RUNNING HEAD: Engaging Commuters in the TLE

Engaging Commuters in the Teaching and Learning Environment: Person-Behavior Perspectives

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> Higher education today must respond to the challenges posed by three major conditions. Rapid social changes are forcing redefinition of the role of colleges and universities and of the college degree. Increased numbers of students with diverse motivations are adding their special educational needs and purposes to those of the typical students of the past. The costs of traditional alternatives are outrunning support for them. (p. 1)

Faced with an unprecedented number of students from diverse backgrounds entering the United States higher education system, Chickering prefaced his 1974 study on commuter students with the above paragraph. Over 30 years later, the same words can describe how our traditional frameworks for understanding how college students engage with the teaching and learning environment are still inadequate for addressing the needs of diverse students. A case in point: Despite findings that only about 15% of undergraduates live on campus throughout their college years ("Profile of Undergraduate Students," 2006), most of our knowledge about the learning and developmental outcomes of college students is based on studies of traditional, residential, 18- to 24-year-students. Without having a more accurate picture of whom our students actually are and what their developmental needs are, we cannot hope to provide services that will promote positive educational outcomes. Indeed, in 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini concluded that living on campus was the overall most important determinant of the within-college impact of college (1991). Although their 2005 update to *How College Effects Students* suggests a waning influence in residential status as a college outcome determinant, in some key indicators, such as persistence and degree completion, commuters continue to lag behind their

on-campus peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Nonetheless, few recent studies investigate the college student experiences of college students who are "non-traditional," either in age or place of residence.

In this paper I will review the current literature on undergraduate commuter students – who they are and how they present challenges to collegiate teaching and learning environments (TLEs). I will assert that in planning teaching and learning environments, most of the higher education theoretical frameworks are based on the experiences of residential, "traditional," students. Thus, while some person-environment and ecological theories offer useful perspectives for understanding commuter students' experiences, a definitive model of commuter student development has not yet been proposed. Finally, I will conclude with suggestions for future research directions that will inform our current understanding of commuter students.

Who Are Commuter Students?

One of the difficulties in discussing how best to serve the needs of commuter students is that there is no universally accepted definition of whom the target population comprises. Barbara Jacoby, who is the director of commuter affairs and community service at the University of Maryland and who is widely published in the literature on commuter students, defines commuters as those students who do not live in institution-owned housing (1989). This definition encompasses the most broadly defined range of students but does not draw distinctions between students who live off-campus with friends versus family, or those students who can walk to school versus sitting for hours on public transportation, etc. Obviously, the nature of the commuting itself, in addition to the environmental context of the student's living arrangements, affects how the student engages with the TLE. Jacoby and Garland (2004-2005) write, "Commuter students include full-time students of traditional age who live with their parents,

students who live in rental housing near the campus, adults with careers, and student parents whose lives intersect with one or more of the previous characteristics" (p. 62). Additionally, commuter students may be ethnic or racial minorities, first-generation students, or of low socioeconomic background (Chickering, 1974; Jacoby, 1989; Schuchman, 1974).

A slightly alternative perspective on whom commuter students are is rarely raised in the literature but speaks to how this population is unreasonably overlooked in institutional planning. Banning and Hughes (1986) suggests that noncommuters – or residential students – are often young, full-time students, dependent on their parents (or other adult entity who maintains responsibility for the student until graduation), who live in institutionally-owned residential housing units. Arguably, one could draw the conclusion that commuters then, are everyone else who does not fall into this category. Again, this definition suffers from discounting the wide variety of experiences that could fall under the rubric – i.e., living in Greek housing, living across the street from campus, or living 30 miles away from campus. Nonetheless, it is clear that the number of students full-time students aged 18-24 living on or within walking distance of campus – upon whom most of the research literature on college students is based – is a minority compared to "everyone else."

Commuter students, as they are defined on individual campuses, pose challenges to university administrators because much of what we know about factors that support student success is difficult to apply to the commuter population. For example, Astin (1984) attributes student development to the extent to which students are involved, or expend psychological energy, in activities related to the TLE. Given the "many competing commitments, including family, work, and other responsibilities" (Jacoby & Garland, 2004-2005, p. 63) that commuting students may face, their ability to become involved in campus activities may be limited. More

specifically, proximity to campus may mediate how much students are able to engage in effective educational practices (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001). It is important to note that students' ability – or lack thereof - to be engaged is not necessarily a reflection of their desire to do so; many commuters would like to be involved in campus activities but do not have the time or resources to do so (Jacoby & Garland, 2004-2005).

Research on commuter students can fall in many different areas, such as "commuters," "part-time students," "non-traditional students," "adult students," "non-residential students" and "returning students." The literature is also divided between studies at two-year public institutions – which tend to offer little if any institutional housing – and studies at four-year institutions. Among four-year institutions, the literature tends to discriminate between students at "commuter institutions" – institutions where most of the student population lives off-campus – and "students who commute" to institutions that are primarily residential. In this paper I have chosen to focus mainly on TLEs at four-year institutions. The research literature on commuter students is scant at best, and is largely descriptive, based on four-year models. I acknowledge that TLEs at two-year schools are qualitatively different from those at baccalaureate-granting institutions, and it would be a disservice to both types of institutions if I were to try to discuss their unique characteristics within the scope of this paper.

Theoretical Overview

Several distinct clusters of theories dominate our understanding of how students develop over the course of their educational careers. A representational psychosocial theory is Chickering's Seven Vectors of student development (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Chickering's original model was originally based on a sample of traditionally aged white males enrolled at four-year institutions (1969). Chickering and Reisser indicate that the 1993 version

has been modified to be descriptive of a universal population of student experiences. They offer few suggestions for engaging commuter students at four-year institutions beyond providing learning communities that simulate a more intimate learning environment within the larger university. Residential learning communities have been shown to have positive effects on student persistence (Stassen, 2003), but wide-scale learning community implementation at large urban campuses with majority commuter populations is not generally practical. Our understanding of students' cognitive development is largely based upon the work of William Perry, whose sample consisted of primarily male Harvard College students (1985). Similarly, Marcia Baxter Magolda's Patterns of Knowing model is limited in its applicability to students of diverse ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses (1992).

Besides lacking validation with studies using commuter student samples, the above theories fail to capture how the organizational and environmental contexts of the TLE affect students' learning experiences. Through his research on college student retention, Tinto (1993) has concluded that one of key factors in student departure is the extent to which students are able to integrate into the institutional environment. Given the near-paradigmatic status of Tinto's research exploring student persistence and, by extension, success, Tinto's Interactionalist model is a useful framework for understanding how commuter students navigate the demands of the TLE setting. Furthermore, an overview of how environmental context informs individual behavior will lay the foundation for understanding how TLEs affect students.

Person/Environment Interaction

Theories of person/environment interaction "focus in detail on the environment and how it influences behavior through its interactions with characteristics of the individual (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 46)." Most person/environment theories are based in the work

of Kurt Lewin (1936) who proposed that individual behavior is a function of the interaction between people and their environments. Therefore, individual meaning-making, both behaviorally and cognitively, is affected by the specific context in which the learning occurs. Researchers after Lewin have further distilled his proposition to explain how educational environments shape student experiences.

Holland's theory of vocational choices is generally considered to be a person/environment model, although it may be more accurately described as a personality/environment model (Walsh, 1978). Holland argues that there are six basic personality types – realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional – that correspond to six congruent environments (Holland, 1973). People gravitate towards environments that will match their personality types, and they behave accordingly depending on whether they find an environmental match. For example, realistic types tend to function very well in realistic environments. Within Holland's schema, personality develops intergenerationally, with parents tending to expose their children to environments that they themselves enjoy.

Holland originally applied his model to elucidating vocational choice. He theorized that people tend to choose vocations that will allow them to work in environments that reinforce their primary or cluster of dominant personality types (Holland, 1973). Furthermore, vocational satisfaction is positively related to the degree of congruence between personality type and environment. As a natural extension of vocational choice, individuals' educational success is related to finding congruence between personality type and field of study. Given that Holland believed that people and environments mutually attract each other, he suggests that within a given field, students are likely to find instructors and peers who share similar personality types, thereby promoting harmonious student learning. Subsequent research has validated many of

Holland's claims, although positive effects are not uniform across the personality and environment types (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Most studies of Holland's vocational theory in higher education focus on its application in choosing academic concentrations. The applicability of Holland's theory to commuters is limited, because the theory is based on how individual typologies inform behavior rather than complex psychosocial interactions. According to Holland, both individuals and environments are static, which provides little reference for how individuals actually function within environments. That is to say, Holland's theory assumes that change occurs as individuals seek environments of increasing congruence with their personality types until stability is reached. Non-residential students are often constrained in their choice of college by proximity and ease of commute (Chickering, 1974). If the most convenient institution does not offer much in the way of ideal "fit," according to Holland's theory the student will be left feeling unsatisfied, since personality and environment are immutable. Holland's theory does not explain how pressures external to the individual yet unrelated to the TLE may influence how the individual engages *with* the environment as opposed to specifically *in* it.

Although not directly derived from Holland's work, Moos' social-ecological framework of educational development adds a psychological component to the way individuals make meaning of the TLE. Moos' model is fundamentally perceptual in emphasis, indicating that individual experience is subjective and that students will respond to the TLE in accordance with their perception of the environment (Jacoby & Garland, 2004-2005). Moos also acknowledges that individuals and environments both function as systems, combining multiple variables that interact to inform behavior (Moos, 1979).

Based on his study of college student living groups, Moos (1979) concluded that just as people have personalities, so do environments. His understanding of personality is more fluid than Holland's though: Rather than aligning neatly with individual personality types, Moos' personalities describe the types of behaviors that are rewarded or discouraged in an environment. He calls the aggregate of these behaviors the "social climate." According to Moos, every environment has a unique social climate that dictates the norms of individuals' inter- and intrapersonal interactions as well as the balance between stability and change. That being said, he and his colleagues identified six different clusters that describe the types of behaviors environements tend to support: Relationship oriented, Traditionally socially oriented, Supportive Achievement oriented, Competition oriented, Independence oriented, and Intellectually oriented.

Moos (1979) contends that behavior is not fixed but rather depends on individual perception and context. He describes how within different contexts, individuals have "ecological niches" that describe the types of behaviors they may demonstrate there. It may be this concept of ecological niches that best informs how Moos' theory may apply to commuter students. It could be argued that different social settings and the demands of the environment may cause individuals to display correspondingly different behaviors. For example, the role and attendant behaviors of the individual in the classroom probably look very than those displayed by the individual in the workplace.

Unfortunately, Moos' theory does not explain how interaction between niches occurs, except to say that they influence each other. Although Moos and his colleagues (1979) tested his model in a variety of settings, within higher educational institutions they only studied on-campus living arrangements. Their analyses place an inordinate amount of emphasis on the ways that living groups affect student development. They acknowledge that different development occurs

on campus versus off campus, but this finding was made in the context of students who started college as residential students and then moved off campus during their junior or senior years. These types of students who have a "hybrid" on and off campus living experience most likely perceive their off campuses living arrangements very differently from those students who live off campus throughout college. Moos assumes that institutional elements of the TLE – living groups and, to a lesser extent, classrooms – act as the nexus of socialization for college students. Commuters, who generally move among many ecological niches (Jacoby & Garland, 2004-2005), do not fit this pattern. Moos' theory does not elaborate on how push-pull factors among niches may have an impact on how individuals make meaning of their education vis à vis competing obligations.

One theory that is not typically considered to be a person-environment theory of student behavior, but which I believe is informs our understanding of the experiences of commuters is Tinto's Interactionalist Theory. Unlike Moos' and Holland's theories, which are mainly useful for understanding students' behavior within particular social niches in an institution, Tinto's theory describes how students engage with an institution as a whole. Tinto originally conceptualized his model to explain student departure, but I would argue that it can be more generally applied to understanding how students negotiate the push-pull factors I alluded to above that affect students' experiences in the TLE.

The basic assumption underlying Tinto's Interactionalist Theory is that retention is directly related to students' ability to achieve academic and/or social integration into the TLE (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration describes whether the student meets the institution's academic standards and the extent to which the student identifies with the institution's normative structures. Social integration describes the personal connections a student makes or does not

make with peers. In turn, the ability to integrate interacts with the individual's level of goal and institutional commitments. According to Tinto the difference between the two types of goals is, "Goal commitment refers to a person's commitment to personal and occupation goals. It specifies the person's willingness to work toward the attainment of those goals. Institutional commitment refers to the person's commitment to the institution in which he/she is enrolled. It indicates the degree to which one is willing to work toward the attainment of one's goals within a given higher educational institution" (p.43). Specific features of the TLE may directly influence the individual's institutional commitment.

Drawing from Astin's (1984) and Kuh and associates' (1991) research, Tinto (1993) posits that successful integration is achieved through involvement with institutional agents, i.e., faculty, or one or more student subcultures. Should a student be unable to make social connections on campus, isolation may occur. On the other hand, if students make contacts on campus and subsequently learn that their values are at odds with those of the institution, they may experience incongruence. It is likely that commuting students at primarily residential institutions may feel that their needs are incongruent with the character of the academic institution. This incongruence could undermine attempts at academic and social integration leading, in turn, to isolation. Tinto describes commuters as "visitors" to the campus who often remain marginalized in relation to the majority of educational activities.

The strength, though some would say the weakness (Tierney, 1992), of Tinto's Interactionalist Theory (1993) is that it uses Van Gennep's (1960) concept of rites of passage and Durkeim's (1951) theory of social suicide to inform our understanding of behaviors associated with college departure. In drawing from these two theories, Tinto conceives of the TLE as a self-regulating microcosm of society. From Van Gennep, Tinto finds parallels between the three rites

of passages associated with adulthood – separation, transition, and incorporation – and the way students navigate new college environments. Tinto states, "Many college students are, after all, moving from one community or set of communities, most typically those of the family and local high school, to another, that of the college" (p. 94). Extrapolating from Durkheim's work, Tinto suggests that students who feel incongruous or isolated from the college community will commit "suicide" by withdrawing from that community and dropping out of college.

Based on the experiences of traditional, residential students, Tinto describes college-going as an either/or proposition: Individuals go to college or they do something else. This assumption weakens his model's explanatory power for understanding commuting students. If college success depends in part upon an individual's ability to separate, transition, and incorporate into a new community, commuter students who maintain ties to multiple communities, many of which are external to the TLE, face daunting challenges. Unless the student lives alone off campus with no off campus employment obligations, she is bound to maintain membership in at least one external community whose cultural norms may erode the student's goal and/or institutional commitment. Realistically most commuter students maintain many external commitments that compete with students' campus engagement.

In a study of persistence decisions among a sample drawn from a four-year institution that serves primarily commuter students, Johnson (1997) found that retained students tended to interact with faculty more frequently than dropouts. Furthermore, retained students found it easier to find the answers to their educational questions than non-persisters. These findings suggest that the emphasis Tinto places on the strength of student's on-campus social network is valid in practice. Liu and Liu (1999) also found that faulty interaction, particularly informally, was positively related to retention among commuter students. However, Ashar and Skenes

(1993) found that among adult learners social integration had a significant positive effect on retention but academic integration did not. The authors posit that these findings may be specific to experienced professional management students or may speak to a characteristic of adult students as a whole; That is, for adult students, learning as an intellectual endeavor may not be as much of a motivator as peer support.

As the studies above illustrate, research on the application of Tinto's model tends to focus on how institutional structures affect college students' experiences, particularly retention decisions. This trend is consistent with the Interactionalist Theory, which focuses on intra-college interactional factors. Tinto (1993) offers the caveat, though, that "By nesting the college within the larger external community, the [Interactionalist] model leaves upon the possibility that events in communities external to the college may shape what occurs within the narrower confines of the college" (p. 126). He acknowledges that while most external commitments (e.g., family, friends outside of the college, neighborhoods) compete with internal commitments (college-oriented) for an individual's time and psychological resources, in some cases the external commitments support academic persistence and success. In sum, though, he believes that circumstances internal to the college community have a larger impact on the student than those external – a conclusion that I believe warrants additional empirical research. That being said, I can see how arrived at this conclusion given his academic context of wanting to provide organizationally-based recommendations for improving student retention.

An Alternative Model for Understanding Commuter Students' Experiences

Tinto (1987) briefly mentions that a system of "nests" may help elucidate the push-pull mechanisms that undergird the dynamic between students' external and internal commitments. Tinto does not offer a detailed explanation of what that model may look like, but he recognizes

that such a model may offer insight into how intersecting demands may affect how commuter students engage with TLE. Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1993) ecological model of human development provides the connection between the individual and multiple competing environments/commitments that previous literature has thus far overlooked.

Bronfenbrenner (1993) modified Lewin's (1935) schema that behavior is a function of the person and environment to that proposition that development is a function of the person and environment, or more specifically, the elements of person, process, context, and time (PPCT). Bronfenbrenner asserts that the shift from behavior to development reflects the inclusion of time in the equation, but it also implies a sense of individual change. That is, in the original proposition, both the person and the environment were fixed entities. Bronfenbrenner's model describes contextual structures, with an emphasis on how process affects development. Although the ecology model was originally used to explain the life span, it is applicable to many situations wherein individuals change as a result of accommodating dynamic environments. Thus, it provides an ideal heuristic framework for conceptualizing how commuter students make sense of their multiple life roles.

Bronfenbrenner (1993) opines that "development is an evolving function of person-environment interaction" (p. 10). At the most basic level the person (individual) engages in face-to-face interactions in discrete settings, the act of which describes a microsystem. The mesosystem describes those processes of interaction between one or more microsystems. Within the mesosystem, "*Special attention is focused on the synergistic effects created by the interaction of developmentally instigative or inhibitory features and processes present in each setting*" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 22, italics in original). The interrelations present in the mesosystem – the system of microsystems – closely mirror the push-pull that commuters experience in

negotiating their multiple commitments. For example, a commuter's mesosystem may comprise his job, family (parents), family (partner and children), religious organization, college classrooms, and college peer groups. All of these microsystems demand attention and energy from the student both in terms of time and psychological output. The demands, in turn, are the "instigative or inhibitory features" that promote individual development. The exosystem comprises those events or settings in which individuals do not actually participate but which indirectly affect them. The macrosystem describes societal level systems, such as cultural norms or class structures. Finally, the chronosystem involves the events that occur at a sociohistorical level or major individual life transitions (Renn, 2003).

In Figure 1 below I have created an illustration of the interactions among systems that may occur within a commuter student in Michigan.

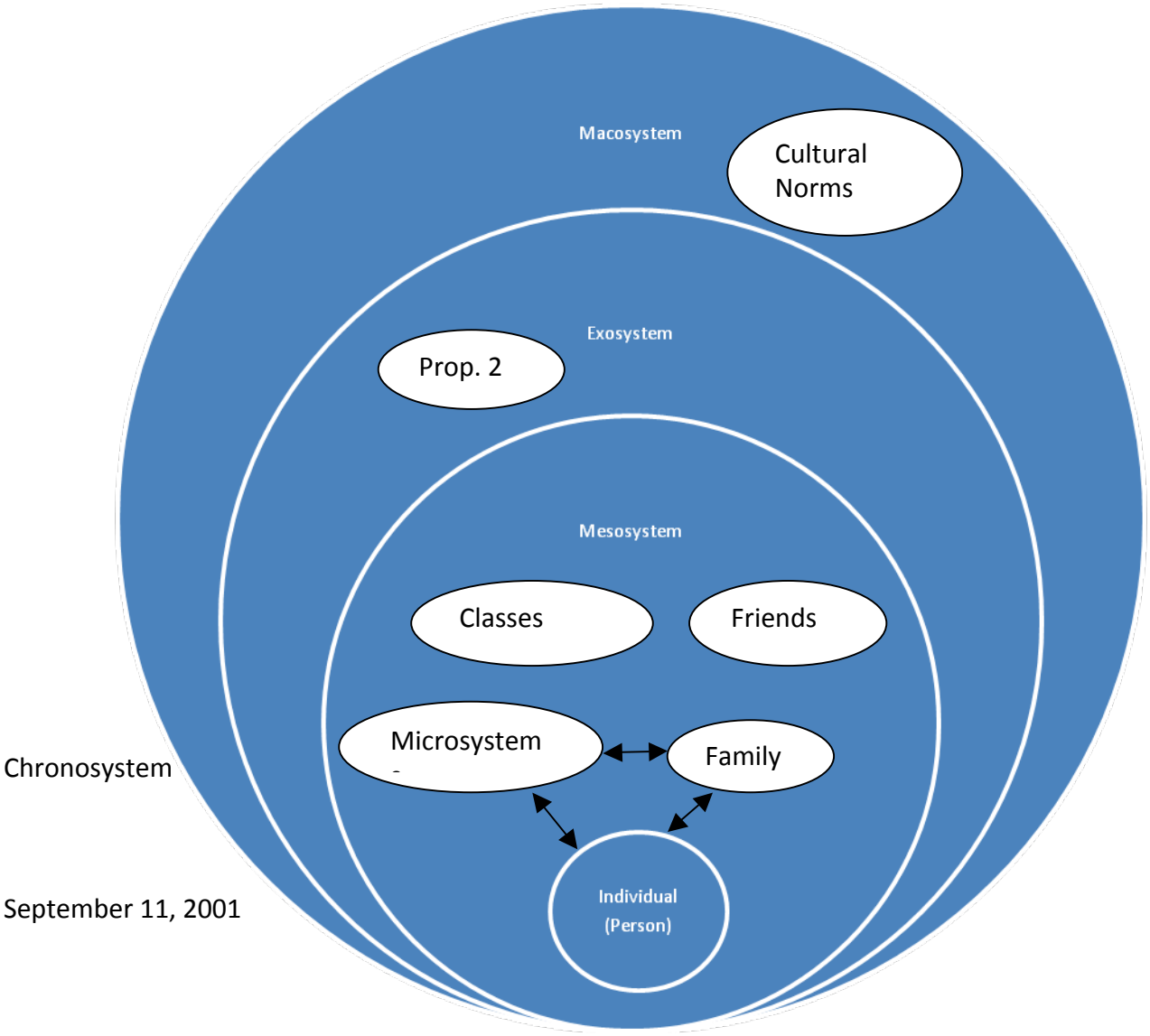

Figure 1: Example of system dynamics

This model describes how the individual student is embedded within a series of nested systems that either directly or indirectly affects her. The arrows within the mesosystem symbolize how different microsystems have an impact on both the individual and each other. The exosystem includes Proposition 2, which may not have a direct effect on the student but does alter the

educational landscape as a whole. College going cultural norms lie within the macrosystem, and major historical events like the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 exist within the chronosystem.

To my knowledge, there have been no empirical studies thus far testing the utility of Bronfenbrenner's ecology model of human development in understanding the experiences of commuting college students. Renn (2003) has applied the PPCT model to the identity development of mixed-race college students. She found that the model was useful for explaining how students negotiate their identities vis à vis their environments but that the model fails to capture the evolution of identity over time. She notes, however:

> Unlike environmental models based on the assumption that students study full-time and live on campus or commute from home, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) model is flexible to fit any student situation, from a first-time, full-time, first-year student just out of high school and living in a residence hall to a re-entry, part-time adult learner with a full-time job and a family to support. Students of any description have multiple microsystems concentrated in the college setting, whereas others will have more diverse settings in which they participate. And the same microsystem – a particular psychology seminar, for example – will provoke and provide different developmental responses and stimuli to each student, depending on those students' backgrounds and developmentally instigative characteristics. (p. 388)

Directions for Future Research

Through the course of studying the literature on environmental frameworks in relation to commuters I noticed several distinct research areas that future studies should address. Obviously, my discussion thus far is theoretical and empirical research is necessary to test the

validity of using Bronfenbrenner's model to understand commuters' experiences. Although the model may not have predictive power for commuter student retention, a closer look at the interactions among commuters' microsystems may help inform educational institutions better serve their students.

Another direction for research may involve modifying Tinto's Interactionalist Model to better reflect commuter students' participation in higher education. In their study of nontraditional students, Ashar and Skenes (1993) replaced Tinto's use of "institution" with "classes" as the unit of analysis – a method unique among the literature I studied. Given that some commuter students study part-time or that a commuter's only connection to the campus may be through classes, the way commuters integrate into individual classes may be more important to understanding their behavior than more broadly defined organizational integration. Perhaps the study of commuter students would benefit overall from a paradigm shift away from analyzing the ways commuters (fail to) engage with institutions as whole to analyzing microsystems within institutions. Such a shift may provide more useful data to enlighten best practices for commuter programs than additional research that shows that what works for residential students does not necessarily work for commuters.

I would also recommend that future studies disaggregate different types of commuters, perhaps by type of residence, commuting distance, age, or part-time versus full-time status. As it is, the literature is unclear about what characteristics are unique to the different categories of commuters. We cannot tell, for example, how the needs of students over age 24 differ from students who have children or how students who live with their parents differ from students who work full-time. Existing studies tend to compare one subset of the much larger commuter student population, so comparisons between different kinds of students are difficult to be made.

Finally, given the pervasiveness of technology on college campuses, it would be interesting to see whether online networking opportunities change the ways that commuters engage the TLE. It could be argued that the growing realm of behaviors associated with online communication – including social networking sites, email, bulletin boards, etc. – represent a major evolution in the processes that connect individuals to their various microsystems. The effect of technology is not limited to the TLE; rather, the ability to work from home or shop online may revolutionize the ways that individuals structure their time which could, in turn, indirectly alter the way they experience the TLE. One study of first-year Australian commuters found that the students' three broad contexts for peer involvement were classes with group work components, out of class settings during breaks, and online interactions. Reactions to online communications were mixed, but the students unanimously agreed that virtual interactions do not compensate for lack of in-person contact with peers (Krause, 2007). It would be interesting to see whether the results of this study could be replicated in the United States or if the results would vary according to age.

Conclusion

Commuters represent the majority of students enrolled in institutions of higher education today, yet TLEs are rarely designed with them in mind. I cannot help but wonder what an institution would look like if it were conceived to serve commuters, as at least most bricks and mortar campuses today, even "commuter institutions" generally adhere to traditional educational models and expect commuters to adapt accordingly. While virtual universities offer viable alternatives to traditional institutions in terms of convenience, it is unclear whether the developmental outcomes associated with the two types of institutions are analogous. Moreover, in my research I came across no studies that looked at the outcomes of traditional schools'

"extension programs" that purport to provide educational experiences on par with those of the "regular" undergraduate program yet tend to be extremely competitive and non-transferrable. There seems to be a disconnect between who college students actually are and whom institutions would like them to be. Unfortunately, until reality at an organizational level sinks in, the majority of students will continue to suffer as a result of institutional blindness.

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