

# Commuting creates unique problems

By Tony Perry

Commuter students are a rare bunch. They don't talk about their roommates or complain about cafeteria food or regret the hastened arrival of graduation day. They don't complain about the conditions of the dorm rooms and they rarely know what color their bedrooms are painted. And, they never, ever, talk about leaving school to enter "the real world."

Leaving home for the first time and going to college is difficult enough, but becoming a commuter student is, in some ways, even more challenging. Depending on the student's distance from the school, the time spent traveling limits the student's available time for studying and participating in extra-curricular activities.

"Time is a unique problem for the commuter student," said Jay Ebersole, vice president/dean of Student Affairs at Harrisburg Area Community College. "Time and external commitments are probably the two strongest holds on a commuter student."

"[A commuter student's] life is very full and rigorous," said Ruth Leventhal, Capitol Campus provost. "To really enrich their experience here is a challenge." Creating programs that will be viewed as important enough for a commuter student to devote some of his or her "already scarce time" is one of the primary problems of a predominantly commuter campus, she said.

Approximately 64 percent of Capitol's 2500 students commute to school from distances as far away as Somerset, Pa.

attend classes and leave right away to attend to their jobs, families or other commitments. Because of this, many commuters feel alienated from the campus community and don't believe the school offers them as much as it offers resident students.

"Commuter students often feel that we don't care about them," said Sharleen Martenas, former administrative assistant in the Student Affairs Office.

Martenas said many commuters frequently feel ignored because they do not participate in campus activities as heavily as many resident students do. But, for the most part, this isn't because they are not interested in the activities.

"A few of the full-time students who live off campus may be interested in getting involved in one student organization," Martenas said, but some of the commuting students never hear about available campus activities. "Many of them (commuter students) don't have the time to participate and may resent it if they are approached." Even when the commuter students do become involved in student activities, their participation is often limited because of their limited available time.

"Depending on the distance that they live, a lot of commuters cannot be expected to run back to campus for an evening event," said Dave Doaty, Coordinator of Student Services at Capitol.

In addition to a generally decreased interest in activities

"Someone living on campus will have a roommate or neighbor that they can go to for help," Doaty said. "Hopefully, commuters will meet other people in their classes that they can call for assistance."

Doaty said many students form study groups that commuter students may not be able to participate in because of a lack of time.

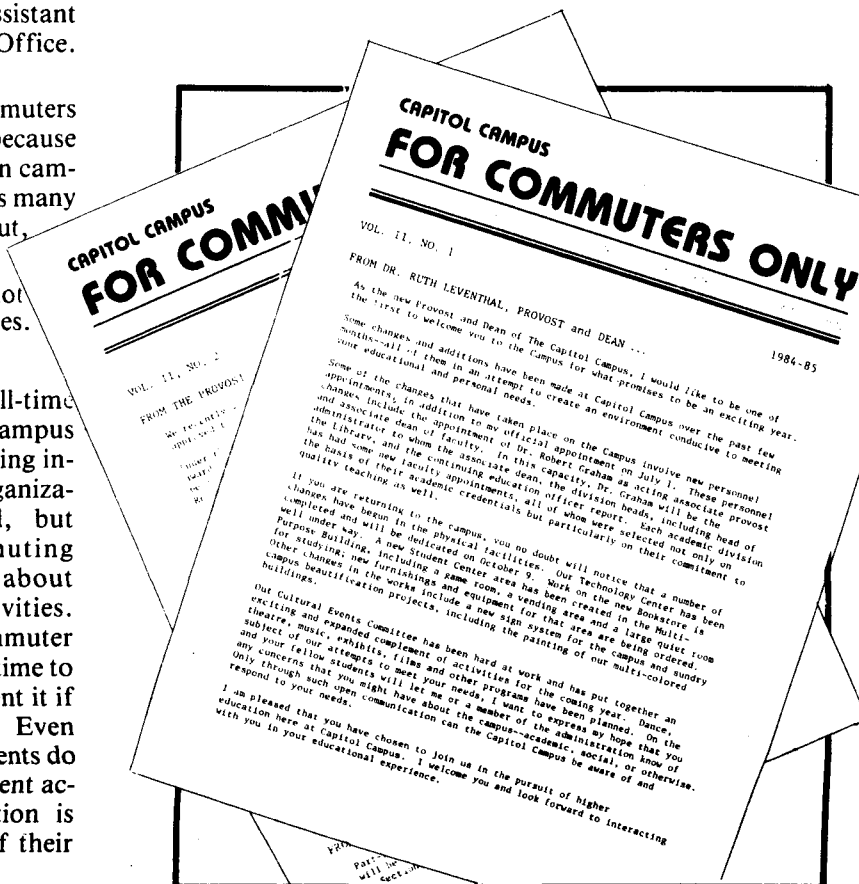
the morning, he or she may well be able to get a four-year degree taking only afternoon and evening courses."

The commuting distance is also a factor in the student's success. In addition, the fact that commuters do not have to pay room and board fees doesn't necessarily make commuting less expensive than becoming a resident student. In

order to commute, the student must consider the cost of transportation; "Should I buy a car," "how much will insurance cost," "is public transportation available," and, of course, "is there a carpool nearby" are all questions that need to be answered when deciding to commute.

Of course, for many students, particularly people who are returning to school after a few years away from academe, commuting is the only way to obtain a college degree. And many attend school at the expense of some other part of their lives such as employment, friendships or marriages.

In order to make commuter students feel more accepted on campus, many school are taking steps to ease the burden on its mobile scholars. Shippensburg University posts notices of activities in the student union building there and offers a taped phone message that lists activities for commuters who come from as far away as Harrisburg, Hagerstown and Gettysburg. The University of Maryland's College Park campus has a twelve-year-old office of commuter affairs that operates a shuttle bus for commuter students and acts as an advocate with other people on campus to increase sensitivity to commuter needs.



"They may be spending a couple of hours on the road and that can cut down on the amount of study time available.

As a result, commuter students tend to be very self-sufficient. They schedule their time -- as it is the only way anything gets done -- and arrange their schedules to best suit themselves. Gary Wilhide, director of public relations and publications for Shippensburg University, said that commuters to that school arrange their own carpools.

"They pretty well match themselves up," he said. "They find people in their classes and so forth."

Wilhide was a commuter when he attended Shippensburg (then Shippensburg State College) and he said he did not let the trip from Chambersburg to Shippensburg effect his participation in extra-curricular activities.

"It's up to the individual student and his or her needs whether or not commuting would be a positive experience," he said. "The student would probably want to schedule courses in such a manner that they would be convenient. If a student has a job in

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**"To really enrich [the commuter student's] experience here is a challenge."**

**Ruth Leventhal  
Provost/Dean**

HACC has no on-campus housing, and with an average student age of approximately 27, the time constraint on a commuting student is even more vital to the school's success.

On a primarily residential campus, Ebersole said, there is a lot of the student's time left to be filled and that leads to student participation in extracurricular activities, many of which may be related to the student's program of study.

In contrast, a commuter student may drive to the campus,

programs, commuter students also often suffer from a lack of time for course work. Since they tend to schedule classes so that they will be convenient for their outside activities, commuter students tend to shy away from large gaps of time between classes and then leave campus right away. This gives them very little time to talk to professors during office hours, do research in the campus library, and work on extended class projects with other students.