement during college: “As a Sinsinawa Dominican-sponsored institution, Dominican University prepares students to pursue truth, to give compassionate service and to participate in the creation of a more just and humane world.” In the spirit of the mission, we offer newly admitted students three letters. Along with their formal acceptance letter, we send a welcome letter from our Student Government Association president, as well as another welcome letter from the director of Student Involvement.

In the letter from student government, we present students a list of available clubs and organizations and encourage them to get involved with those that interest them. We provide the contact information for the Office of Student Involvement so they can contact us during the summer or when they arrive on campus in the fall. This is our first attempt at reaching out to our commuter students to help them realize what opportunities exist on campus to enrich their academic experience.

The director’s letter follows with important dates for activities such as Dominican Fest and the Involvement Fair. It also reinforces the message of being active on campus and highlights the ways in which cocurricular involvement helps students succeed.

Newsletter Preview

We also send our last communication through the mail. In August, all commuting students, new and returning, will find the first edition of Stars on Wheels—the quarterly newsletter from our office—in their home mailboxes. Submissions for the newsletter come from offices and departments around campus and contain important information on academic deadlines, financial aid, registration information, start-of-the-year events and other information helpful to commuters. The Office of Student Involvement includes an article in the newsletter highlighting clubs and organizations, our leadership development program, and the start-of-the-year activities in which commuters can participate.

The Commuter Student Association (see related article on Page A48) also includes an article welcoming all commuters to become members of the group and provides an overview of recent events and goals for the upcoming year. These intentional connections before the summer communicate the importance of student engagement in the campus community.

Summer Orientation

Opportunities to SOAR

To help all students with the transition to college, Dominican requires participation in a summer orientation session. New first-year students participate in SOAR (Summer Orientation and Registration), a two-day, overnight program. Residential and commuter students are mixed within the orientations and all students are required to stay in the residence halls during the program.

For first-year students, the orientation program is a chance to get to know other students in their class. The programs are limited to 60 participants who are organized into smaller groups led by orientation leaders. These small groups allow students, both residential and commuter, to foster relationships with each other.

When we send students their orientation materials, we give them a contact list to gather the names and contact information of potential friends. Many of our commuters have reported this has been a great way to get to know other students they might not have met otherwise. It is a high-impact way of helping students connect before coming to campus.

Networking Opportunities, Other Resources

One part of the two-day program is specifically designed with commuter students in mind. We schedule a commuter lunch on the second day, during which they have the chance to network with each other. The Office of Student Involvement offers a formal presentation about commuter resources. The presentation contains information on physical resources, such as important office locations (Wellness Center, security,
Welcome Weeks

- **More Than One Week**
  As has happened at many institutions, our original Welcome Week has evolved from a weekend program to a more intentional, multi-week event consisting of social programs, off-campus trips, service-learning opportunities, educational lectures and campus traditions—all with a strong focus on students getting involved and being part of the Dominican University community.

  Everything starts with our official Welcome Weekend program, which is designed for residential and commuter students and their families. In its sessions, we cover issues students might face as they transition and ways to get involved on campus. We also build social opportunities into the program to help students get to know each other.

- **Academic Convocation**
  The beginning of the academic year is signaled by Academic Convocation. This campus tradition struggles to draw a large student audience. In hopes of increasing student participation for Convocation, we have just begun to coordinate it with Dominican Fest, a large outdoor festival. By combining two campus traditions, one academic and one social, we hope to show that student engagement concerns both academic and personal development.

- **Dominican Fest**
  Dominican Fest contains several booths, activities and food sponsored by departments, clubs and organizations. It provides a chance for student groups to volunteer and meet new students, a chance for students to reconnect with friends and a time for our commuter students to engage in a wonderful campus tradition. It is an easy transition to our Involvement Fair, which occurs a few days later.

  - **Involvement Fair**
    Our Involvement Fair provides an excellent way for commuter students to learn more about the opportunities for involvement in clubs and organizations. We schedule it over two days within the first week of classes, with afternoon and evening times available for commuter students to attend while they are on campus for classes. We publicize the Fair through the Stars on Wheels newsletter, the commuter student bulletin board and through traditional publicity methods to maximize commuter attendance.

  - **Trips to the City**
    Knowing that many of our commuter students enjoy the opportunities afforded by living close to the city of Chicago, our office also works to reach out by giving them campus-sponsored activities in the city. Instead of competing with city events, we use them to our advantage and build community on campus by enjoying trips off campus. This helps us promote our office and our programs by incorporating activities geared toward commuter interests and providing an opportunity for commuter and residential students to interact in a non-school setting. Each semester we plan several campus trips, usually to sporting events or theater productions. We subsidize ticket costs through our budget and are often able to provide transportation. We sponsor at least one trip during the Welcome Weeks.

The First Few Months and Beyond

Once the heavy programming push at the beginning of the semester begins to slow down, there are other ways in which we stay connected to commuter students to continually ease their transition and help them feel as though they are part of the campus community.

- **Active and Passive Programming**
  The Commuter Student Association takes an active role on campus and plans extensive active and passive programming. The membership plans passive service opportunities, such as food and clothing drives, but also plans social gatherings and participates in larger campus programs. The Commuter Student Association is the official voice of students and holds a seat within the Student Government Association.

- **Student Leadership Office**
  Newly created this past year, our Student Leadership Office is an office space available for use by all clubs and organizations. Our Campus Activities Board, Student Government and Commuter Student Association hold office hours daily to be available to students who have program ideas or are looking to get involved and to act as a resource for students with concerns. All other organizations may hold office hours but are not required to do so. The office is open during the tradi-
Commuter students will be aware of and involved in Campus Activities Programming. Organization administrators use audience evaluations forms. On these forms, participants view the program, compare commuter and residential responses to see differences in how they view the program. The Welcome Weekend evaluation survey is given to students during the orientation program. It is educating students about the importance of involvement and connect them with their peers. The data from these evaluations gives us a sense of whether the individual is a commuter student or a residential student. That data is extremely helpful in learning what types of programs commuter students attend, what days of the week work best for them and what times of the day most commuters are able to attend.

- **Student Involvement Resource Center**

Our Student Involvement Resource Center is also staffed in the evening. Student staff are available to assist with questions on clubs and organizations or to help students with projects for upcoming programs. Many of our organizations use the Center in the evening to accommodate the schedules of their commuter and residential members.

- **Continual Programming**

The Office of Student Involvement continues to program throughout the year. We intentionally plan programs during the afternoon and early evening to reach out to commuters. Many programs provide a free dinner so commuters do not have to choose between eating a meal or attending a program.

### Assessment Measures

To determine if we are reaching out to commuter students through our orientation process and Welcome Week activities, we use several methods of assessment. These methods help us show achievement toward our two commuter-student-specific learning outcomes:

- Commuter students will be aware of resources on campus and in the Office of Student Involvement.
- Commuter students will be involved in the university community through events and opportunities that take place outside of the classroom.

- **Orientation, Welcome Weekend Evaluations**

For the summer orientation program and Welcome Weekend, we provide evaluations to each participant for them to complete. The summer orientation evaluations contain a place for rankings on orientation communications (brochure, mailings, Web site), session topics, staff and overall comfort with their transition after having gone through the program. The data from these evaluations gives us a sense of whether the orientation program is educating students and connecting them with their peers. The Welcome Weekend evaluation contains similar questions but we separate results into commuter and residential responses to see differences in how participants view the program.

- **Audience Evaluations**

For any programs implemented by our office or a student organization, we use audience evaluations forms. On these evaluations, we seek several demographic characteristics. The most important for us to determine is whether the individual is a commuter student or a residential student. That data is extremely helpful in learning what types of programs commuter students attend, what days of the week work best for them and what times of the day most commuters are able to attend.

- **Organization Membership Analysis**

Another assessment tool we use is an analysis of club and organization membership. Each organization gives us a roster of officer and member names. From those lists, we gather data on what percentage of officers and members are commuter students. This information helps us to understand if our commuter students are seeking leadership positions. Current data indicates that more than half of our officer and membership positions are held by commuter students.

### A Fresh Approach

As we look at the changes we made on campus, they seem simple and straightforward. And they were. It just took a fresh approach to make minor changes in programs and services in order to make a huge impact on commuter students. Any campus can do it. Look at how you welcome your commuter students and how they experience the campus those first few weeks. Find ways to connect with them over the summer, to make their first impression of campus meaningful and welcome them in a way that makes them feel connected. Get them involved and you’re on your way to building stronger and more engaged students.

### References


### About the Author

William Dlugokieni is assistant director of Student Involvement at Dominican University (IL). He previously served as residence life coordinator and coordinator of Student Activities at Elmhurst College (IL). He holds a bachelor’s degree in marketing and management from Grand Valley State University (MI) and a master’s degree in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia. A past delegate to the NACA National Convention and the NACA Mid America Regional Conference, Dlugokieni is also a member of the American College Personnel Association, the Association of College Unions International and the Association of Campus Activities Administrators, which he currently serves as treasurer.
Commuter student organizations can be an essential and exciting part of the campus experience. They can provide a surprising range of new ideas and experiences for the general campus population as well as their members, but they have to be run just right. As with all clubs, anyone can run a commuter student organization, but running an effective one that reaches students and fulfills their needs takes a little more work. First and foremost you must reach out to the commuter student and make them feel they are valued.

1. Seek Feedback

When we were reorganizing our Commuter Student Association at Dominican University (IL), one way we sought feedback from students was to camp out with pizza in the café area, which has a lot of commuter traffic because it’s located between computers, the library, the coffee bar and a hallway of commuter lockers. We limited the free pizza to commuters and offered it in return for their feedback and their signatures on a petition to reorganize the club. It worked, as free food usually does.

We also included a yearly survey in our commuter newsletter that is published quarterly, with a fifth edition for summer updates. Another thing we did to help keep people informed and help keep members updated was to create an e-mail list. We generated this at our school’s annual Involvement Fair, where all on-campus organizations can set up a table to publicize themselves to the student body. We grew from there.

2. Pursue a Different Kind of Thinking

Running a successful commuter student organization requires a different kind of thinking than that required for running other organizations. The main difference between commuter organizations and most others is interest. Other campus groups usually are based on some sort of “special interest” such as ethnicity, religion, an academic field or a particular activity. In other words, they are all organizations students join because they have an interest in the organizations’ central purpose or ideas. In this regard, commuter organizations are different because they are based on students’ decisions pertaining to school and housing. The commuter organization is there to fill a basic need and, as such, does not necessarily offer the same fun appeal other groups provide.

Filling the needs of commuters at Dominican can be somewhat like handling a double-edged sword. Commuters make up the majority of the university population and are always voicing their concerns about a lack of activities to attend, as well as a few ideas about what they want to see. Yet, when meetings are held to make plans, they seldom show. We are constantly striving to find ways to entice them to bring themselves and their ideas to our meetings.

3. Listen to Your Students

To reach the commuter student body effectively beyond the core group of regulars, and to make your presence on campus felt, you have to listen to the students you are serving. This goes beyond asking for suggestions or providing surveys or suggestion boxes, although these are important tools. You have to really listen:
- Listen to what they are saying and, even more importantly, what they are not saying.
- Notice what students are doing on the weekend and what they casually complain about not seeing on campus.
- Pay attention to other organizations. See what the other groups on campus are doing and what they are not doing. If there aren’t many other groups on campus, keep track of what other campuses are doing by going to leadership conferences or reading articles (like this one).

4. Initiate Conversation

If you really want to generate ideas you need to initiate conversation with a variety of people. I don’t know how often I have asked members, “Are there any activities or anything that you would like to see on campus?” only to receive blank stares and experience a pregnant silence. When I start with an idea, though, such as celebrating a crazy holiday, that idea sparks other ideas, which in turn spark more until soon we have a long list of potential activities.

5. Pay Attention to Trends

If you see a large group of people with an interest, or hear a lot of talk on some topic such as a book, movie or policy, organize an event around it.

6. Fulfill Existing Needs—and Your Core Mission

Find a need on campus, one that no one knows exists yet. What is at the core of your college or university? That is a good place to tap into for ideas. For example, our university mission is compassionate service, so we organized a winter clothing drive.
Running a successful commuter student organization requires a different kind of thinking than that required for running other organizations.

7. Celebrate Crazy Holidays

Another great idea, one I got from a leadership conference, was to celebrate a crazy holiday. Did you know April 26 is National Pretzel Day? Neither did I until I looked up crazy holidays (http://holidayinsights.com/moreholidays/index.htm). Our organization hosted a pretzel giveaway and it was a huge success.

8. Let Students Come and Go

Your group should be open to the idea of “come and go” events because they are open to students who may not have the time to stay for a longer activity. Students come, participate (get free food, enter a raffle, etc.) and then go. It gives you a chance to let people know you are there, to make their commuting experience more enjoyable, and it gives them a chance to send suggestions your way. Our group is also looking into the idea of having a lunch social where students can bring their own lunch and get free drinks and dessert from the club and have the option of staying and meeting other commuters.

9. Understand the Problem of Scheduling

As I’m sure you know, the really difficult part of sponsoring programs and meetings is scheduling. Every commuter seems to have a different schedule, as well as a different mode of transportation that impacts their schedules. The best way to figure out scheduling is to pay attention to the fluctuation of students at school and their cars in the parking lot. This might seem to be common sense, but commuters’ schedules are always changing and it is easy to forget that people have different schedules. What works for your schedule might not work for everyone else.

10. Accept and Work Through Frustration

An important thing to remember when trying to organize a commuter organization is that it will likely be frustrating. You are going to have to accept this fact and work through it. Like anything else, it will take time to grow into something that can stand on its own. The first year (at least) will require much hard work, dedication and, above all, patience from officers and advisors. No matter what you do, how many flyers you hang, how many e-mails you send, how many other ways you remind students, it is very difficult to get a regular group of commuters to attend meetings. They have other priorities.

For most commuters, jobs, family, class, homework and beating the rush-hour traffic all take priority over spending an extra hour on campus to attend a meeting. It is something that has to be accepted, but also something that can be accommodated. That is where e-mail is most effective. Our organization relies heavily on e-mail. In fact I don’t know where we would be without it. Updates, reminders and minutes from the last meeting go out regularly in electronic form as a way of keeping members in touch with what the club is doing.

Keep Up the Good Work

If you keep at it and overcome frustrations and setbacks, people will notice and your club will be effective. In our club, very few people actually attend the meetings, but there is a noticeable change in campus attitude. Commuter students seem to be prouder of commuting and are getting involved in other parts of campus life. For some students, it is enough to know they are appreciated and there is a commuter organization looking out for their interests.

About the Author

Katie Rosebrock is entering her second year as president of the Commuter Student Association at Dominican University (IL), where she is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in English and writing. She also serves as co-editor of Dominican Star, the school’s student newspaper.