

# Involving Students in Research at a Commuter College

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The obvious distinguishing characteristic of a commuter college such as Lehman College, the City University of New York, is that all of our students live off campus. Immediately, this makes the forging of any sense of community extremely difficult. Writing about commuter students for an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Lipka (2007) reported that George D. Kuh, Director of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) referred to commuter students as “less engaged, less satisfied, and more likely to drop out” (p. A31). For most commuter students, the idea of the college as a meeting place, a “home” where students spend time, make friends, and “hang out,” simply does not exist. Instead the college is where they go, when they must, to take classes. The majority of their lives are elsewhere.

But there are other differences as well: Lehman College’s undergraduate students in fall 2006 tended to be older than “traditional” college students (20% were 35 years and above, only 34% were between 19 & 22 years), overwhelmingly minority (48% Hispanic, 33% African American, 10% White), and of low socioeconomic status (80% receiving financial aid). In addition, often they are parents, work full-time, started college elsewhere (sometimes a long time ago), and frequently seem to not have had prior good experiences in college. Thus, our students tend to focus on immediate career possibilities and short-term goals. They generally are in a rush to graduate. It seems that in their eyes, they need a degree to move on with their lives. Furthermore, their immediate family and friends tend not to be college graduates and are even less likely to possess more advanced degrees. Thus, for many if not most of our students, family and friends are not going to be supportive of their spending more than the minimum time on campus, especially when that time is spent on something as abstract as “research.” Family and friends tend to be much more supportive of spending non-class time on “real work” or on activities with them.

Yet faculty know that research experience is critical for acceptance into graduate programs:

Norcross, Kohout, and Wicherski (2006) analyzed admissions information from almost 80% of the psychology graduate programs in the U.S. and Canada and found that research experience was rated as highly important for both masters and doctoral programs. Perhaps not surprisingly, doctoral programs actually gave research experience a higher rating than master’s programs did. Similarly, Walfish and Turner (2006) found research experience to be the 4<sup>th</sup> highest rated criterion, ahead of overall GPA, for acceptance into doctoral programs in Developmental Psychology. It is now common for articles advising students about applying to graduate schools to stress the importance of research experience (e.g., Cynkar, 2007; Schoeneman & Schoeneman, 2006) and students themselves acknowledge it (e.g., Grover, 2006; LaRoche, 2004; Purdy, 2005). Research experience also is important in preparation for the job market (Sleigh & Ritzer, 2007).

Given the obvious importance of research experience, how does one successfully involve nontraditional, commuting students? Few guides exist. For example, when Ocampo et al. (2003) reviewed 2,029 articles on diversity published in the journal *Teaching of Psychology* between 1974 and 2002, they found that only 3% concerned nontraditional students and none focused on socioeconomic status. In one study explicitly focused on nontraditional students, Chartrand (1992) used a self-report questionnaire to examine factors affecting their intention to continue their studies. She found degree of certainty in their choice of majors and support from family and friends to be important factors; however, finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities, were not important factors. Articles concerning factors involved in ethnic minority student success tend to focus on issues of adjustment to being on predominantly majority campuses (e.g., Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Thomason, 1999; Walton & Cohen, 2007). In one study that did survey students on diverse campuses, Santos, Ortiz, Morales and Rosales (2007) found that

the strongest positive dimension among African American, Latino, and Asian students was a sense of belonging.

## **Recruiting Students into Research**

As the profiles of nontraditional students and Lehman College students in particular suggest, getting these students interested and involved in research carries unique challenges. Even many of those with the desire and capability to pursue graduate studies in psychology do not know how important research experience is to that goal. Targeting these students is a department-wide priority. Students need to hear continually in their classes about the importance of research and about research opportunities available. We post information about faculty research projects in the hallways, on the web, and include it in a department brochure. An active chapter of Psi Chi, The National Honor Society in Psychology, helps to reinforce these messages. Psi Chi's magazine, *Eye on Psi Chi*, often contains articles about student research and its importance in graduate school admissions (e.g., Grover, 2006; La Roche, 2004; Norcross, et al., 2006, Purdy, 2005; Sleigh & Ritzer, 2007; Walfish & Turner, 2006). The goal is to create an atmosphere within the department that being involved in research is something expected of students planning graduate studies.

One of the best ways to recruit students is through one's classes. First-hand observation of a student's work habits, intellectual curiosity and maturity are invaluable aids to selecting students who will be successful research assistants. However, another hallmark of commuter colleges is that a large number of classes are taught by part-time faculty. Thus, developing a culture in which faculty, including adjunct faculty, continually refer students to those with active research projects is important.

## **Helping Commuter Students Find Time for Research**

Once students become interested in research, helping them to find enough time in their schedules to do that research is another major challenge. Here is where funding, either external or internal, can be critical. Optimally, enough funding should be available to allow students to leave their regular part-time jobs or to pay for child care while they work on their research. Our students have been funded through such institutional mechanisms as the *Minority Access to Research Careers* program (MARC) under the National Institutes of Health

(NIH), the *Minority Research Infrastructure Support Program* (M-RISP) under the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH), the *Alliance for Minority Participation in the Sciences* (AMPS), under the National Science Foundation and the *McNair* program under the Department of Education.

Another avenue to support research time is course credit through Independent Study and Honors Research courses. Because our students often are interested in the fastest route to graduation, opportunities to gain more credits are attractive, but we have to be sensitive to whether this option is actually creating more time. Allowing students to increase their semester course load from 15 to 18 credits by adding research based independent study courses might not be effective in freeing time for research. Sometimes highly talented, motivated and interested students simply cannot make sufficient time in their schedules for research.

Clearly it is best to recruit students to research early in their academic careers; however, this practice becomes problematic when so many students arrive in their junior year as transfers. Thus, students' involvement in research projects must be weighed against their anticipated time left at the college. Although students can make real contributions in as little as a single semester, expecting students to start and finish a research project in one semester often is unrealistic.

## **Conducting Research Projects**

The time factor creates two distinct types of student involvement in research projects: Some students, mostly those recruited early, participate in all aspects of the research, from design, through data collection, all the way to analysis and presentation or even publication of the results. These students might even pursue their own independent research projects as well. Other students, however, participate, as their time allows, on more "multigenerational" projects. They might work on data collection and analysis for a project already designed. Or they might have responsibility for a single experiment of a multi-experiment project. Some students who work on a project might even graduate before the entire project is completed.

In working with both groups of students, clear sets of goals are important, principally because of the time factor. Commuting students are continually juggling their commitments, taking time from task A to do task B. Thus, clear time requirements, work expectations and objectives are essential to keep the students focused and to keep work progressing. Regular meetings with clear foci are essential (e.g., to

discuss the results of a student's search for relevant literature, to review summaries the student has written of articles read, to plan a schedule for data collection, to monitor data collection and identify unforeseen problems, to plan analyses, to rehearse presentations). It is important to remember that students are sacrificing time from other important activities to do research. Thus, their time should be used effectively.

Group meetings can be efficient if the students are working on aspects of the same research project. However, it might be difficult to find a time when everyone can get together, so it is more likely that faculty will work with students individually. I have been finding email an important asset in this area. More and more my students and I communicate this way, "discussing" problems or new leads, or just staying in touch to maintain momentum.

It should be noted that staying abreast of student progress is not the same as micromanagement. It is important that students develop the ability to work on their own, and have sufficient time to wrestle with unanticipated problems and difficulties. However regular contacts can be very effective in moving the project forward and keeping students from feeling lost or overwhelmed.

Building a sense of community among commuting students involved in research projects with different faculty is difficult, but important. Peers can be sources of assistance when students get stumped by difficult readings or analysis questions. Being more mature than traditional-aged college students, our students tend to be more concerned about "wasting" a professor's time with too many questions or creating a poor impression of their competence. This concern makes them more likely to seek help from fellow students rather than running immediately to their faculty mentor. As students are not likely to see role models among their families and friends, it becomes important that their involvement in research does not make them feel isolated from other students as well. For several years, our department maintained a computer laboratory that was supervised by members of our Psi Chi chapter and available to all students conducting research and to Psi Chi members. This facility was a great advantage in building camaraderie and providing a sense of "home" on the campus. Unfortunately we recently were forced to give it up and our student research productivity has suffered. We are currently seeking to reinstate a similar facility.

Other models for conducting research can be found in Karukstis and Elgren (2007). The Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) and its publication, *The CUR Quarterly*, also can be excellent resources.

## Acknowledging Student Success

Student involvement in research should be celebrated publicly for several reasons. First, and probably most important, is because research is difficult. Students who have risen to the challenges and sacrificed the time and effort required to complete their research projects deserve special notice. We often publicly display student posters. Students who complete honors research projects are acknowledged publicly at a post-commencement reception. Students who receive Psi Chi Regional or National Research Awards, or other awards are often featured prominently on the College web site.

Another reason to publicize student research is to show the students' family and friends that their research work is important and acknowledged. A listing on the College web site, mention in the local newspaper, certificate from an "external" source, all serve to demonstrate that research involvement is seen as a "big deal." Students currently involved in research can point to publicity about former students as a way to legitimize their activities, to explain why they are spending so much valuable time on campus.

Finally, publicity is an important aid in recruitment of new students into research. As noted earlier, creating an atmosphere that expects student to be involved in research is critical. By consistently reminding students that there are tangible gains to their research involvement can help to attract new students. Indeed, it may even do more. Recently Walton and Cohen (2007) suggested that one of the barriers to minority students' pursuit of careers in science was that they had difficulty seeing themselves as belonging in those fields. Minority students who were reminded how few students like them were enrolled in specific science majors were less likely to see themselves in those majors as compared to students who were not explicitly reminded. In a follow-up intervention study, African-American students who were given information designed to normalize their doubts about belonging in college, that is, to show them that all students share some of the doubts they were experiencing, increased their sense of belonging and their engagement in activities such as studying (there also was some evidence that their GPA's improved as well). Creating an environment in which students see the successes of students like them might also help to convince them that graduate school and professional careers are real possibilities.

## Closing Thoughts

Although many of the challenges in successfully involving the commuter student at Lehman are the same as involving more traditional students at traditional institutions, many are different. With our students, it is especially important to remember that factors outside our or our students' control will occur: family members will become sick or even die, children will need more attention than planned, apartments will burn, and students with terrific potential will find it impossible to engage in research. But because their involvement in research can be critically important to their futures, the efforts are well worth it.

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