

# Programming for A Commuter Campus

by Del Suggs

It may be the biggest challenge in the field of Student Activities: programming for a commuter campus. It's like having a student body of gypsies or nomads. Sometimes they're around; sometimes they're not. What can you do?

Let's start by defining what we mean by a commuter campus. It's not as easy as you might think. Obviously, a commuter school has a student population that lives off-campus. We tend to think of a commuter campus in stereotypical terms, such as a community college. The real definition is actually broader, because it can include any school-- two-year, four-year, or graduate school-- without residence halls.

These days it's the rare campus that has the majority of students living in residence halls. So, in some sense, most campuses are commuter campuses-- or at least have a sizable commuter population. If every campus is a commuter campus, how do you deal with the programming issues?

## Another demographic in play

It may be easier to consider your commuter students based on a simpler demographic. Consider whether your students are "traditional" or "non-traditional." When you do that, you'll be able to assess their programming needs and understand how to reach your target audience.

On the typical community/commuter college campus, the majority of day time students are traditional: eighteen-to-twenty-four years old, recent high school graduates, single, etc. The main difference between traditional college students at a commuter campus as compared to a residential campus is simple-- most of these commuter students still live at home, with their families. At a residential campus, these students would most likely be living either in a dorm or an off-campus apartment, but not with their families.

Then there are the evening students. On a commuter campus, these people

are nearly all "non-traditional" students. They may have regular, day jobs. They may be married, or have families. They tend to be older, more mature, and therefore have different interests.

Here's what you'll find on most commuter college campuses: from 8-to-5 are your traditional college students, while from 5 o'clock until the last class lets out are your non-traditional students. Look around and that's what you'll see.

Based on this insight, let's develop a few principles for commuter campus programming that can help you do a better job. We'll consider these two groups-- daytime and evening students-- separately.

## Daytime Students

The daytime, traditional students will enjoy the typical student activities that you'd see on any college campus. That includes music, coffeehouse shows, comedians, spoken word artists, novelties, and more. The events and attractions that you see showcased at the APCA conferences and convention work perfectly.

Your biggest challenge in daytime programming is getting these traditional students to attend your events. That's is the fuel for ongoing discussions at every educational session and programming workshop.

There are two solutions. The first one you've heard before: *free food*. Free food is the biggest draw on any college campus anywhere, anytime. It's not just your campus. It's every campus. We have to bait students to attend and have fun. They always have fun when they go to a campus event, but for some reason they seem to forget that. So you have to bait them almost every time.

The second solution to attendance is traffic patterns: take your show to the students. Most schools find it nearly impossible to get students to break their deeply ingrained traffic patterns. Students park their cars, they walk to the student center, they go to class,

they may go back to the student center, they walk to their cars, they leave. Oh, and once in a while they go to the library.

Understand that you can't break those patterns. You could have Dave Matthews playing free in the auditorium across campus, and many students wouldn't make the effort to walk over there. So you must bring the performance to your students. Present shows in the cafeteria or student center. Program in the lobby, or the patio or courtyard. Place your events in their way, actually block their path on sidewalks. They will accidentally bump into your programs, and end up participating.

## Evening Students

The students that hit campus after five o'clock are different. They may be tired from working all day at a job or at home. They may have rushed from childcare to campus. They've got other concerns that traditional college students don't have to face.

But these non-traditional, evening students also need programs. And, most importantly, they pay student activity fees, too. Part of your challenge is to find student activities programs and events that can meet their needs.

What are their needs? Evening students often don't have time to be entertained, because they've got a tight schedule when they're on campus. They go to class, then rush off to other obligations like family or a job. But remember the idea of free food? It works especially well with evening students, because they may have missed dinner to rush to campus.

You might also consider some ongoing evening activities for these students. In addition to that free pizza party or hamburger cook out once a month or semester, how about something more often and less expensive? Maybe you could provide free coffee in the student center every evening from five until seven o'clock? Maybe you could have

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snacks or dessert offerings. These folks would be grateful!

## Bigger Coordinated Events

If you do a larger event for your evening students, try to coordinate with the faculty. Often evening classes meet longer than the traditional one-hour. A three-hour class generally takes a break somewhere around the midpoint. If you plan a big program, such as a cookout with entertainment, communicate that to your faculty well in advance. You'll often find the professors will time their lectures so that the students can take a longer break and enjoy more of your activity. More importantly, they won't plan an exam that might keep students in the classroom.

Campus-wide programs such as an Open House can also be very successful. Students love to bring their children-- or parents-- to campus and show them around. If you can present such an event, and throw in a free (or cheap) meal, you'll reach a lot of students. It also makes a great recruitment tool, and gets the family involved with the school.

## Off Campus Events

We nearly always think of student activities as something that is done for students on campus. It doesn't have to be that way. Think of ways you can provide for these students off campus.

You may be able to purchase student tickets to local movie theaters, sporting events, concerts, and more. By getting these tickets for your students, you've provided them with an activity-- perhaps even a cultural event-- that they might not have been able to attend otherwise. It's worth considering.

Note, too, that these offerings will be self-selecting. You might present a comedian for your daytime students, but give away tickets to a local comedy club for your evening students. You don't have to discriminate-- but if you only give away the free tickets at night, you'll end up giving them to the right students.

## Final thoughts

Perhaps the most difficult feat to execute on a commuter campus is the evening program. It's tough to schedule a concert or event that appeals to traditional students (your daytime commuter students) in the evening. Unless it's extraordinary, don't try it. It's nearly impossible to get students back on campus after they've left for the day. Many a coffeehouse and comedy series has gone down the drain because it was scheduled at night on a community college. It would have worked at noon, when the students were already there. They don't come back...

Commuter students are a challenge to serve. They have different needs, different interests, and different responses to campus events. You'll find it a constant struggle to reach out to them and get them involved with your programs. But it's worth it when you find those programs that work, and those students who appreciate your effort. And, after all, it is your job!

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