



# Reaching Commuter Students

By Emily Hixon,  
Instructional Design Specialist

It's easy to describe the "typical" undergraduate student at an institution like IU Bloomington. He or she is likely between 17 and 22 years of age, goes to school full-time, works part-time (if at all), lives on campus or very nearby and takes most of his/her classes during the day.

It is far more difficult to describe a "typical" undergraduate student at IU Northwest. Some of our students are "college age," but others are older and many have children. About half our students attend college full-time, while the other half-attend part-time. Some of our students do not work, but many work part-time, full-time or hold down numerous jobs. None of our students live on-campus, but some live relatively close by while others commute quite a distance. Many of our students take classes during the day, but most take at least some of their classes in the evenings, perhaps at off-campus instructional sites.

Even with the diversity of our student body, they all have one thing in common...they are all commuter students; and, according to B. Jacoby in a 1989 report entitled, *The commuter as student: Developing a comprehensive institutional response*, "the fact that they commute to college profoundly influences the nature of their educational experience" (p. 4). Jacoby also identifies some common needs and concerns shared by commuter students, including (p. 5-7):

- **Transportation Issues:** This may include concerns about parking, traffic, inclement weather, maintaining a car, transportation costs, arranging for transportation, etc. Taking transportation issues into consideration, our students may schedule classes in blocks and spend little additional time on campus.
- **Multiple Life Roles:** Although being a student is demanding, it is only one of our students' many important and demanding life roles. Our students are also spouses, parents, children, siblings, friends, employees, co-workers, community members, heads-of-households, caregivers, etc. Having these various responsibilities in addition to completing their education leads our students to choose their campus involvements carefully.
- **Integrating Support Systems:** Our students' primary support network likely exists off-campus and may include parents, siblings, spouses, friends, co-workers, etc. Students must continually renegotiate priorities and time requirements

to ensure that all areas of their life are being adequately supported. For our many students who are first-generation college students, gaining support for their education may be more difficult if individuals within their support network are not familiar with the challenges and opportunities of college.

- **Developing a Sense of Belonging:** Since our students likely have an established support network outside of the university and may spend relatively little of their "free" time on campus, they may lack a sense of belonging on campus. Students who don't feel connected to the institution will have a different collegiate experience than students who develop personal relationships and feel a sense of belonging.

It is important for faculty and staff at IU Northwest to recognize the challenges and opportunities associated with these issues related to our students-as-commuters. T.J. Stoops, director of the Occupational Development Program which provides tutoring and other services to students, recognizes the importance of helping students develop a sense of belonging on campus. She emphasizes that students need a person and/or place on campus to identify with, somewhere they can feel "at home." She says, "When I was a student here, I also worked on campus and that provided me with a connection that I am sure helped me succeed in my classes." Stoops works hard to create a welcoming atmosphere for students. She has learned that even the little things like having some extra pens and pencils around in case a student doesn't have one, keeping a supply of gum and coffee on-hand for tired students who may be coming to class after a hard day's work, or having a water cooler that also has hot water for students to make a hot beverage or a quick meal, go a long way with students. She emphasizes, "If we can get them hooked in that first year, then we've got them."

Paul Blohm, Ph.D., professor of education, also recognizes the importance of helping students develop a sense of belonging. He has been pleased to notice that students have been "hanging out" more on campus in the last few years. He notes that the tables placed outside around the grounds are serving as meeting places for students, and that Moraine Student Center is being used more, especially since the Office of Career Services moved there.

While acknowledging the importance of feeling connected to campus, Patricia Hicks-Hosch, Ph.D., director of Student Support Services, points out that, "For students who are commuters, one benefit is that they still

have the support they grew up with in contrast to students who go away to school." She emphasizes that, "When you're at a commuter school, you have some advantages with regard to not having your life disrupted in the same way. You can still maintain your same friendships, your job and you won't miss your dog."

Blohm agrees, adding that one of the university's greatest strengths is the fact that we are able to offer a high-quality, Big Ten education to people of Northwest Indiana who otherwise may not be able to get a college education.

The fact that IU Northwest is a commuter campus serving a diverse region presents opportunities for enhanced learning. Hicks-Hosch says, "One of the main opportunities for IU Northwest students and professors is related to the high level of diversity in the classroom. The opportunity to teach and interact with returning adult students (who bring a lot of life experience into the classroom) enhances the educational experience for all." While students may struggle to negotiate their many life roles and integrate their support networks, faculty can build upon the diversity of our student body and help students understand how their vast life experiences can enhance their educational experience.

**Faculty are invited to join Patricia Hicks-Hosch, Ph.D., in an informal Brown Bag Discussion about teaching at a commuter campus. The CETL-sponsored session will be held on Thursday, Oct. 14 from 12:30 - 2 p.m. If you are interested in attending, please register at the CETL Web site.**

## Upcoming CETL Events

To register, please visit: <http://www.iun.edu/~cetl/services/workshops.shtml>

### Oncourse Training

Monday, Oct. 4  
9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

#### 9:30 – 11:00 a.m. *In Touch Tools*

Learn about the various communication tools within Oncourse including Course Mail, Discussion Forums, Chat Rooms, Drop Boxes, and Group Spaces.

#### Noon– 1:30 p.m. *Gradebooks*

Learn how to use Oncourse to manage your students' grades and allow your students to monitor their progress 24/7.

2:00 – 3:30 p.m. *Oncourse Assessment Manager* (information session) The NEW Oncourse Assessment Manager will be replacing the current Test & Survey tool. Learn about the features of the new Assessment Manager and participate in a question/answer session.

### Student Evaluation of Online Teaching

Wednesday, Oct. 13  
Noon – 12:50 p.m.

In this session, presenters Saxon Reasons, Ph.D., and Charles Harrington, Ph.D., University of Southern Indiana, will describe the USI's pilot project supporting online evaluation for distance education courses, outline the early successes and challenges thus far, plans for the future, and provide recommendations for institutions facing similar challenges.

### Brown Bag: Teaching at a Commuter Campus

Thursday, Oct. 14  
12:30 – 2 p.m.

Teaching at a commuter campus presents faculty with some unique challenges, but also a wealth of opportunities. Bring your

lunch and join your colleagues in an informal Brown Bag Discussion related to the topic of "Teaching at a Commuter Campus." Patricia Hicks-Hosch, Ph.D., director of Student Support Services and an adjunct professor of minority studies, will assist in the facilitation of this session.

### Outlook Tips & Tricks – Basic

Monday, Oct. 18, 10 – 11 a.m. **OR**  
Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2 – 3 p.m.

Learn some tips and tricks of Microsoft Outlook to help you manage your e-mail. Topics that will be addressed include:

- Creating and using folders
- Deleting old mail messages
- Creating contacts and distribution lists
- Using IU's SPAM blocking tool

This session will be facilitated by Carol Wood, Ph.D., director of technical services.

### Teaching Tips Roundtables & Poster Sessions

Wednesday, Oct. 20  
Noon-1:30 p.m.

Bring your lunch, choose a topic of one of the roundtables or poster sessions and join your colleagues in a discussion of what has worked especially well for them in the classroom. Examples of roundtables include: how to use the Web for presenting classroom content and for improving communication between students and with the professor, and how research projects and papers can involve library databases and other electronic fulltext resources that in the process increase students' critical thinking skills and add diversity of viewpoints into the course. This session is co-sponsored by the Faculty Development Committee and CETL.



## Contact Us:

Center for Excellence in  
Teaching and Learning  
IU Northwest  
3400 Broadway  
Library, 332B  
Gary, IN 46408  
phone: (219) 980-6755  
fax: (219) 980-6762  
email: [cetl@iun.edu](mailto:cetl@iun.edu)

[www.iun.edu/~cetl](http://www.iun.edu/~cetl)

## Faculty Spotlight:

Ana Osan, Ph.D.



When Ana Osan, Ph.D., was a student at IU Northwest pursuing three majors, she wasn't sure what career she wanted to follow. It was her teachers and mentors who helped her realize her passion for learning and helping others learn. Inspired and

encouraged by her professors at IU Northwest, including the late Inma Myers, Ph.D., and Angeline Komenich, Ph.D., Osan attended graduate school at the University of Chicago and is now in her eighth year of teaching at the university, as an assistant professor of Spanish.

Remembering what it was like to be a "non-traditional" college student, Osan recognizes that many of her students are juggling numerous responsibilities including work, family, and school. She says, "This is a commuter campus, and I keep that very much in mind." Osan believes that faculty members need to be empathetic with their students and acknowledge that a student's personal life can impact the learning process. She states, "I have adopted a very flexible stance, but that doesn't mean that I compromise my standards." Osan doesn't accept laziness and reminds her students at the beginning of the semester that while she is there to help them learn, they have to put forth the effort.

In 2003, Osan received both the Founder's Day Teaching Award and the Trustees Teaching Award in recognition of her dedication to exemplary teaching. Her passion for teaching is evident, and is reflected in a comment she made about a recent student. As she shared how one of her students will be attending graduate school after completing her Bachelor's degree while working full-time and being a single parent, she affectionately said, "I am very proud of her." Osan is active within the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning where she continues to develop her skills as a teacher and share what she has learned about teaching with others.

## Resource Spotlight:

### Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice

This book addresses what changes when teaching is learner-centered and how to implement a learner-centered approach.

#### Tips from this book:

- Instead of covering content, use content to develop a knowledge base, develop learning skills, and create learner awareness. To make these changes, utilize "active learning strategies that allow students firsthand experience with the content" (p. 52).
- While there are times when it is important for you to do learning tasks (e.g., organizing content, generative examples, asking questions, answering questions, summarizing discussion, solving problems), try doing these activities less frequently and allowing students to complete such tasks. (p. 82).
- Help students see that learning matters more than grades by focusing on learning processes, reducing the stress and anxiety associated with evaluations, and incorporating more formative feedback (p. 125-130).
- When moving toward a more learner-centered approach, be open and honest with students about how your approach may be different from what they are used to, and don't assume that anything is obvious (p. 157).

For more tips on these topics and others, stop by CETL to borrow this book!

Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.