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### Extension of a Commuter Advisor and Engagement Program

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Mike Secreti

Extension of a Commuter Advisor and Engagement Program

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree  
Master of Education in Higher Education

At

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### **Abstract**

Commuter students continue to face a number of challenges when it comes to building social connections with their peers (Krause, 2007). Despite the number of programs targeted towards first-year college students, few programs are adequately prepared to address the needs and concerns of the commuter student population. In an effort to produce greater learning and development outcomes among Commuter Advisors (CAs) and their protégés (first-year commuter students), the Commuter Advisor Program at Merrimack College will provide seasoned commuter students with the opportunity to receive the training and guidance necessary to become strong mentors to the first-year commuter student population. According to Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory, validation is crucial early in the college experience to ensure students are able to adapt into their new environment. By marketing leadership and co-curricular opportunities specifically for commuter students, commuter students are able to thrive in an environment that recognizes their needs and strengths. As a result, CAs will work closely with the Office of Student Involvement and Office of Residence Life to develop and implement a variety of programming initiatives designed to acclimate first-year commuter students into the Merrimack College community.

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### **Extension of a Commuter Advisor and Engagement Program**

Although commuter students comprise 73.1 percent of all undergraduate students attending four-year institutions (Horn & Berkold, 1998), commuter students continue to struggle with building social connections amongst their peers (Krause, 2007). As opposed to residential students, commuter students commonly face a number of additional stressors during their college years including off-campus employment, family obligations, and traveling to and from campus, which can prevent initial connections from being made (Burlison, 2015; Newbold, 2015; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). In spite of the attention colleges are giving to student persistence, there continues to be a lack of strategies in place to further enhance the success of commuter students. However, given the limited financial, academic, and social resources many commuter students continue to grapple with, colleges should be taking a closer look at what they can do for commuter students for the duration of their collegiate careers (Brown, 2015).

According to Laura Rendón's (1994) validation theory, it is vital that all students have opportunities to develop positive relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow students through in-class and out-of-class contexts to validate their experiences and fully integrate them into their new roles. This project analyzes the current structure of the Commuter Advisor (CA) Program at Merrimack College, which was created in the fall of 2016. This program has the intention of helping first-year commuter students transition into Merrimack College with the help of a paid, seasoned commuter student, or CA, who is also enrolled at the College. While this program has proven to be quite successful in its first few years, this project includes a number of new and innovative strategies that will better prepare CAs for their work with first-year commuter students, as well as give them the confidence to see themselves as leaders both inside and outside the Merrimack College community. As a result of providing CAs with a greater amount of

training and professional development opportunities, first-year commuter students will have a number of programming opportunities to choose from that will allow them to feel validated and make the most of their time at Merrimack College.

### **Literature Review**

In order to better understand the effect of peer mentoring programs for commuter students, this section provides a review of the literature on the differences between commuter students and residential students (Newbold, 2015; Newbold et al., 2011), transitioning into college (Clark, 2005; Gefen & Fish, 2013; Krause, 2007), the challenges of being a commuter student (Burlison, 2015; Dugan, Garland, Jacoby, & Gasiorski, 2008; Jacoby, 2015), and outcomes of peer-mentoring programs (Jacobi, 1991; Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006; Tremblay & Rodger, 2003; Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2010; Yomtov, Plunkett, Efrat, & Marin, 2017).

### **Commuter Students and Residential Students**

Before delving into the challenges experienced by commuter students, it is essential to garner an understanding of the differences between commuter and residential students. Newbold et al. (2011) hypothesized that when compared with non-commuter students, commuter students were more likely to be non-traditional students, transfer students, work more hours, and earn higher incomes. Moreover, Newbold et al. (2011) also hypothesized that commuter students are less likely to identify with the university, express interest in joining the alumni association, believe the university is distinct, and label the university as having a good reputation. This study included 453 senior-level students attending a mid-sized state university, of whom 108 were commuters. All participants were instructed to complete a self-administered questionnaire that included questions regarding their involvement, employment, social life, time management

skills, stress, and coping strategies. The findings noted that while more commuters were classified as non-traditional or transfer students, there was no significant difference between commuters and non-commuters when it came to employment. However, commuters were more likely to have higher incomes. The researchers also found that commuters were less likely to attend school-sponsored events, identify with the institution, express interest in joining the alumni association, or view their school as distinct and/or having a good reputation. Given that commuter students are more likely to be defined as non-traditional students (Newbold et al., 2011), it is imperative that any leadership training for CAs centers on the subgroups of students they will be serving in this role. It is also important to consider hiring both traditional and non-traditional CAs to ensure all students have someone they can relate to. Additionally, since commuter students are less likely to identify with the university, the strengthening of a peer mentoring program for first-year students could garner a greater sense of belonging.

Although Newbold et al. (2011) identified contrasts in student engagement and belonging between commuter and residential students, Newbold (2015) focuses on the differences in time management, work-life balance, stress, and coping skills among commuter and residential students. Given that commuter students are more likely to be considered non-traditional students, there are a number of stressors that these students experience, including academic responsibility, family obligations, work, maintaining personal relationships, time management, financial obligations, and becoming acclimated to the university environment. However, because non-traditional students tend to be older in age, they have more experience with managing these stressors. Newbold (2015) also pointed out additional stressors faced by all commuter students such as reliable transportation and access to the library and computer facilities. In order to cope with these stressors, Newbold (2015) suggests the “sacrifice, support,

and negotiated arrangements,” (p. 82) which helps students realize that something has to give, the use of family and friends as support, and the ability to work with others to accommodate for change. However, for those with friendships outside of the institution and those who are employed, it can be difficult to navigate these arrangements. Furthermore, Newbold (2015) discusses active coping behaviors, which allows for better planning, support, and time management, as well as passive coping, which helps modify the meaning of events. Based on this research, it will be important to educate peer mentors on effective coping strategies they can use when working with their first-year students through stressful situations. Newbold’s (2015) findings also emphasize the importance for peer mentors to form strong connections with their protégés.

### **Commuter Students and Transitioning to College**

While it is important to understand what makes commuter students different from residential students, a more in-depth analysis on the challenges of transitioning into college as a commuter student will provide a better understanding of how to best serve this population. Krause (2007) explored empirically how commuter students interact with their peers during their first few months in college. After dividing 46 commuter students from a metropolitan public university in Australia into six focus groups, Krause (2007) found that commuter students most commonly interacted with their peers in formal classroom settings, followed by out-of-class settings and online contexts. When the participants interacted with their peers in the classroom, they reported feeling more comfortable when in a small class setting or while doing group work. In out-of-class contexts, many participants expressed how disconnected they felt in-between classes when they had nobody to spend it with.

Additionally, most did not take part in any social clubs that may have been meeting during their free time. Furthermore, although participants appreciated the ability to e-mail their professors with questions, they believed online contexts could not replace the value of face-to-face interaction. Krause (2007) also determined the primary roles of social involvement in the first-year, which included supporting academic integration, motivation from peers, and making friends as opposed to acquaintances. Moreover, regarding involvement, students commented on the role faculty should play in promoting class discussions. These findings emphasize the importance of peer mentors and their role of getting to know their protégés. In order to prevent social isolation for first-year commuter students, it might be worth to consider creating a “buddy system,” so first-year commuter students could meet up with fellow first-year commuter students or peer mentors who are free at the same times.

Although peer interactions can have a significant effect on a commuter student’s transition into college, Gefen and Fish (2013) explored additional factors that can impact a commuter student’s adjustment to college, such as the influence of stress, family functioning, and coping strategies. Surveying 167 non-residential first-year students from two large, urban commuter colleges, all participants were instructed to complete the perceived stress scale, the family adaptability and cohesion evaluation scale, the young adult coping orientation for problem experiences, and the student adjustment to college questionnaire. Through these measures, the authors determined that there was a positive correlation between successful adjustment to college and low levels of stress, high levels of family functioning, and effective coping strategies. Furthermore, the authors also found that balanced family functioning is associated with more effective coping strategies and lower levels of stress. Finally, participants with lower levels of perceived stress and effective coping strategies were more likely to better

adjust to college. Based on these findings, it would be worth considering including families in some of the initial interactions first-year commuter students have with peer mentors for those with strong family ties. However, for students lacking in family functioning, it will be important for peer mentors to have the training necessary to serve as a resource for these students. Additionally, if peer mentors could work together to ensure that their protégés are fully integrated into the campus culture, it is more likely that these students will be more satisfied with their overall college experience.

As opposed to Gefen and Fish's (2013) quantitative study on how first-year commuter students adjusted to college, Clark (2005) performed a qualitative study with eight second-semester first-year students at an urban, commuter, public four-year institution to determine the challenges they faced when transitioning into college. All participants attended ten 60-90 minute interview sessions regarding their adjustment to college and were able to review the researcher's notes to ensure their perspectives were being heard correctly. Among the challenges mentioned by the participants, Clark (2005) uncovered four broad themes, including overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to a change, or pursuing a goal. When overcoming obstacles, the participants described a number of positive and negative strategies they used to cope, which ranged from developing better time management skills to withdrawing from a course. Meanwhile, when seizing opportunities, many students struggled in the second semester after committing to more things than they could handle.

In addition, Clark's (2005) participants discussed how the biggest change from high school to college was managing the demands of studying and finding the best environment to complete their assignments. Although participants had similar goals, such as earning good grades, they all had different strategies to achieve this. Given the variety of methods the

participants had when overcoming challenges, a peer mentoring program for first-year students would be beneficial to ensure that each student can receive individualized attention to develop effective strategies. Additionally, for students who used negative strategies, a peer mentor would be valuable as an additional source of support who could work with them to develop strategies with more positive outcomes.

### **Challenges of being a Commuter Student**

Despite the unique challenges faced by commuter students in their first few months of transitioning to college, there are a number of obstacles that remain throughout their collegiate careers. Using theories, models, and frameworks, Jacoby (2015) provides a comprehensive examination of commuter students and their institutional environments. The frameworks she analyzed included Maslow's (1982) Hierarchy of Needs, Schlossberg's (1985) Mattering and Marginality Theory, Schlossberg's (2008) Transition Theory, Baxter-Magolda's (2001) Self-Authorship Theory and Ackell's (1986) Model of Institutional Integration. Through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Jacoby (2015) found that commuter students are preoccupied with satisfying their lower-level needs such as housing, transportation, security, food, health care, and child care. As a result, colleges and universities must ensure that these basic needs are met before students are able to take advantage of other opportunities. Meanwhile, Jacoby's (2015) analysis of Schlossberg's Mattering and Marginality calls for leaders in higher education to ensure that all policies are based around how they contribute to the success of all students. For instance, while a commuter student's transition into college is commonly perceived as a nonevent, commuter students are tasked with navigating the college's policies, opportunities available to them, and prioritizing their coursework with their already busy lives. Jacoby's (2015) interpretation of Baxter-Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory suggests the importance of engaging students in

school-sponsored events to foster their personal growth and decision making skills. Lastly, Jacoby (2015) used Ackell's Model of Institutional Integration to explain the three stages institutions go through in adapting their policies to fit the needs all students. These stages include the laissez-faire stage, when institutions remove barriers, but fail to offer any intervention from administrators; the separatist stage, when underrepresented groups of students are given less priority than the majority; and the equity stage, when institutions wholeheartedly commit to providing the same experience for all students. After reviewing these theories, the need for a strong mentorship program will be crucial to promote the success of commuter students both academically and socially. Additionally, through partnering with and gathering input from current commuter student leaders, initiatives can be put into place that target the needs of incoming commuter students.

Although theory can explain the challenges faced by commuter students in their environments, understanding the nonacademic commitments that can prevent commuter students from becoming more involved will be imperative to ensure their needs are taken into consideration. In a review of past literature, Burlison (2015) found that commuter students work far more hours than residential students, thus impacting their ability to get involved. Furthermore, family responsibilities and other time constraints, such as traveling to and from campus, can make commuter students feel even more disconnected from campus. However, despite low levels of involvement, commuter students are just as engaged in academics as residential students and were more likely to read for pleasure, write papers, and collaborate with peers during class time. In order to combat the disconnection commuter students face with their university, Burlison (2015) recommends dedicating a space specifically for commuter students to relax, study, and socialize. Additionally, Burlison (2015) argues that student affairs

professionals should take more responsibility to better promote on-campus opportunities to commuter students. By effectively utilizing peer mentors and keeping them up-to-date on the different events happening on-campus, peer mentors would be better able to encourage first-year commuters to take advantage of the different opportunities available to students. Furthermore, as the role of the peer mentor is strengthened, peer mentors will develop a stronger connection with their campus community.

With much of the literature on commuter students focused on interactions between family and friends, Dugan et al. (2008) examined how the living arrangement of a commuter student impacted their leadership skills. Their sample consisted of 11,864 commuter students representing 50 institutions who had completed the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership. Based on their findings, the authors divided the participants into two groups—dependent commuters, or those who lived with their family, and independent commuters, or those who lived either with friends or on their own. Whereas dependent commuters were more likely to demonstrate greater leadership skills when involved in formal leadership training programs and off-campus organizations, independent commuters possessed stronger leadership skills when employed off-campus or provided with formal leadership training. However, independent commuters indicated a greater sense of overall leadership efficacy than dependent commuters. Additionally, while close relationships with faculty and staff were important in fostering commuter students' willingness to lead, conversations with peers were the most influential in shaping all students' motivations to lead. These results emphasize the importance of a peer advising program, for both mentors and protégés, and the impact it can have on facilitating peer-to-peer contact. However, both dependent and independent mentors require greater levels of leadership training to assist them in further developing their leadership skills, particularly around

the diversity of the commuter student population. As a result, leaders in higher education should work to better encourage and accommodate a commuter student's involvement on campus.

### **Outcomes of Peer-Mentoring Programs**

Given the positive outcomes stemming from peer-interactions and engagement in co-curricular programs, the value of peer mentoring programs should be considered when working with commuter students. Research from Ward et al. (2010), determined whether students participating in a mentoring program would achieve their goals and return to the institution the following fall semester. The sample, taken from a small, urban institution in the Midwest, included 34 protégés, who were mostly freshman and sophomores, as well as 12 mentors, who were all juniors and seniors. Protégés started off by completing a goal-setting activity with their mentors, followed by 90 minute weekly meetings for the remainder of the semester to discuss strategies to accomplish their goals. Mentors would then track their protégé's progress with a progress tracking form that was completed in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth weeks of the program, in addition to recording reflective notes for each meeting. Ward et al. (2010) concluded that the mentoring program had a significant effect on the progress the protégés made towards achieving their goals. According to the mentor's weekly notes, most protégés had improved their time management skills, organizational skills, and study habits over the course of the program.

Moreover, the protégés were more likely to establish and pursue goals than they were when first starting this program. Furthermore, it was determined that those who completed this program were significantly more likely to be retained in the fall semester. Given this study's attention to goal-setting for underclassmen, it appears to be beneficial for first-year students and their mentors to share their goals amongst one another in order to hold each other accountable for

the tasks they set for themselves.

While Ward et al. (2010) focused their study on the impact peer-mentoring programs had on goal setting, Tremblay and Rodger (2003) analyzed the relationship between peer mentoring and academic achievement for first-year college students. Tremblay and Rodger's (2003) study included 1,489 first-year students from a Canadian university, with 537 participants who applied to the mentoring program and received a mentor, 446 participants who applied to the mentoring program and did not receive a mentor, and 506 participants who did not apply to the mentoring program. Participants who applied for peer mentors were asked to self-report their demographics and study habits, as well as complete Tremblay's (1998) academic motivation inventory. Additionally, students admitted in the peer mentor program were assessed by their mentors regarding how active they were with the program. However, retention data was gathered for all participants. The authors determined that although peer mentoring as a whole did not have a significant effect on academic achievement and retention, participants with peer mentors who were active with the program were more likely to have higher grades than those who were less active.

Moreover, second-year retention rates for all the participants were similar regardless of whether they had a mentor or applied for the mentoring program. In addition, participants with peer mentors performed similarly academically regardless of their anxiety level, whereas participants who applied to the peer mentoring program and did not receive a mentor fared worse academically if they had a high anxiety level. As a result, this study implies that while first-year mentoring programs are often focused on retaining those students, programs like this prove to be most valuable to students with high levels of angst. In a related study, Sanchez et al. (2006) assessed the value of a peer mentoring program for first-year business students and how it could

bolster attitudes towards the university and increase student retention. The participants of their study consisted of 128 freshman who were enrolled in a one-credit business course. However, because the class was divided into two sections, only one section was given a senior peer mentor who they met with on three separate occasions.

Every participant completed four different surveys regarding their experiences at the university, while the mentored students also completed surveys concerning their peer mentoring experience. Through this study, the authors discovered that peer-mentoring had a positive correlation with overall student satisfaction. However, it was discovered that because the mentors were not well trained, it was difficult for many to form high-quality relationships with their protégés. Additionally, the authors were unable to determine a positive relationship between student satisfaction and intent to graduate from the school of business. These results demonstrate that while even the most basic of mentoring programs can increase student satisfaction, training programs for mentors can be utilized to improve upon the overall experience. In addition, because peer mentor programs are more likely to influence student satisfaction, retention should not be the main focus behind why colleges decide to implement these kinds of programs.

Similarly, while Jacobi (1991) conducted a literature review on the link between mentoring and undergraduate academic success, her research looked at the outcomes for both protégés and their mentors. When defining mentoring, Jacobi (1991) points out the variety of definitions used by previous researchers, which have made it difficult to understand how mentoring impacts students. Additionally, previous researchers have disagreed on the characteristics of the mentor-protégé relationship, such as age, gender, and racial differences, as well as duration, intimacy, and formalization of the mentoring relationship. Furthermore, while

having a mentor is common at the graduate level, most undergraduates, particularly women and students of color, report difficulty finding a mentor. However, when looking at the effects of mentoring, Jacobi (1991) uncovered some common themes for both the protégés and mentors. For example, the protégés received information from their mentors that led to greater job and career benefits, in addition to psychological benefits from the friendships they formed with their mentors. On the other hand, mentors had the opportunity to serve as role models, as they helped their protégés realize their full potential. However, despite the number of differences mentioned, all prior literature emphasizes mentoring relationships as helping relationships that benefit both the mentor and protégé. In addition, mentoring has been shown to promote positive learning outcomes, academic and social integration, social support, and developmental support. Jacobi's (1991) findings emphasize that while mentoring is valuable for both protégés and mentors, mentoring can also come in various forms for different people. As a result, it will be crucial that peer-advising programs are built with both the protégé and mentor in mind.

With most literature discussing the impact peer-mentoring programs had on retention, Yomtov et al. (2017) emphasized the relationship between student satisfaction and peer-mentoring programs. Participants consisted of 304 first-year students enrolled in a semester long freshman-year experience course at a university in California. All participants completed two online surveys at the beginning and conclusion of the course that asked about their sense of belonging at the institution. Of the 304 total participants, 162 participants had a peer mentor as part of the section they enrolled in. The authors found that participants with peer mentors were significantly more likely to report higher levels of belonging and engagement. Moreover, participants with peer mentors were more likely to have someone to turn to for emotional and academic support at the end of the course compared to the beginning. Additionally, a vast

majority of participants with peer mentors were extremely satisfied with who they were assigned with. The most common benefit to the peer mentoring program was that the mentors were helpful and friendly, while the most common improvement suggested was for mentors to be more involved inside and outside the classroom. The results of this study support the usefulness for a peer mentoring program for first-semester students. However, it appears that more initiatives need to be established that better connect mentors with their protégés.

The literature on commuter students and peer mentoring programs provides a comprehensive look on the unique experiences of commuter students and the impact of peer mentoring programs on social adjustment, retention, and academic success. However, what continues to lack is an understanding of how peer-mentoring programs can be tailored to the experiences of commuter student mentors and first-semester commuter students. In order to better grasp the importance of serving commuter student populations, the next phase of this project analyzes how to apply Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory into practice.

### **Theory Overview**

Many of the challenges associated with commuter students involve the changing demographics of college-going individuals. In order to better serve the diverse student populations that are attending college, Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory can be applied into practice with commuter students. When developing this learning theory, Rendón (1994) referenced the Transition to College Project, which sought to address how students become involved participants in the academic community, as well as how out-of-class experiences augment learning taking place in the classroom. After realizing how students got involved in college was only part of their total college experience, the Transition to College Project revealed several important findings, including the doubts non-traditional students had about their ability to

succeed, the level of active intervention needed for non-traditional students, support for first-year college students, the value behind in- and out-of-class validation, and the importance of validation to encourage student involvement.

In an effort to provide all non-traditional students with opportunities for enriching in- and out-of-class experiences, Rendón (1994) created a multi-factor process to understand validation. According to Rendón (1994), “validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process” that provides students with self-worth and makes them feel capable of learning (p. 44). While many leaders in higher education expect students to involve themselves with academic and social activities, many students lack the skills to gain access to these opportunities. Validation can take place through a variety of outlets, including faculty, college staff, classmates, friends, and significant others. Furthermore, because validation is a prerequisite to student development, students must feel validated on a consistent basis to support their growth and involvement with the college community. However, validation is most effective early on in the college experience to ensure students feel accepted in their new environment.

In order to ensure that all students are taking part in validating experiences, Rendón (1994) recommends that faculty and staff must be made aware of the needs and strengths of the diverse student populations they serve through training workshops. Additionally, faculty and staff must create validating classrooms for their students that allow them to feel liberated through open communication and collaboration. Furthermore, the campus community must commit to promoting healthy relationships among students, faculty, and staff and recognizing the potential of all students to achieve success.

In conjunction with Rendón’s (1994) recommendations, this project will strengthen the CA Program to ensure first-semester commuter students are given a network of returning

commuter student leaders who will be able to support them both academically and socially as they transition from a variety of different contexts. Given that a vast majority of students from Merrimack College are residing on-campus, pairing up first-semester commuter students with returning commuter students provides them the opportunity to discuss the challenges of being a commuter student, while also developing strategies with someone who had a similar experience not too long ago.

On the other hand, the CA Program will also allow CAs the ability to feel validated as student leaders. With many leadership positions tailored towards traditional, residential students, the CA Program gives returning commuters the opportunity to get involved in an environment that is conducive to their needs and strengths. Furthermore, by strengthening the level and intensity of training for CAs, CAs will further develop their charisma and confidence, which will not only translate into their work with first-semester students, but hopefully other projects and initiatives both on-campus and in their home communities. In addition, as the commuter advisor program continues to evolve within the Merrimack College community, it is probable that commuters will start to see more of the recognition and attention they deserve from faculty, staff, administration, and fellow students.

### **Project Introduction**

In an effort to strengthen the CA Program at Merrimack College, the author has proposed a number of additional initiatives to ensure that both CAs and first-semester commuter students are following in the Augustinian tradition and are able to enlighten minds, engage hearts, and empower lives. These initiatives aim to ensure that CAs will have a high level of autonomy when creating on-campus programs, as well as view themselves as leaders and integral pieces to the Merrimack College community. Meanwhile, first-semester commuter students will receive

greater levels of support and active intervention, while also gaining exposure to programs designed to foster one's academic, cultural, physical, and social development. As part of this proposal, the author has included an overview of the existing CA Program and its component pieces, the employee selection process, the supervision model for student employees, a recruitment plan, an orientation program for CAs, learning development outcomes for CAs and their protégés, and an assessment plan.

### **Overview of the Existing CA Program**

The CA Program at Merrimack College is a semester-long program that was created in the fall of 2016 in an effort to assist first-semester commuter students with transitioning into the Merrimack College community. As a whole, commuter students tend to face a number of challenges when adjusting to college, including time management, access to adequate transportation and technology (Newbold 2015), off-campus employment (Burlison, 2015), identification with the institution (Newbold et al., 2011), and creating and maintaining friendships (Krause, 2007). Moreover, Rendón (1994) emphasized the importance of validation in a student's first-year of college through out-of-class experiences with their peers. As a result, the CA Program is intentionally designed using the existing literature on commuter students by pairing first-semester commuter students with a CA who will help them navigate the challenges of acclimating to life as a Merrimack College student, as well as conduct programming, group activities, one on one meetings, and consistent communications about different events going on around campus.

For students matriculating during the fall semester, the CA Program starts during June orientation when CAs meet their protégés for the first time, participate in icebreaker activities, and have any questions about the commuter student experience answered for them. CAs will

then undergo a mandatory training session in July led by the Head Commuter Advisors (HCAs) and program directors, as well as participate in a number of commuter summer events which are designed to better acclimate first-semester students to campus and to address Rendón's (1994) finding to create experiences for students that allow them to feel validated early in their college career. Next, CAs and their protégés have the chance to reconnect at September orientation, just prior to the start of the semester. For the remainder of the semester, CAs maintain consistent communication with their protégés by scheduling meetings with them, reminding them of important dates, and inviting them to events both on- and off-campus. Additionally, CAs are able to continue their professional development by meeting with HCAs and program directors on a bi-monthly basis.

During the spring semester, the CA Program remains much the same, except that half the CAs will serve as Student Group CAs and mentor first-semester commuter students in the same manner they did in the fall, while the other half will work as Open House CAs by serving as student-representatives at open houses and Admitted Students Days to welcome prospective commuter students onto campus. Selection for these roles will take place during November when CAs will be asked to submit their preferences to the program directors and explain why they would make a good fit for each position. However, to ensure that the split between Student Group CAs and Open House CAs is equal, the program directors will have the ultimate say in each CA's role. Although the schedule for Student Group CAs is similar to the fall semester, Student Group CAs do not meet their protégés until January orientation.

While the initial connection between CAs and protégés does not happen until much later than those in the fall, the winter break leaves less time for preparation than the summer break, and first-semester commuter students in the spring are more likely to be transfer students coming

from a different institution, thus making the opportunity for CAs and protégés to meet months ahead of time significantly more challenging. However, as opposed to the fall semester, Student Group CAs who are overseeing first-semester and transfer students tend to have smaller groups than in the fall, allowing for more personalized attention and support throughout the semester, which is particularly important given that fewer students enroll during the spring as opposed to the fall. Additionally, professional development opportunities are created throughout the semester specifically for Student Group CAs and Open House CAs to cater to their specific roles.

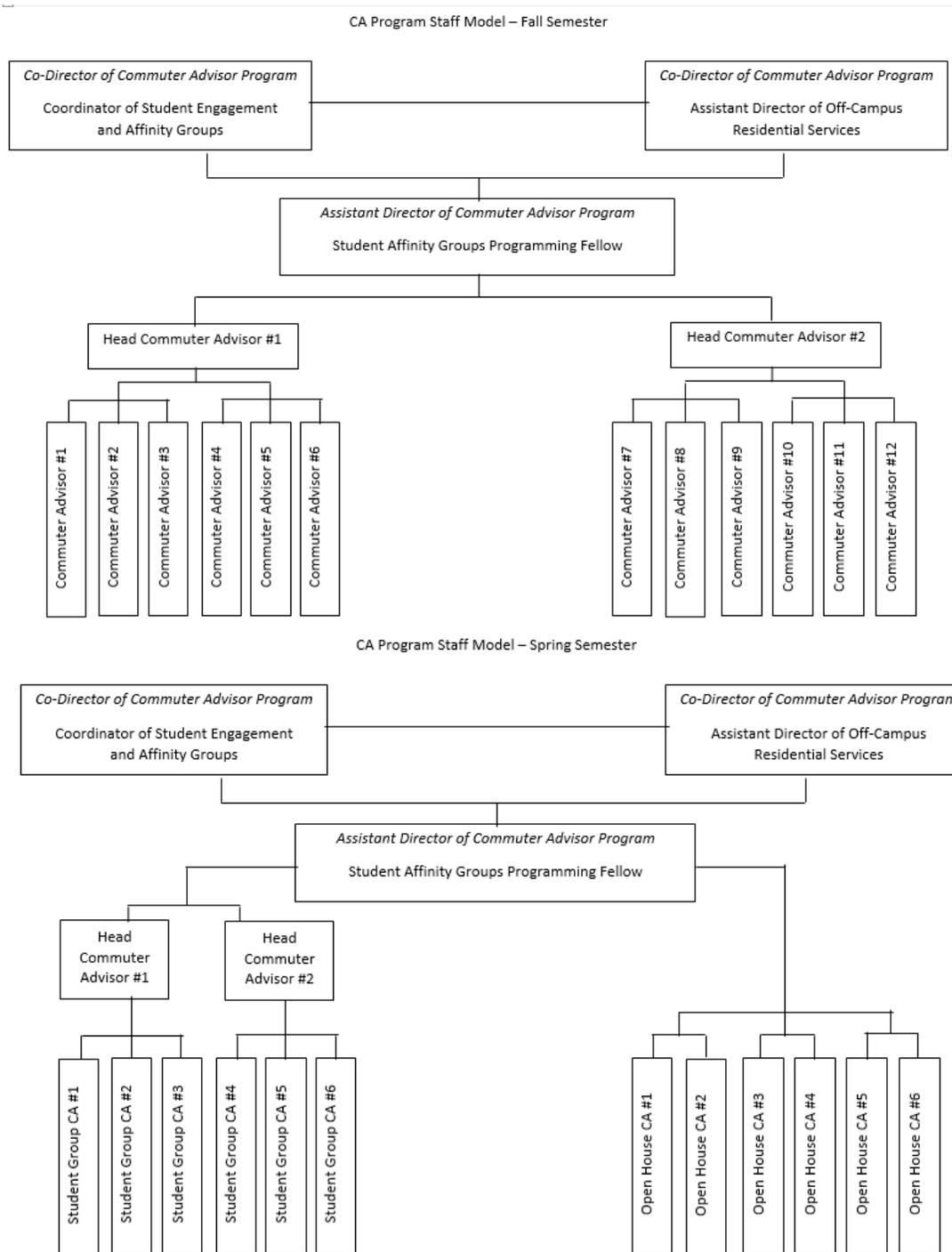
To further enhance the current structure of the CA Program, training sessions have been designed to provide the CAs with strategies on how to establish and maintain communication with their protégés before the start of the semester, as well as on how to create and lead programming initiatives on a regular basis that engage their protégés as well as the entire commuter student population (see Appendix A). Each of the following sections discusses a new initiative that is designed to further foster the growth and development of the CAs and their protégés.

### **Employee Selection Process**

Perhaps the most crucial factor in ensuring the success of the CA Program will be the selection of enthusiastic and dedicated program directors, HCAs, and CAs. The program directors will consist of the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups, Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and the Student Affinity Groups Programming Graduate Fellow, who will be responsible for selecting the HCAs and CAs, in addition to mentoring them throughout the academic year (see Figure 1).

In terms of student employees, the employee selection process will begin with the hiring of two HCAs who will be selected based on their on- and off-campus involvements, leadership

Figure 1. The CA Program Staff Model During the Fall and Spring Semester.



qualities, and past commitment as a CA. In order for an HCA to be selected, interested candidates must complete an application that will be reviewed by the program directors. Once all applications are reviewed, one of the program directors will reach out to schedule an

interview with those who the program directors have deemed a good fit for the position. The interviews will include two of the three program directors who will rank each candidate based on their responses to each question (see Appendix C). Once the program directors have met to discuss their rankings and thoughts on each candidate, those with the most appropriate skillsets will receive an offer of employment.

Once the HCAs are selected, the program directors and HCAs will work together to select twelve CAs based on their collaboration skills, on- and off-campus involvements, and their ability to work in a team setting. In order for a CA to be selected, interested candidates must complete an application that will be reviewed by the program directors. Moreover, all prospective CAs will be required to attend a CA Information Session or schedule a time with one of the program directors to learn more about the position before applying. Once all applications are reviewed, one of the program directors will reach out to schedule an interview with those who the program directors have deemed a good fit for the position. While the interviews may be led by either a program director or HCA, no more than two people will be allowed to interview a candidate at one time. Of those participating in the interview, each interviewer will rank each candidate based on their responses to each question. Once all candidates are interviewed, all of the program directors and new HCAs will meet to discuss their rankings and thoughts on each candidate before determining which candidates will receive an employment offer.

Although the program directors will only hire the candidates with the best qualifications, experience, and potential, it will be important for the CA Program to follow the lead of other programs, including Jefferson University (2018), Seattle University (2018), Stony Brook University (2018), and Suffolk University (2018), and University of Saint Thomas (2018) and hire candidates who are living independently off-campus. Given the number of Merrimack

College students who are deciding to live in area apartments that are unaffiliated with Merrimack College, particularly in Royal Crest North Andover apartment complex, it will be critical to hire at least one HCA or CA who can speak to the issues impacting students who are living in these kinds of apartments, as well as issues that may come up with living independently for the first time.

Additionally, given the anecdotal difficulties Merrimack College has faced with retaining commuter students from the nearby city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, it will be vital to hire at least one HCA or CA who resides in the community of Lawrence and can speak to their experiences about the transition into Merrimack College, as well as navigating the challenges students may face when traveling to and from campus.

Given the unique perspectives of the program directors, as well as the job descriptions of the HCAs and CAs (see Appendix B), the CA Program will be able to achieve a staffing model that creates helping relationships, which Jacobi (1991) describes as important for all employees to get the most out of their experience. Furthermore, given the confidence Rendón (1994) describes that students gain when they know their role, the HCA and CA job descriptions will include explicit expectations for students as they apply for these positions.

### **Supervision Model for Student Employees**

Once all employees have been selected and hired, it is imperative that all employees are aware of the expectations associated with their position and how they will be contributing to the overall scope of the CA Program. In order to facilitate this process, all HCAs and CAs will be asked to read and sign a contract that outlines the expectations of their role (see Appendix D). By clarifying expectations early on, HCAs and CAs will be aware of the responsibilities of their role, which should lead to fewer surprises and less angst as their roles progress.

Additionally, all employees will review an organizational chart of the program, so each employee knows who to report to should there be any questions (see figure 1). Although all employees will be encouraged to work together, this organizational chart ensures that all information is consistent and prevents any confusion from occurring amongst employees.

Furthermore, all CAs will be required to meet with the HCAs and program directors on a bi-monthly basis to review the projects they are working on and further clarify any expectations. Additionally, these meetings will serve as a way for HCAs and CAs to connect as well as share their concerns and questions in a safe environment. Meanwhile, HCAs will meet with program directors on a weekly basis to review any questions they have gotten from the CAs they supervise, as well as the different events being hosted by the CA Program. Moreover, because HCAs will be responsible for leading the CA meetings, they will use these weekly meetings to create an agenda of what they need to go over.

### **Student Recruitment Plan**

Despite the number of CAs and HCAs willing to participate in the CA Program each year, it will be important for the program directors to come up with creative strategies to get student employees and their protégés excited about this program. Given Burlison's (2015) findings that employment makes commuter students feel disconnected from the campus community, the CA Program provides commuter students the ability to gain employment while simultaneously getting involved on campus. In terms of recruiting HCAs and CAs, it is crucial that program directors work to ensure that HCAs and CAs enjoy the work they are doing to ensure they reapply the following year and serve as a role model to newly hired CAs. Additionally, HCAs, CAs, and program directors must work together to provide a positive experience for all first-semester students, in hopes that they apply to become CAs in the future

and serve as a role model to new CAs. Moreover, based on the relationships CAs are able to form with their protégés, CAs should be able to provide input on current first-year students who would make strong CAs. Furthermore, the CA Program must continue to increase its presence on social media, particularly on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. For instance, in addition to posting flyers about applying to become a CA or HCA, current employees in the program could create a video to highlight their experiences. In addition, another tactic is to create a “Meet your CA” social media campaign, where current CAs and HCAs would be featured on the Program’s social media pages and include information about their hometown, major, reason(s) for enrolling at Merrimack College, and what they enjoy most about being part of the CA Program. While many programs and offices now have some sort of social media presence, the Commuter Services office at Stony Brook University (2018) hosts Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages where they post daily updates not just about their programs, but about other events taking place around campus and in the local community.

While recruiting quality CAs and HCAs will be crucial to this program, it is also imperative to get all first-semester commuter students interested in this program, particularly since students are required to participate in the program. The author suggests that recruiting should start early by having CAs send personalized, mailed letters to their protégés at the start of the summer or winter break, depending on when the students are matriculating. By mailing letters home, it is the author’s hope that many guardians would also be able to see these letters and would encourage their college-entering relative to reach out to their CA. In addition, given the positive correlation between family functioning and college adjustment as demonstrated by Gefen and Fish (2013), the CAs should host a Commuter Family Dinner prior to orientation, which would include a free meal, an introduction to the CA Program, and information on what

families could do could assist their relatives in adjusting to college life. Furthermore, during the summer break, the HCAs can create a closed Facebook group for CAs and all first-semester commuter students to connect before the start of classes. Additionally, given the success of the Commuter Cash program as part of Jefferson University's (2018) Commuter Assistant Program, the CA Program will roll out "Commuter Coins," which will be given to first-semester commuter students who are involved with on-campus events, attend required meetings with their CA, and earn good midterm grades. Students with Commuter Coins will then be able to redeem them at the end of each semester for prizes such as gift cards, Merrimack swag, seasonal gift baskets, TVs, and laptops (see Appendix E).

### **Training Program for CAs**

According to Sanchez et al. (2006), training for peer mentors is crucial in order to build high-quality relationships with their protégés. As a result, all HCAs and CAs will attend one training session in early June followed by a second training session towards the end of August prior September orientation. At the first training session, HCAs and CAs will have the opportunity to review the expectations of their respective positions, participate in goal setting, and bond with one another by participating in a series of icebreakers. In addition, CAs will be provided with a list of their protégés and will be asked to write a personalized letter to their protégés that will be sent in the mail prior the first June Orientation session for first-year students.

Moreover, the program directors will review the process of how to develop a program, which all HCAs and CAs will be required to do once in the fall and twice in the spring, should the CAs opt to serve as Student Group Leaders. Although HCAs will be asked to host their program by the second week of the fall and spring semester, CAs will be split into four groups in

the fall and two groups in the spring if they serve as Student Group Leaders and will be required to create, develop, and host a program amongst their group members with a \$300 budget. Furthermore, each group will be required to host their program within a two week time frame at some point during the semester to ensure that programs are being held on a regular and consistent basis (see Appendix A). As part of the training in developing a program, all CAs will receive a checklist adapted from Western Michigan University (2018) on how to create a program, as well as learn how to reserve a space through the Event Management Systems page, order food and necessary supplies, and advertise for their event (see Appendix F). In order to get CAs thinking about possible programming ideas, the program directors will provide a variety of suggestions on the kinds of programs they could consider hosting. Additionally, all groups will be assigned a HCA who they will work closely with when creating their program.

After the first training session and June Orientation Session, all HCAs and CAs will be asked to check-in with one of the program directors in the middle of July. This will give HCAs the opportunity to reflect on the first training session and June Orientation sessions and come prepared with any questions or concerns they may have going forward. Moreover, based on a survey that HCAs and CAs will distribute to all first-year commuter students at June orientation to gather their input on programming ideas, the HCAs and CAs will be asked to come prepared with a list of preliminary programs they would like to host during the semester. Additionally, given the importance Rendón (1994) places on social activities that validate a student's experience, the HCAs and CAs will have the opportunity to decide on a trip they would like to take together as a group during either July or August.

During the month of August, HCAs will meet with the program directors to discuss the presentations they will be asked to lead at the second training session. The second training

session will start off with icebreakers that the CAs can use with their students. Next, there will be a check-in with all the CAs to see if anyone's protégés have had any questions or concerns over the past few weeks. Following this, the HCAs will provide a look at the program they plan to host and the steps they took to create their event in an effort to help CAs who still might be unsure of how to create a program and how it is expected to look like. Finally, the remainder of this training session will focus on how CAs can effectively communicate with their protégés in an engaging way. This will include workshops on how to provide developmental support to their protégés, how to maintain a strong and positive social media presence as a student-leader, and how to file a Campus Assessment, Response, and Evaluation (CARE) report for students experiencing substantial levels of distress or significant changes in behavior.

Furthermore, CAs will engage in a "Behind Closed Doors" scenario where HCAs and CAs will rotate in groups and either act out the scenario or respond to it. The possible scenarios will include situations such as a student who has failed all their midterms, a student who is anxious about making friends, a student who is having difficulty managing a long-distance relationship after their partner moved away for college, a student who is questioning their sexuality, a student who is unable to afford their tuition or is having financial difficulties at home, a student whose parents are kicking them out of their house, a student who is having difficulty getting to class due to unreliable transportation, and a student who is anxious because they are unable to effectively manage their time. After the HCAs and CAs go through each of these scenarios as either the actor or responder, the group will come back together to discuss these scenarios and the best ways to go about handling each situation.

In addition to the orientation sessions that will be held, HCAs and CAs will be given a number of professional development opportunities throughout the academic year. HCAs will be

required to meet with the program directors once a week to talk about the meetings they will lead with the CAs as well as any questions or concerns they are having with particular students or the CA Program as a whole. Meanwhile, during the fall, CAs will meet with the HCAs and program directors on a bi-monthly basis to have an open conversation about the difficulties they are facing as well as prepare for any upcoming events and programs. Additionally, these bi-monthly meetings will include a number of icebreakers, which are meant to bring program directors, HCAs, and CAs closer together, while also giving CAs ideas about engaging questions and activities they could use with their protégés. In the spring, Student Group Leader CAs will continue with these meetings like they did in the fall, while Open House CAs will meet with the Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow before and after each Admitted Students Day to discuss expectations and clarify any questions or concerns.

### **Learning Development Outcomes**

Although much of the existing literature points to the success behind peer mentoring programs for first-year students, Yomtov et al. (2017) discusses the lack of involvement mentors had with their protégés both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, by centralizing the CA Program around programming, HCAs, CAs, and their protégés will experience a number of additional opportunities to grow and develop in a variety of contexts. As stated previously, CAs will be divided into four groups of three and will be asked to create, develop, and implement a program for their protégés and all commuter students during an assigned two week period of the fall semester. Then, during the spring semester, Student Group Leader CAs will be divided into two groups of three and will need to create two programs for their protégés and commuter students during two separate two week periods (see table 1). HCAs will be expected to lead a program during the first two weeks of the fall and spring semester. All groups will be given a

Table 1. Group Programming Schedule for HCAs and CAs

Fall 2019	
Student Employees	Time frame to host group program
HCA #1 and HCA #2	September 4-September 13
CA #1, CA #2, and CA #3	September 16-September 27
CA #7, CA #8, and CA #9	September 30-October 11
CA #4, CA #5, and CA #6	October 15-October 25
CA #10, CA #11, and CA #12	October 28-November 8

Spring 2020	
Student Employees	Time frame to host group program
HCA #1 and HCA #2	January 15-January 24
Student Group CA #1, Student Group CA #2, and Student Group CA #3	January 27-February 7
Student Group CA #4, Student Group CA #5, and Student Group CA #6	February 10-February 21
Student Group CA #1, Student Group CA #2, and Student Group CA #3	February 24-March 6
Student Group CA #4, Student Group CA #5, and Student Group CA #6	March 16-March 27

maximum of \$300 to budget for every program they do.

While HCAs and CAs will be given high levels of autonomy when creating their programs, every program is expected to encourage a student’s academic, physical, social and personal development. Moreover, given Krause’s (2007) findings that commuter students are less likely to get involved during their time between classes, as well as Burlison’s (2015) findings that commuter students are consumed by other nonacademic commitments, HCAs, and CAs must come up with innovative ways that will attract their protégés and fellow commuter students. Possible programs include, but are not limited to movie screenings, seasonal events, crafts, contests, and workshops on topics such as driving in winter, changing a car tire, or renting an off-campus apartment.

Among HCAs and CAs, the goals of these programs will be to further engage them in on-campus activities, while also providing them with out-of-class validation. Furthermore, by having HCAs and CAs create their own programs, it is probable that these would garner a greater sense of belonging at the College, as well as give these students the opportunity to view themselves as leaders both within the College community and the student's hometown.

On the other hand, programming like this for first-year commuter students will allow the CA Program to meet its goal in successfully acclimating this population to the College community. For instance, because commuters currently have relatively few places to go between classes, these programs will encourage students to venture into other spaces on-campus. Furthermore, first-year commuter students will be able to meet up with fellow commuter students at these programs, which will allow for students to share their struggles of being a commuter student and adapting to the Merrimack College community. Moreover, Rendón (1994) has argued that programming will allow for first-year students to receive greater levels of support and active intervention, as well as fewer doubts about their ability to succeed. Additionally, because HCAs and CAs are required to host a program within a specific time frame, the CA Program is able to ensure that there is some sort of programming being held regularly, particularly during the first six weeks, which Matthews (2009) argues is the most critical time for a successful transition into college life.

### **Assessment Plan**

Although each CA's program will be crucial in assessing the effectiveness of the CA Program, it is crucial to develop a number of additional assessments that give CAs and their protégés the opportunity to individually voice their concerns and progress. Protégés will be encouraged to schedule at least two 20-minute one-on-one meetings with their CA, with the first

meeting occurring the sixth week of the semester and the second meeting occurring on or between the ninth and twelfth week of the semester. While all protégés will be enticed to these meetings with Commuter Coins, protégés will be required to schedule at least one meeting with their CA in lieu of a meeting they would have had with their instructor for First-Year Experience (FYE). As a result, protégés will be unable to receive a passing grade in their FYE course if they do not meet with their CA at least once. In addition, in order for protégés to receive Commuter Coins for the programs they attended that were sponsored by a CA, all protégés must complete a brief survey that will be sent to their e-mail shortly after the event (see Appendix G). Moreover, protégés will also be asked to complete an anonymous assessment about the CA Program via e-mail at the beginning and end of each semester in an effort to track sense of belonging and overall student experience.

Although the meetings between CAs, HCAs, and program directors will allow for assessment, all CAs will be required to meet with the student affinity groups programming fellow during the sixth and thirteenth weeks of each semester to analyze and revise the goals they created during summer training. By providing students the opportunity to review their goals, students will be more likely to hold themselves accountable (Ward et al., 2010). In addition, the student affinity groups programming fellow will review the program evaluations submitted by the protégés to determine what each CA can do to better serve the needs of first-year commuter students. Moreover, CAs will be asked to complete an anonymous assessment during the first and final general meetings of each semester in order for the program directors to determine how they can better prepare future CAs for working with their protégés. Additionally, if any CAs are seeking additional opportunities for assessments or one-on-one time with any of the program

directors, CAs will be encouraged to schedule appointments with the student affinity groups programming fellow during weeks in which there are no meetings scheduled.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, despite the number of stressors commuter students face during their college years including off-campus employment, family obligations, and traveling to and from campus (Burlison, 2015; Newbold, 2015; Newbold et al., 2011), Merrimack College has demonstrated a deep commitment to the needs of incoming commuter students through the establishment of the CA Program. However, regardless of how successful this program has been so far, there are a number of ways to further develop the CA Program to better address the needs of the Merrimack College commuter student population. Although several strategies have been provided here to build upon the success of the CA Program, the two most central components will be the creation of a comprehensive CA training as well as the addition of regular on-campus programming.

Given the research that demonstrates how training for peer mentors helps build high-quality relationships with their protégés (Sanchez et al., 2006), a training program for the CAs will enable them to troubleshoot situations they might encounter when interacting with their protégés, while also developing strategies that will enable CAs to bond with their protégés. In addition, by going through the logistics of creating and facilitating an on-campus program, CAs can be more confident in their ability to lead a successful program that will attract both their protégés as well as fellow commuter students. Moreover, by dispersing professional development opportunities throughout the academic year, HCAs and CAs will be able to discuss the challenges they are facing in their roles as they are happening, while also developing approaches to overcome the obstacles they might be facing.

Furthermore, since commuters are less likely to get involved in extracurricular activities

during their time between classes (Krause, 2007), the addition of regularly-scheduled programming for commuter students will enable commuter students to become more involved on-campus, while also receiving greater levels of out-of-class validation from their peers and College staff. Because the first six weeks of a college student's first-semester are the more critical time for transitioning into college life (Matthews, 2009), it is vital that CAs are able to use these programs as a way to bond with their protégés and further promote their role as a resource to the entire commuter student population.

Based on Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory and Transition to College Project, each initiative provided by the author will allow HCAs and CAs to maximize their experience as a Merrimack College student by developing into a leader who is willing to advocate for others both inside and outside the College community. By investing in validating the experiences of the HCAs and CAs, the CA Program will then be able to ensure its commitment to providing all first-year commuter students with a quality peer mentor who will not only assist them in acclimating to campus, but will assist them in "making it their Merrimack" for the years to come.

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**Appendix A**

2019-2020 CA Program Calendar

Spring 2019	
January 16, 2019	Spring 2019 Semester Begins
January 21, 2019	Martin Luther King Day (college closed; no classes)
January 28, 2019 – February 8, 2019	HCA Application Open
February 13, 2019	HCAs Notified of Interviews – must schedule an interview time with the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups prior to 3PM on February 15, 2019
February 18, 2019	President’s Day (college closed; no classes)
February 25, 2019— March 7, 2019	CA Information Sessions
March 1, 2019	All HCA Interviews must be completed
March 5, 2019	HCAs to be notified if they have received the position – they will have until March 20, 2019 to accept the offer by completing the Head Commuter Advisor contract
March 11, 2019— March 15, 2019	Spring Break (no classes)
March 18, 2019— March 29, 2019	CA Application Open
April 2, 2019	CAs Notified of Interviews – must schedule an interview time with the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups prior to 3PM on April 5, 2019
April 16, 2019	All CA Interviews must be completed
April 18, 2019— April 22, 2019	Easter Recess (college closed, no classes)
April 23, 2019	CAs notified if they have received the position – they will have until May 1, 2019 to accept the offer by completing the Commuter Advisor contract
May 2, 2019—May 3, 2019	Reading period
May 6, 2019—May 10, 2019	Final Examination Period

Summer 2019	
June 6, 2019	Assign first-semester commuter students to CAs. CAs will learn who is in their group at the first training session and first-year commuter students will learn who their Commuter Advisor through a personalized letter that will be sent out prior to June Orientation
June 7, 2019	Training Session #1
June 19-20, 2019 June 24-25, 2019	June Orientation Sessions “Commuter Family Dinner” to be held on June 20 <sup>th</sup> and June 25 <sup>th</sup> to give guardians the opportunity to meet the CAs and learn more about the CA Program.
Week of July 15, 2019	Commuter Advisor Check-In
Late July-Early August	Group outing with all CAs and HCAs
Fall 2019	
August 23, 2019	Training Session #2
August 30, 2019 – September 2, 2019	September Orientation
September 3, 2019	Fall 2019 Semester Begins
September 4, 2019— September 13, 2019	HCAs must host an on-campus program in this time frame
September 3, 2019— October 4, 2019	All first-semester commuter students should schedule a brief check-in with their CA at some point in this time frame
September 5, 2019	Academic Convocation
Week of September 9, 2019	HCA/CA Meeting
September 16, 2019— September 27, 2019	CA #1, CA #2, and #3 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
Week of September 23, 2019	HCA/CA Meeting
September 30, 2019— October 11, 2019	CA #7, CA #8, and CA #9 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
Week of October 7, 2019	One-on-One Check-ins with Student Affinity Programming Fellow

October 14, 2019	Columbus Day (college closed; no classes)
October 15, 2019— October 25, 2019	CA #4, CA #5, and CA #6 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
Week of October 14, 2019	HCA/CA Meeting
October 21, 2019— October 25, 2019	Commuter Student Appreciation Week
Week of October 28, 2019	HCA/CA Meeting
October 28, 2019— November 8, 2019	CA #10, CA #11, and CA #12 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
October 28, 2019— November 22, 2019	All first-semester commuter students should schedule a brief check-in with their CA at some point in this time frame
Week of November 11, 2019	HCA/CA Meeting
November 15, 2019	Deadline for CAs to decide if they would rather serve as an Open House representative or Student Group leader during the Spring 2020 Semester
November 25, 2019 – December 9, 2019	First-year commuter students should report to the Office of Student Involvement to redeem their Commuter Coins for prizes
November 27, 2019— November 29, 2019	Thanksgiving Break (college closed; no classes)
Week of December 2, 2019	One-on-One CA Check-ins with Student Affinity Programming Fellow
Week of December 2, 2019	Program Directors to meet with Student Group CAs and Open House Representatives to discuss expectations
December 10-11, 2019	Reading period
December 12, 2019— December 18, 2019	Final Examination Period
<b>Spring 2020</b>	
January 8, 2019	Assign first-semester commuter students to CAs. CAs will learn who is in their group at the first training session and first-year commuter students will learn who their Commuter Advisor is at January Orientation
January 9, 2020	CA Check-In (Student Group CAs only)

January 11, 2020	“Commuter Family Dinner” to be held to give guardians the opportunity to meet the CAs and learn more about the CA Program.
January 12, 2020 – January 14, 2020	January Orientation
January 15, 2020	Spring 2020 Semester Begins
January 15, 2020— January 24, 2020	HCAAs must host an on-campus program in this time frame
January 15, 2019— February 21, 2019	All first-semester commuter students should schedule a brief check-in with their CA at some point in this time frame
January 20, 2020	Martin Luther King Day (college closed; no classes)
Week of January 20, 2020	HCA/CA Meeting (Student Group CAs only)
January 27, 2020— February 7, 2020	Student Group CA #1, Student Group CA #2, and Student Group CA #3 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
Week of February 3, 2020	HCA/CA Meeting (Student Group CAs and Open House Representatives)
February 8, 2020	Admitted Students Day
February 10, 2020— February 21, 2020	Student Group CA #4, Student Group CA #5, and Student Group CA #6 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
February 17, 2020	President’s Day (college closed; no classes)
Week of February 17, 2020	One-on-One Check-ins with Student Affinity Programming Fellow (Student Group CAs only)
Week of February 24, 2020	HCA/CA Meeting (Student Group CAs only)
February 24, 2020— March 6, 2020	Student Group CA #1, Student Group CA #2, and Student Group CA #3 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
March 9, 2020— March 13, 2020	Spring Break (no classes)
Week of March 16, 2020	HCA/CA Meeting (Student Group CAs only)

March 16, 2020— March 27, 2020	Student Group CA #4, Student Group CA #5, and Student Group CA #6 must host their group on-campus program during this time frame
March 23, 2020— April 17, 2020	All first-semester commuter students should schedule a brief check-in with their CA at some point in this time frame
Week of March 30, 2020	HCA/CA Meeting (Student Group CAs and Open House Representatives)
April 4, 2020	Admitted Students Day
April 9, 2020— April 13, 2020	Easter Break (college closed; no classes)
Week of April 13, 2020	HCA/CA Meeting (Open House Representatives only)
April 19, 2020	Admitted Students Day
April 20, 2019 – April 29, 2019	First-year commuter students should report to the Office of Student Involvement to redeem their Commuter Coins for prizes
Week of April 20, 2020	One-on-One Check-ins with Student Affinity Programming Fellow (Student Group CAs only)
April 30—May 1, 2020	Reading period
May 4, 2020— May 8, 2020	Final Examination Period

## Appendix B

### CA Program Job Descriptions

#### Head Commuter Advisor (2 positions)

Head Commuter Advisors (HCAs) facilitate the social, academic, and personal adjustment of first-year commuter students. During the fall, each HCA will oversee a group of roughly fifteen first-year commuter students who they will mentor throughout the semester. In addition, each HCA will supervise approximately six Commuter Advisors (CAs) during the fall and approximately three CAs during the spring. Because this is a leadership position, the ideal candidate must be an effective communicator and team player. This position reports directly to the student affinity groups programming fellow, the assistant director of off-campus residential services, and the coordinator of student engagement and affinity groups.

The ideal candidate will:

- Be a former commuter advisor and current commuter student
- Have attended one of the HCA/CA Information Sessions
- Have and maintain a 2.5 cumulative GPA
- Attend mandatory training sessions
- Not have a position on the executive board of the Commuter Student Association
- Attend a mandatory weekly, one-hour meeting with the program directors (Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow, Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups)
- Lead a mandatory bi-monthly, one-hour meeting with the CAs
- Frequently communicate between program directors and CAs
- Create and facilitate all CA trainings with the help of program directors
- Assist in creating June orientation training and summer orientation events
- Facilitate June and September orientation sessions, as well as summer events for incoming commuter students
- Lead commuter groups, break-out sessions, and give tours of campus
- Construct and lead an on-campus program for first-year commuter students within the first two weeks of the fall and spring semester
- Ensure CAs are able to create and lead their required programs each semester
- Assist in the preparation and facilitation of all commuter programs
- Act as a resource to guide new students and commuter advisors during all portions of the program
- Hold at least two 20-minute one-on-one meetings with each of the first-year commuter students in your group during the fall semester
- Attend Open House Days and Admitted Student Days as needed
- Serve as a positive role model by being on-time to all events, in addition to listening, paying attention, and providing input at all meetings
- Advocate for the needs of all commuter students in the Merrimack College community
- Represent Merrimack College in a positive and enthusiastic manner, abiding by the Code of Conduct.

- Complete other duties as assigned

Remuneration: HCA's will be compensated \$11/hour during time of employment by the Office of Student Involvement

## Commuter Advisor (12 positions)

Commuter Advisors (CAs) facilitate the social, academic, and personal adjustment of first-year commuter students. Each Commuter Advisor will be assigned to a group of approximately fifteen first-year commuter students who they will mentor throughout the fall semester. In the spring semester, Commuter Advisors will have the option of either mentoring commuter students who are in their first semester at the College or serving as a representative at the College's Admitted Student Days. Because this is a leadership position, the ideal candidate must be an effective communicator and team player. This position reports directly to the Head Commuter Advisors, Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow, the Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups.

The ideal candidate will:

- Be a current commuter student
- Have and maintain a 2.5 cumulative GPA
- Have attended one of the HCA/CA Information Sessions
- Attend mandatory training sessions
- Attend a mandatory bi-monthly, one hour meeting with the Head Commuter Advisors (HCAs) and program directors (Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow, Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups)
- Frequently communicate between HCAs and program directors
- Facilitate June and September orientation sessions, as well as summer events for incoming commuter students
- Lead commuter groups, break-out sessions, and give tours of campus
- Assist in the preparation and facilitation of all commuter programs and summer events
- Construct and lead one on-campus program for first-year commuter students during the fall semester (date to be determined at training)
- Construct and lead two on-campus programs for first-year commuter students during the spring semester, if serving as a Student Group CA (dates to be determined by the end of the fall semester)
- Attend Open House days and Admitted Student Days as needed
- Act as a resource to new students during all portions of the program
- Hold at least two one-on-one meetings with each of the first-year commuter students in your group per semester
- Serve as a positive role model by being on-time to all events, in addition to listening, paying attention, and providing input at all meetings
- Advocate for the needs of all commuter students in the Merrimack College community
- Represent Merrimack College in a positive and enthusiastic manner, abiding by the Code of Conduct
- Complete other duties as assigned

Remuneration: CA's will be compensated \$11/hour during time of employment by the Office of Student Involvement

## Appendix C

### Head Commuter Advisor Interview Questions Spring 2019

Please rank each response using the following criteria:  
0 = Fails to meet expectations // 1 = Approaching expectations //  
2 = Meets expectations // 3 = Surpasses expectations

#### Getting to Know You

1. Tell us a little about yourself and what motivated you to apply to become a head commuter advisor?

#### Job Awareness

2. What are your perceptions of the time commitment for the HCA Position compared to the CA Position?
3. What are the three most important qualities you think a HCA should have?

#### Teambuilding Skills

4. Describe an experience (other than as a CA) where you were a member of a team. What role did you play?

#### Leadership

5. Describe why you see the HCA role as a leadership position.
6. How will you assist fellow CAs when working with their students?

#### Programming

7. Based on your experience with programming, what kinds of programs do you think will attract commuter students?

#### Approaching and Managing Conflict – *choose one of the scenarios below*

8. A first-year student comes to you stating that they have been thinking about changing their major and adding a minor. How would you handle the situation?
9. A first-year student asks you about moving on-campus. What do you do?
10. A first-year student confides in you that they are suffering from a mental illness and it is getting challenging with classes and friends. What would you do to help and support the student?

#### Administrative Skills and Organization

11. How do you manage stress?
12. Do you prefer to plan things in advance or work close to a deadline? Why?
13. Do you have any commitments this summer we should be aware of? – *do not rank*

#### Wrap-Up – *do not rank*

14. Do you have any questions for us?

*Thank the candidate for their time and let them know decisions will be made on or before Tuesday, March 5th. If they are hired as a HCA they will be able to sit-in on interviews with the CAs. If they are not hired as a HCA, they will still be considered during the CA hiring process.*

Commuter Advisor Interview Questions  
Spring 2019

Please rank each response using the following criteria:  
0 = Fails to meet expectations // 1 = Approaching expectations //  
2 = Meets expectations // 3 = Surpasses expectations

Getting to Know You

1. Tell us a little about yourself and what motivated you to apply to become a commuter advisor?

Job Awareness

2. What are your perceptions of the time commitment for the CA Position?
3. What are the three most important qualities you think a CA should have?

Teambuilding Skills

4. Describe an experience where you were a member of a team. What role did you play?

Leadership

5. Describe why you see the CA role as a leadership position.
6. How will you assist fellow CAs when working with their students?

Programming

7. Do you have any experience with programming? What kinds of programs could you host specifically for commuter students?

Approaching and Managing Conflict – *choose one of the scenarios below*

8. A first-year student comes to you stating that they have been thinking about changing their major and adding a minor. How would you handle the situation?
9. A first-year student asks you about moving on-campus. What do you do?
10. A first-year student confides in you that they are suffering from a mental illness and it is getting challenging with classes and friends. What would you do to help and support the student?

Administrative Skills and Organization

11. How do you manage stress?
12. Do you prefer to plan things in advance or work close to a deadline? Why?
13. Do you have any commitments this summer we should be aware of? – *do not rank*

Wrap-Up – *do not rank*

14. Do you have any questions for us?

*Thank the candidate for their time and let them know decisions will be made on or before Tuesday, April 23rd.*

## Appendix D

### CA Program Contracts

#### Head Commuter Advisor Agreement 2019-2020

I \_\_\_\_\_  
understand that I must meet the following expectations if I am to be an effective team member.

#### **Expectations and Responsibilities**

Head Commuter Advisors (HCAs) facilitate the social, academic, and personal adjustment of first-year commuter students. During the fall, each HCA will oversee a group of roughly fifteen first-year commuter students who they will mentor throughout the semester. In addition, each HCA will supervise approximately six Commuter Advisors (CAs) during the fall and approximately three CAs during the spring. Because this is a leadership position, the ideal candidate must be an effective communicator and team player. This position reports directly to the Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow, the Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups.

#### Other Requirements/Responsibilities

- Have and maintain a 2.5 cumulative GPA
- Attend mandatory training sessions
- Attend a mandatory weekly, one-hour meeting with the program directors (Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow, Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups)
- Lead a mandatory bi-monthly, one-hour meeting with the CAs
- Frequently communicate between program directors and CAs
- Create and facilitate all CA trainings with the help of program directors
- Assist in creating June orientation training and summer orientation events
- Facilitate June and September orientation sessions, as well as summer events for incoming commuter students
- Lead commuter groups, break-out sessions, and give tours of campus
- Construct and lead an on-campus program for first-year commuter students within the first two weeks of the fall and spring semester
- Ensure CAs are able to create and lead their required programs each semester
- Assist in the preparation and facilitation of all commuter programs
- Act as a resource to guide new students and commuter advisors during all portions of the program
- Hold at least two 20-minute one-on-one meetings with each of the first-year commuter students in your group during the fall semester
- Attend Open House Days and Admitted Student Days as needed

- Serve as a positive role model by being on-time to all events, in addition to listening, paying attention, and providing input at all meetings
- Advocate for the needs of all commuter students in the Merrimack College community
- Represent Merrimack College in a positive and enthusiastic manner, abiding by the Code of Conduct.
- Complete other duties as assigned

**Remuneration**

HCA's will be compensated \$11/hour during their time of employment by the Office of Student Involvement

**Termination of Position**

Failure to meet any of these expectations may result in probation, suspension, and/or termination as a HCA. I understand that termination of this position will result in stepping down from the position effective immediately.

By signing below, I understand the requirements mentioned above, and I am committing to my role as a Head Commuter Advisor for the 2019-2020 academic year. I understand if I no longer meet these requirements, I may be asked to give up this position or this position might be taken away.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Commuter Advisor Agreement 2019-2020

I \_\_\_\_\_  
understand that I must meet the following expectations if I am to be an effective team member.

**Expectations and Responsibilities**

Commuter Advisors (CAs) facilitate the social, academic, and personal adjustment of first-year commuter students. Each Commuter Advisor will be assigned to a group of approximately fifteen first-year commuter students who they will mentor throughout the fall semester. In the spring semester, Commuter Advisors will have the option of either mentoring commuter students who are in their first semester at the College or serving as a representative at the College's Admitted Student Days. Because this is a leadership position, the ideal candidate must be an effective communicator and team player. This position reports directly to the Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow, the Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups.

Other Requirements/Responsibilities

- Have and maintain a 2.5 cumulative GPA
- Attend mandatory training sessions
- Attend a mandatory bi-monthly, one hour meeting with the Head Commuter Advisors (HCAs) and program directors (Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow, Assistant Director of Off-Campus Residential Services, and Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups)
- Frequently communicate between HCAs and program directors
- Facilitate June and September orientation sessions, as well as summer events for incoming commuter students
- Lead commuter groups, break-out sessions, and give tours of campus
- Assist in the preparation and facilitation of all commuter programs and summer events
- Construct and lead one on-campus program for first-year commuter students during the fall semester (date to be determined at training)
- Construct and lead two on-campus programs for first-year commuter students during the spring semester, if serving as a mentor
- Attend Open House days and Admitted Student Days as needed
- Act as a resource to new students during all portions of the program
- Hold at least two one-on-one meetings with each of the first-year commuter students in your group per semester
- Serve as a positive role model by being on-time to all events, in addition to listening, paying attention, and providing input at all meetings
- Advocate for the needs of all commuter students in the Merrimack College community
- Represent Merrimack College in a positive and enthusiastic manner, abiding by the Code of Conduct
- Complete other duties as assigned

**Remuneration**

CAs will be compensated \$11/hour during their time of employment by the Office of Student Involvement

**Declaration of Spring Position**

CAs must e-mail the Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow on or before November 15th, with a decision about whether they would prefer to continue as a mentor for first-year commuter students in the Spring 2020 semester or serve as a representative at the College's Admitted Student Days. If the CA does not have a preference, the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Affinity Groups will assign the CA a position. Please note that representatives for the College's Admitted Students Days will not be required to attend the bi-monthly meetings, but will be required to attend a meeting the week before each Admitted Students Day with the Student Affinity Groups Programming Fellow to discuss expectations. While all preferences will be accommodated as best as possible, the program directors cannot guarantee that all CAs will receive their top preference.

**Termination of Position**

Failure to meet any of these expectations may result in probation, suspension, and/or termination as a CA. I understand that termination of this position will result in stepping down from the position effective immediately.

By signing below, I understand the requirements mentioned above, and I am committing to my role as a Head Commuter Advisor for the 2019-2020 academic year. I understand if I no longer meet these requirements, I may be asked to give up this position or this position might be taken away.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E**

Commuter Coins

First-semester commuter students will have the opportunity to earn “Commuter Coins” for earning good grades and attending campus events hosted by the CA Program and Commuter Student Association (CSA). Please note that in order for the coins to be credited to your account, you must sign-in at each event. Commuter Coins may be redeemed at the end of the semester for prizes that may include gift cards, Merrimack swag, seasonal gift baskets, TVs, and laptops. If you have other ideas of what kinds of prizes you would like to redeem with your Commuter Coins, please contact your CA.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Value</b>
Attend the “Meet Your CA” session of orientation	50
Attend a program hosted by a CA and complete program evaluation	50
Attend a program hosted by your CA and complete program evaluation	75
Attend and participate in your One-on-One Meeting with your CA	75
Attend a CSA Meeting	25
Attend an off-campus trip hosted by CSA	50
Attend an event during Commuter Student Appreciation Week	50
Be able to show your CA that you follow at least one of our social media pages	10
“Turn-in” good midterm grades	
GPA: 2.0-2.49	25
2.5-2.99	50
3.0-3.49	75
3.5-4.0	100

If you are unsure of the coin value of a particular event, the coin value will be written in the top right hand corner of the event flyer. Event flyers can be found on any of our social media pages

## Appendix F

### Program Planning Checklist

#### Getting Started

- Who is your specific audience?
- What is your purpose/goal for the program?
- How does the purpose appeal to your audience?
- How does this program fit with your staff goals?

#### Planning

- Select a date
- Check for available space
- Check other campus activities and events at that time (the competition)
  - o Student Communications Calendar (SCC)
- What equipment is needed?
- \$300 budget
- Contact speakers/groups in advance
- Purchase needed supplies, etc.

#### Publicity

- What will be most effective?
- Advertise at least 1 week in advance
- Use WORD OF MOUTH in addition to fliers
- What were the final advertisements?

#### Implementation

- Remind staff of program
- Remind protégés of program
- Arrange the space accordingly
- Greet presenters
- Greet participants
- Thank everyone at the end
- Clean up
- Send thank you notes

#### Evaluation

- Self evaluation
  - o Were your goals met? Why, why not?
  - o Would you repeat this program? Why, why not?
  - o Could this program be improved upon? How?
- Participant evaluations
  - o What did you enjoy the most about the program?
  - o Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
  - o How did you benefit from attending this program?

*adapted from Western Michigan University Residence Life*

## Appendix G

### CA Program Evaluation

\* Required

Name \*

Your answer

Merrimack e-mail \*

Your answer

Please rate the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5  
 5 - Strongly agree, 4 - Agree, 3 - Neutral, 2 - Disagree, 1 - Strongly Disagree

I enjoyed the program \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

The advertising was creative and catchy \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

The program personally benefited me \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

I would attend this program again \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

What did you like most about this program? \*

Your answer

What are your suggestions for improvement? \*

Your answer

SUBMIT