

**Engaging the Commuter Student:  
Examining the Impact of a Majors Mentor Program on Commuter Students**

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University commuter students are typically less engaged outside the classroom than their residential counterparts, being less likely to participate in extracurricular activities and university-sponsored events. This lack of engagement can lead to lower rates of persistence and retention. At the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, a small, regional, public university, commuter students comprise almost 60% of the overall student population. Despite being the majority, these students are typically less engaged on campus than the residential students and have reported being less satisfied in a number of areas. Using an improvement science approach, my theory of improvement was that by connecting engagement opportunities to academics, I could increase commuter students' involvement. The intervention I tested was a *Majors Mentor* program which involved upper-level students mentoring and connecting with second semester first-year students within the same major or academic area. The impact of this peer mentoring program on commuter students' engagement was measured through a mixed-methods approach, including attendance records, a post-participation satisfaction and opinion survey, and semi-structured interviews conducted with the commuter students who were both mentees and mentors. Results of this study suggest that the *Majors Mentor* program helped commuter students to connect more actively with the campus community, and that they benefitted from the intervention, engaging more with the institution. Strengths, limitations, implications, and suggested improvements to the intervention

are also discussed. Further iterations of this intervention are recommended in order to collect more conclusive data and findings and to help improve the program in the future.

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## Preface

First, I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor and dissertation chair, Dr. Michael Gunzenhauser, for his continual support, guidance, and encouragement throughout my EdD journey. His feedback and mentorship has pushed me to explore, learn, and grow. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Keith Trahan and Dr. Mary Anne Koleny. Dr. Trahan challenged me to become more adept at scrutinizing and analyzing my data, as well as thinking outside the box. As a former colleague, I had the privilege of working with Dr. Koleny, and throughout this program she offered me constant encouragement, as well as “technical support” whenever I needed it. Thank you all.

Next, I would like to extend my thanks to my colleague, Beth Tiedemann, who enthusiastically partnered with me to see the intervention of the *Majors Mentor* program come to fruition. Without her collaboration, completing this initiative would have been far more challenging. Thank you, Beth.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. To my parents, may they rest in peace, especially my mother, Gail K. Trautwein, for instilling in me a sense of determination and a can-do attitude. Like in *The Little Engine That Could*, my mother’s kindergarten teacher mantra of “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can” inspired me every step of the way. I hope I have made you proud. To my husband, Ben, for making sure I never gave up and who turned the television down so I could concentrate, thank you for patiently supporting me throughout this journey. And to my children, Keely and Zachary, who also wouldn’t let me quit so that they could call me “Dr. Mom”, thank you for always giving me the boost that I needed. I love you Ben, Keely, and Zach!

## **1.0 Introduction: Framing the Problem of Practice**

### **1.1 Problem Area & Statement**

The majority of today's college students do not live in university-owned housing, yet these commuter students continue to be viewed as non-traditional and are too often overlooked by universities (Jacoby, 2020). The National Survey for Student Engagement (2020) recently reported that 61% of first-year and senior student respondents lived off-campus. However, college completion rates are lower for commuter students than for students that live on campus (Titus, 2006). Commuter students who live with their parents are more likely to drop out and not be retained during their first year of college (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Commuter students as a whole also have a significantly lower probability of persisting into their second year of college (Schudde, 2011). Considering that commuter students comprise such a significant portion of the overall population at universities, it is important to address issues and challenges that exist which interfere with their success and persistence to degree completion.

Campus engagement outside the classroom is an important factor in the retention of college students (Holloway-Friesen, 2018). Engagement is defined as devoting time and effort to activities that lead to experiences of success and advantage (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Research shows that commuter students are characteristically less engaged than residential students, being less likely to participate in extracurricular activities and university-sponsored events (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Newbold et al., 2011). Accordingly, on-campus engagement, or the lack thereof, is linked with commuter student persistence and retention.

Almost 60% of the student population at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg (Pitt-Greensburg) is commuter students, yet commuter student representation in clubs, organizations, sports, and leadership positions is below that of the residential students on campus. In addition, according to results from the Noel-Levitz survey completed at Pitt-Greensburg (2019), commuter students are less satisfied with the university than residential students, specifically in the areas of support services, service excellence, campus climate, concern for the individual, and student centeredness. Demographically, 90% of our commuter students are under age 25, considered in the data as traditional-aged students, leaving only 10% of our commuter students to be considered as non-traditional students. Most of our commuter students live with parents or other family members, rather than in off-campus houses or apartments with roommates, and many of them have family commitments as a result. They tend to work more hours at off-campus jobs and arrange their class schedules to maximize the academic time they spend on campus while minimizing the non-academic time. In addition, the percentage of first-generation students has been increasing every year for the past three years. Unfortunately, other than the facts previously mentioned, information obtained from the university found that disaggregation of data related to specific commuter student populations was not available. Therefore, findings associated with demographic differences in regards to areas like race, gender, and socioeconomic status are not obtainable.

Although the institution has previously implemented some initiatives and interventions in an effort to increase commuter student engagement, commuters are still less involved outside the classroom. Recent survey and focus group results found that Pitt-Greensburg commuter students would like to see more campus sponsored activities and events that accommodate their desires. Only 46% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that activities and events offered by the University met their needs, and 68% would like to see more commuter-specific events offered.

Focus group participants also mentioned that the campus could better address the “stress” that accompanies commuting as a possible area of focus for campus activities and programs. In addition, these students mentioned making commuters more aware of activities and events and scheduling more of them during times when commuters are on campus would help to encourage and increase their involvement and engagement. If Pitt-Greensburg would offer activities and opportunities that better accommodate commuter students’ wants and needs, these students may be more likely to become involved in these programs. Since these students make up the majority of Pitt-Greensburg students, it is vital to address commuter student engagement, so the University could more successfully provide an inclusive and affirming environment that offers opportunities for these students to participate in activities that lead to outcomes that constitute success (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

## **1.2 Fishbone Analysis**

As cited in the literature, there are many root causes of commuter students being less engaged than residential students. Root causes are the underlying processes that are contributing factors to the problem (Bryk et al., 2017). For example, family commitments and family support, or lack thereof, influence the decision of commuters to engage in pursuits on campus outside of academic (Newbold et. al., 2011). Time is another factor that affects commuter student involvement and engagement, as commuters spend more of their time at off-campus jobs and traveling to school, work, and home than residential students, which leaves little time for campus involvement (Burlison, 2015). Work responsibilities and focus on work and jobs also affect the extent of institutional engagement demonstrated by commuter students (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013).

Commuter students also have unique needs that are different from that of resident students and they typically aren't provided with the type of services that cater to these needs (Jacoby, 2014). They want formal spaces where they can meet their peers, intentional outreach and mentoring, and other services and opportunities that assist them in being more socially connected with their universities, but many times these are not provided (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2014). Finally, demographic variations between commuter and residential students also lead to differences in involvement and engagement with the university, such as distinctions in age, family educational background, and living situation (Newbold et al., 2011).

In order to assist in defining this problem specific to my place of practice, I conducted a series of empathy interviews in the fall of 2021 with University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg commuter students. Empathy interviews are exploratory personal interviews completed in order to understand the experiences, feelings, and/or needs of individuals related to a problem of practice (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Mertens (2015) cites interviewing as an important method of qualitative data collection that allows us to understand the process and dynamics that support a causal relationship. Many of the students I interviewed verified a number of the major and minor root causes identified from the literature review. Major root causes are the main categories of causes of the problem, while minor root causes pertain to why the main causes exist. Students I interviewed cited having family obligations and employment responsibilities. Time commitments, such as traveling/commuting time and intentionally planned class schedules, were also mentioned frequently. A number of students also revealed that the quality or type of services and programs offered by the university did not meet their needs, such as a desire for asynchronous and online classes, and the hours of university-sponsored activities, club meetings, and dining options. Much

of what I garnered from these empathy interviews confirmed my expectations and the assertions obtained from the research literature.

Based on feedback and information I received from the students in my context, I also identified a new major root cause, along with minor root causes, for why there is lower commuter student engagement at Pitt-Greensburg. Many of the commuter students I interviewed expressed that it is a conscious choice for them not to be engaged with the campus outside of academics. Reasons for this included preferring to engage at home rather than on campus, wanting to keep their home life and school life separate, wanting to focus just on academics and getting a degree, and viewing a sense of belonging and engagement with the university as not important. Based on this new information that I learned, I added this as an additional root cause with minor root causes to my fishbone diagram (Figure 1). In addition, I added an additional minor root cause under the major root cause of “quality/type of services”. Based on insight from the students, they desire events which are commuter-specific (i.e. just for commuters) as a way of encouraging their engagement. In addition, the commuter students I interviewed expressed unique viewpoints and characteristics that the University as a system has failed to consider or accommodate. This failure by the university was added under “university characteristics” as a major root cause on my fishbone, taking the onus off of the students as the “cause” of the problem and negating the deficit mindset by focusing more on the institutional processes that contribute to my problem of practice. Through this root cause analysis and completion of the fishbone diagram, aspects of the commuter student experience and the university conditions and structures that contribute to their lack of engagement are better understood.

# FISHBONE DIAGRAM

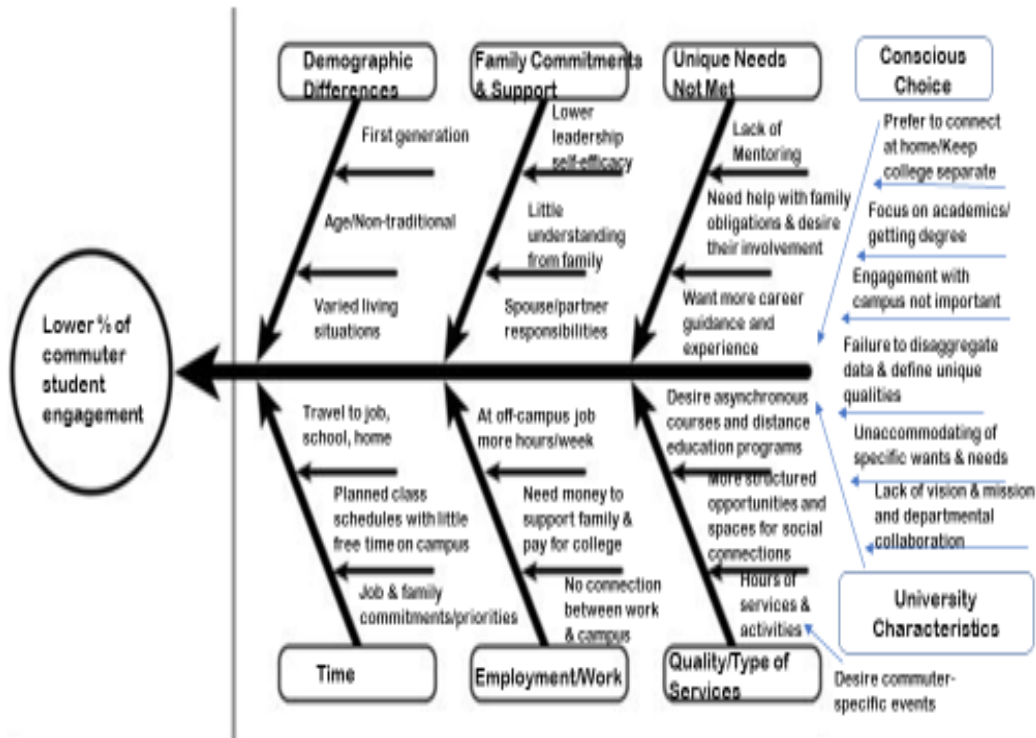


Figure 1 Fishbone Illustrating Root Causes of the Problem of Practice

### 1.3 Organizational System

Having worked my entire adult career in higher education allows me to bring my experience to the table when understanding and approaching the problem of commuter student engagement. When I started researching this problem of practice and formulating an intervention, I was serving as the Assistant Dean of Student Services and Director of the First-Year Experience at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. In this position, I experienced first-hand the



challenges associated with engaging commuter students, the majority of the student population, and always had a desire to explore programs that might lead to an increase in their engagement with the University. I actually created the Commuter Mentor program over a decade ago to help address this issue, but have continued to be interested in this problem of practice. Recently, I was promoted to the position of Dean of Students at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, which has provided me with more influence over change as well as the ability to implement my improvement initiative. However, I recognize that in all but my most recent positions, my career experience has been situated predominantly around residential students, so I needed to also consider the commuter experience as the norm; though different, not deficient, as mentioned in Milner (2007).

The University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg is a regional campus within the University of Pittsburgh system that serves approximately 1,400 undergraduate students. Founded as a campus in 1963, Pitt-Greensburg did not become a degree-granting institution until 1988 and did not provide residence halls for students until that time. Prior to 1988, students could complete their first two-years of study at Pitt-Greensburg, but then would have to relocate to the Pittsburgh campus to complete their requirements for graduation. Even though the residential student population has grown substantially over the last 30 or so years, the population of commuter students at Pitt-Greensburg has remained the majority. Located in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, approximately 79% of our students hail from this county or one of the surrounding contiguous counties. In addition, the percentage of first-generation students has been steadily increasing over the past five years and currently comprises 36% of our student body. The history and tradition of Pitt-Greensburg being a “commuter campus” that serves the local community

population and a number of first-generation students was an important consideration when examining the problem of commuter student engagement on our campus.

Pitt-Greensburg touts its mission as providing educational opportunities to both traditional and nontraditional students through curricular and co-curricular experiences, and having them acquire depth and breadth of knowledge in a specific discipline while gaining the fundamental skills necessary for academic success and learning. The University espouses that students should develop leadership, a sense of civic engagement and public service, global awareness, and a commitment to academic excellence. Although this general mission of the University is well-publicized, many of the University's divisions and departments do not use this mission to guide their work, and they lack their own mission or vision statements, as discovered by an equity audit I performed of the campus. In addition, there is no mention of diversity, equity, or inclusion in Pitt-Greensburg's mission statement. As a result, equity and justice issues are not at the forefront of our institution and seem to be somewhat invisible. This lack of focus and direction in general, as well as the failure to emphasize equity issues, has resulted in the institution being unable to determine the sources of unsatisfactory outcomes (i.e., lack of engagement, low retention, poor graduation rates) for particular populations of students, including commuter students. As O'Day and Smith (2016) discuss, it is a challenge for an institution to support educational improvement if it lacks a unified vision for accountability.

The Student Affairs division at Pitt-Greensburg, the department under which my problem of practice resides, consists of university functional areas including orientation, first-year experience, student conduct, housing and residence life, career services, counseling services, health services, and student involvement. Unfortunately, through information gathered from document analysis, process mapping, force field analysis, and a semi-structured interview, past

leadership within the division has not been trusted to advocate for the needs of the division or the students. The division has also lacked a vision or mission, as uncovered through the equity audit, so there has been no coherence of focus. Process mapping also revealed that many of the departments are siloed and that communication and collaboration, both between divisional departments and with departments outside the division, is deficient. An example of this lack of collaboration is the process of onboarding new students. Rather than working together to consolidate and streamline the process, each department operates separately in their outreach to new students, which inundates and overwhelms these students. A force field analysis also revealed why our system has stayed stagnant, especially in regards to addressing commuter student engagement. Even though driving forces for change, such as departmental retreats and student survey results, have initiated efforts to transform the student experience, forces against change, such as budgetary constraints and staffing limitations, have resulted in maintaining the status quo.

This lack of progress at both the divisional level and the University level is the result of not only competing forces, but also the lack of disaggregated data related to our student population, as confirmed by document analysis. Limited data exists which examines the commuter student experience separately from the residential student experience. In addition, data examining underrepresented populations within these two groups is almost non-existent. As Bryk et al. (2017) explains, we need to examine diverse perspectives and engage in an analysis of understanding the specific problem in order to effectively act as a system. A semi-structured interview I completed reinforced what I had seen in the document analysis, with the interviewee expressing that our university treats all students the same, even though it should not. The University employee I interviewed believes that one weakness of our system is that we create programs, policies, services, class requirements, and activities anticipating that commuter students are interested in the same

“traditional college experience” as our residential students. This person expressed that perhaps these students have different wants and needs, and that the system needs to do a better job of accommodating this population of students. Interestingly enough, I heard similar expressions from the commuter students themselves during empathy interviews and a focus group that were conducted.

Hinnant-Crawford (2020) states that by ceasing to blame the students for outcomes and starting to see the system as the reason for achieving unwanted outcomes, we are less likely to fall victim to deficit thinking. After examining the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg’s organizational system, I recognized the characteristics of the institutional system that are central to the problem of commuter student engagement. I found that the university has not been accommodating of the specific desires and unique needs of our commuter students, who, as demonstrated in the literature, have needs that are different from that of resident students. The University needs to do a better job of understanding the specific characteristics of the commuter population, enhancing and empowering the mission of the institution, engaging key players in collaboration, and accommodating the specific needs of our commuter students.

#### **1.4 User Description**

There are a number of users central to understanding and/or impacted by this problem of practice. Chief among those who are affected remain the university commuter students themselves. In addition, student organizations, such as the student government association and the commuter mentors, are users involved with and contributing to the issue of commuter student engagement. Student-facing offices, departments, and staff members, as well as faculty members,

who work directly with commuter students also have specific perspectives about, would have direct impact on, and would benefit by addressing this problem of practice.

Pitt-Greensburg commuter students obviously are the users most impacted and provide the most valuable perspective of this problem of practice, since they are the population experiencing the issue. Commuter students are the individuals who need to be represented in the research, who best understand what the problems or issues are that are involved, and who can best identify the root causes for the problem of practice. Currently, almost 60% of students at Pitt-Greensburg are commuter students, identified as students who do not live in university-owned housing. Their demographics vary (living situations, age, socioeconomic status, race, and family educational background) and need to be taken into consideration, but they are the stakeholders most impacted by any initiatives or interventions proposed when approaching this problem of practice.

After completing empathy interviews, a focus group, and a survey of current Pitt-Greensburg commuter students, I was able to gain further perspectives of these students. Empathy interviews and a focus group were completed by soliciting commuter students from select academic classes. I enlisted the support of a few faculty members who allowed me to petition their class for participants and purposefully selected commuter students willing to participate. In addition, a survey was sent out to all campus commuter students asking for their feedback, which helped to obtain information that is more representative of the general commuter population. Through the interviews, focus group, and survey, I was able to gain a perspective that is illustrative of the problem from the commuter student viewpoint, and root causes were more accurately identified. Based on feedback and information I received from these students, it is apparent that commuter students at the University are not aware of the benefits of campus engagement. In addition, Pitt-Greensburg commuter students who are engaged participate in academic clubs more

than any other type of involvement and their motivation to be involved is typically academically related. Those who never participated in activities and programs indicated that their focus on academics was the reason they were not involved. Commuter students are key stakeholders and the knowledge that is gained from them is fundamental when formulating an approach to this problem of practice.

Other interested individuals or groups who would benefit by addressing this problem includes some University student organizations, University departments, and staff and faculty members. The student government association (SGA) and the commuter mentors are two student organizations whose members are currently invested in helping to improve the campus experience for our commuter students. These organizations are fully or partially comprised of University commuter students, and they already work with student-facing departments and staff to try to improve the campus experience for commuter students at our institution. They are instrumental in supporting any initiatives and interventions suggested and would benefit by any increase in commuter student engagement at Pitt-Greensburg.

Student-facing offices, departments, and staff members that would also benefit include the Student Life department, the Academic Advising department, the Director of Career Services, and the Director of Academic Advising. Some of these constituents were enlisted to implement the intervention to assist commuter students, so their understanding of how this could best be achieved has been invaluable. Most, if not all, of these departments or individuals acknowledge the importance of student engagement and would advocate and support any proposals which would improve the experience for a subset of our students. These departments and individuals all have frequent contact with students, including commuter students and student organizations, so they are key resources and allies in the implementation of any programs and activities. They would benefit

by an increase in commuter student engagement with the University as a result of an intervention, and ideally and consequently, an increase in student satisfaction and retention at the University.

Finally, faculty members are additional stakeholders who are central to understanding this problem and would benefit from addressing it. It is important to get feedback, support, and advocacy from faculty members at Pitt-Greensburg. Faculty establish relationships with commuter students within the classroom, and many of them advise student organizations and work with staff members in various departments to ensure student success. In addition, faculty have a vested interest in ensuring that students succeed and are retained within the University, and they may have influence over whether an initiative will be successful. Having previously gained some knowledge and attitudes from a part-time faculty member through a semi-structured interview, it was important to establish them as allies when developing a strategy.

By considering the multiple perspectives of these various parties, I was able to better understand the problem of commuter student engagement and the impact it has on various stakeholders. Though some of these users have more formal power than others, they all have influence over whether commuter student initiatives and interventions will be successful. For each of them, increasing commuter student engagement is important to pursue in order to advance commuter student satisfaction and retention at Pitt-Greensburg.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

As revealed in the literature, campus engagement outside the classroom is an important factor in the retention of college students. Research also shows that commuter students are characteristically less engaged than residential students, being less likely to participate in

extracurricular activities and university-sponsored events. Accordingly, commuter students have lower graduation rates and are less likely to persist to degree completion. Since these students make up the majority of Pitt-Greensburg students, it is vital to explore factors that affect their engagement and to examine the unique needs they possess which our institution should address. Grounded in improvement science, this dissertation reviews the literature informing the inquiry, examines University characteristics that are contributing to the problem, develops a theory of improvement based on research questions, and explains the development and impact of a *Majors Mentor* initiative aimed at increasing commuter student engagement at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. At the end, I provide key findings and suggestions for improvement of the intervention as well as implications for further research.



## **2.0 Review of Supporting Knowledge**

### **2.1 Introduction**

An examination of commuter student lifestyle complexities, as well as the corresponding needs that arise as a result, helps to understand their experience and investigate factors that serve as barriers to their engagement. Issues regarding time constraints, work obligations, family commitments, support systems, and travel to campus have been examined, as well as the support and assistance that commuter students find essential from their universities. Research also exists on commuter students regarding demographic differences between commuter and residential students, and how these influence engagement with the university. Commuter students are demographically different from their residential student counterparts in respect to age, family educational background, socioeconomic status, and educational experience (Jacoby, 2020). In addition, demographic diversity exists within the commuter student population, including differences in living situations and racial diversity. Finally, university initiatives and interventions that have been suggested for and/or successful in improving commuter student engagement are important to examine. Various institutional strategies, as well as interventions related to social interactions, have been investigated as both suggestions as well as successfully proven strategies (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2014).

## **2.2 Lifestyle Complexities and Corresponding Needs**

There are many lifestyle complexities of commuter students that cause their needs to be different from that of resident students. For example, family commitments and family support, or lack thereof, influence the college experience of commuter students. Many commuter students have family roles and commitments that reduce their chances of becoming involved in non-academic activities. Commuter students are more likely to be married and have spouse/partner responsibilities than their resident student counterparts (Burlison, 2015). The additional responsibilities of supporting a family influence their decision to engage in pursuits on campus outside of academics. A commuter student's immediate support system while attending college is typically their family members, who cannot necessarily relate to the demands of higher education, so commuters get little understanding from these family members when they spend time away from the family to participate in campus events (Newbold et al., 2011). As a result, commuters choose to pacify their families and fulfill their familial responsibilities instead of choosing campus engagement opportunities. Additionally, commuter students who live with a parent or relative have been found to have a lower degree of leadership self-efficacy, so they are less likely to become involved in leadership positions on campus (Dugan et al., 2008).

Time is another factor that affects commuter student involvement and engagement. Along with family responsibilities, commuters spend more of their time at off-campus jobs and traveling to school, work, and home than residential students (Burlison, 2015). This leaves little time for campus involvement. Due to these additional priorities, commuters frequently arrange their class schedules so that classes are back-to-back and only meet two to three days a week (Jacoby, 2014). This saves them time traveling to campus, as well as allows them more flexibility balancing class hours with hours working at a job. It also means that commuter students are not on campus as

frequently as residential students and are not able to take advantage of sponsored activities. Commuters have furthermore expressed opinions about commuting being time-consuming, tiring, expensive, and stressful due to the travel involved with the experience (Thomas, 2019). Due to their various time commitments and time constraints, commuter students have less time for engagement with university activities and programs.

Work responsibilities also affect the extent of institutional engagement demonstrated by commuter students. Commuters typically work more hours at off-campus jobs than do resident students, which reduces their chance for active involvement with the university (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). Often, these students have to help financially support their family and pay their college bills, resulting in their more complex lifestyle of balancing work and school (Newbold et al., 2011). Commuter students are also degree and career-focused, so they desire opportunities which provide them with experiences that can help advance their career. Typically, they cannot find jobs within the university that they believe fulfills this need, so they find it by working at off-campus locations (Jacoby, 2014). In addition, leadership roles in campus organizations, that could provide some of these experiences, are not viewed by commuter students as affording such benefits, so commuters are unaware of the value of such involvement (Dugan et al., 2008). Commuter students' focus on work and jobs is one more reason why commuter students cannot and/or do not take advantage of events or activities outside of academics.

These lifestyle complexities of commuter students cause their needs to be different from that of resident students. For example, commuters are more likely to need assistance with family obligations, such as finding childcare, managing transportation options, and handling finances (Jacoby, 2014). They also want their family members to be involved in the educational experience, such as including them in the orientation process, to help them balance their time commitments

(Jacoby, 2014). Commuter students benefit from university resources and experiences that are flexible, and those that are able to fit into their competing schedules, including activities and events that take place during lunchtime, late afternoon, and early evening. They require distance education courses and programs, especially asynchronous courses that provide them with more flexibility (Kretovics, 2015). Programs which apply more broadly to their interests, such as programs on stress management, time management, and with an emphasis on family-friendly activities, are also essential for commuter students (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). Career guidance is in demand by commuter students who typically have a work and career focus. Assistance with portfolio development and other career development activities that will ultimately lead to gainful employment after they graduate is essential to these students (Thomas, 2019). For example, commuter students show interest in gaining internship experience and co-op faculty or employer mentoring, which provides experiential learning and the development of leadership self-efficacy, while fostering social connections with faculty and staff (Dugan et al., 2008).

Despite their more complex lifestyles, commuter students also indicate a need to be more socially connected with their universities. Two-thirds of surveyed commuter students have expressed a desire to feel more a part of the university community (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). However, many times they are not provided with enough opportunities for social interactions to make connections, with both their fellow students and faculty and staff members (Burlison, 2015). They tend only to get to know other students in their courses, since they are generally not engaged in other activities or with other groups in the wider institution. This lack of a social network subsequently makes it difficult for them to participate in other social activities because they do not know anyone with whom they could attend these events (Thomas, 2019). Because commuter students' living spaces are not at the university, commuters need more structured opportunities as

well as physical spaces where they can obtain this social interaction, connectedness, and sense of community. Commuters desire formal spaces where they can meet their peers, eat their meals with others, and relax with their friends, without having to be forced to spend money to do so, such as in a dining hall (Burlison, 2015; Pokorny et al., 2015; Thomas, 2019). They also require intentional outreach or peer mentoring to facilitate interactions and help them make these connections (Jacoby, 2014). Finally, commuter students indicate that classroom and university spaces which afford them opportunities to develop new social relationships and support, similar to those living on campus, are important to their social development (Pokorny et al., 2015).

The literature suggests that there are many lifestyle complexities of commuter students, and corresponding needs that they have as a result, which may influence their engagement with their university. Family commitments, time constraints, and work obligations, as well as the specific support and assistance that commuter students need, are revealed as important factors to consider.

### **2.3 Demographic Differences**

Demographic variations between commuter and residential students also lead to differences in involvement and engagement with the university. These distinctions in age, race, family educational background, socioeconomic status, and living situation have been found to affect participation in university activities and identification with the institution (Newbold et al., 2011). In addition, there are sub-populations among commuter students that are important to keep in mind when considering and addressing commuter student engagement. A one-size-fits-all approach may not succeed for commuter students with different demographics.

Even though commuter students are defined as students who do not live in university-owned property, they can have varied living situations. Some commuters reside with roommates in rental housing off-campus, others live with their parents and siblings, and still others may live with spouses, partners, and/or children (Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kuh et al., 2009). These varied living situations can affect their university experiences differently. For example, a commuter student who is defined as more of a dependent, due to the fact that they live at home with a parent or other family member, will have expectations set for them by these family members that commuter students who live more independently do not experience (Roe Clark, 2006). How these different living situations impact commuter students' engagement with the university needs to be taken into consideration.

On average, commuter students are typically older than residential students, with over forty percent being twenty-five years of age or older (Jacoby, 2020). These older students have different expectations of university life than more traditional-aged college students, and are interested in distinctive incentives for attending university-sponsored programs and events (Newbold et al., 2011). Commuter students are also more likely to be adults with full-time careers, and married and supporting a family, which influences their decision to engage in non-academic pursuits on campus (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2020).

Another variation between commuter and residential students is that commuters are more likely to be first-generation college students, defined as students whose parents did not graduate from college (Newbold et al, 2011; Regalado & Smale, 2015). Because these students are the first in their family to attend college, they may have less family support in their college experience and therefore lower levels of on-campus involvement (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). These students and their

families typically do not understand the advantages and benefits of non-academic engagement with the university, so the students do not take advantage of such opportunities or utilize such services.

Compared to their residential counterparts, commuter students are also more prone to possess lower socioeconomic status, coming from low-income households (Regalado & Smale, 2015). To save money, low-income first-year students are three times more likely to choose to live with their parents rather than live on campus (Bozick, 2007). Since low family income is a variable that is associated with a student leaving college, it is a reason why some commuter students are more at risk than residential students (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). When designing programs and providing services, it is important for universities to consider socioeconomic status as yet another barrier that commuter students face.

Finally, the racial and ethnic diversity of commuter students has been steadily increasing as more students of color continue to enroll in college (Jacoby, 2020). Although the commuter student literature often does not disaggregate data by race, there are indications that many commuter students are also students of color (Kodama, 2015). Connections to family is the main reason why students of color commute, wanting to live home with relatives during college, particularly for Latinx and Native American students (Kodama, 2015). It is important to consider whether the commuter experience is different for these students, and how that might affect their engagement. Though the literature does not yet seem to address this sub-population of commuter students, the unique needs of commuter students of color should be considered and addressed.

As found in the literature, the demographic differences between commuter and residential students, as well as the demographic diversity that exists within the commuter student population itself, need to be considered when addressing the engagement these students have with the university. Approaches to increasing commuter student engagement have to take into

consideration that commuter students vary more in age, race, living situation, socioeconomic status, and family educational background than their residential colleagues. As a result, commuters can have vastly different wants and needs which affect their experiences and their perceptions of what college should be.

## **2.4 Initiatives and Interventions**

Various university initiatives and interventions have been suggested and/or shown to be successful in the literature as improving commuter student involvement and engagement. These include strategies and interventions related to informing, accommodating, and enabling opportunities.

Ensuring that commuter students are knowledgeable about various services, opportunities, activities, and programs is one approach to getting these students more engaged with the university. Since commuter students' living environments are not where these services and events occur, many times they are unaware and uninformed. Adding a website that is updated daily with specific information relevant to commuters is one small initiative that has been found to be helpful in keeping commuter students informed (Newbold et al., 2011). Institutions that sponsor such a site include daily events and activities, links to area traffic updates and campus services, time management tips, and even a platform where they can submit questions. The importance of informing commuter students about other issues that directly relate to their circumstances, including transportation options, childcare, and managing finances, has also been suggested (Jacoby, 2014). In addition to websites, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as email, have been found to be effective in communicating such information (Jacoby, 2014).



It has also been demonstrated that educating family members of commuter students, in addition to the students themselves, can help involve families in the educational process and build rapport with those who support commuter students. Information that teaches families about why campus involvement is important to student success, and what family members can expect in terms of time commitments, can help them better understand and be prepared to support their students (Jacoby, 2014). Tactics used to accomplish this include holding orientation sessions for family members, providing online workshops, and creating websites specifically for families (Burlison, 2015). Not only do family members feel more valued through their involvement in the student's educational process, but students are better supported and feel less guilt and stress about engaging with the campus.

Accommodating commuter students by providing them with an environment that makes them feel like they matter has also been found to be key in encouraging their engagement. For example, some universities found that revamping fees so that commuter students pay for services that directly apply to them, like lockers, parking, and lounges, makes them feel like their unique circumstances are valued (Newbold et al., 2011). Initiatives such as offering more options for electronic campus services, providing extended morning and/or evening campus office hours, affording and encouraging work on campus rather than off campus, and being more intentional and mindful when creating class schedules, can provide commuter students with a more optimal educational environment (Jacoby 2014). Another initiative that has been employed to accommodate commuter students and their engagement involves creating spaces on campus specifically for them to inhabit, including ones where they can relax, study, eat, and socialize (Burlison, 2015). These spaces can help students feel a sense of belonging and expose them to interactions with fellow students. Finally, universities have made efforts to plan activities and

events that better fit the schedules of commuter students, including lunchtime, late afternoon, and early evening programs, and which apply more broadly to their interests, such as programs on stress management, career guidance, and family-friendly activities (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). These efforts and initiatives meet commuter students where their needs are, making them feel like they are full, valued members of the campus community.

A number of institutions have also enabled opportunities for commuter student involvement. Inherent in this enabling have been chances for social interactions, in order for them to identify with others and have a greater sense of connectedness and community. For example, some institutions intervened by implementing a peer-to-peer mentoring program, where conversations, guidance, encouragement, and interactions occur between students (Burlison, 2015). Other institutions have implemented an internship and co-op faculty mentoring or on-campus employer mentoring program, which provides experiential learning and the development of leadership self-efficacy, while fostering social connections with faculty and staff (Dugan et al., 2008). Other initiatives and interventions enable first-year commuter students to engage from the beginning of their collegiate career. These include providing a variety of orientation formats, including evening, weekend, overnight, and online programs; assigning one faculty or staff member to personally work with each new student from admission through their first semester; and educational goal-setting with an academic advisor or mentor (Jacoby, 2014). Learning communities, where students have been shown to develop academic and social connections with their peers and with faculty, have provided small group experiences as well as academic expectations and support (Jacoby, 2014). Intentional personal invitation and encouragement by faculty, staff, and student leaders help push commuters to attend activities and get involved in leadership positions and other opportunities (Jacoby, 2014).

There are quite a few institutional initiatives and interventions that have been suggested or used to address the problem of commuter student engagement. By focusing on informing, accommodating, and enabling opportunities, universities have attempted to provide a more positive experience for commuter students. These approaches should be considered, along with the lifestyle complexities, programmatic needs, and demographic differences of commuter students.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

When researching the commuter student experience, factors that serve as barriers to commuter student engagement, the unique needs of commuter student populations, and the differences that need to be taken into consideration when planning opportunities were all explored. Identified initiatives and interventions also revealed in the research provided a starting point for possible solutions to this problem of practice. Although some gaps in the literature remain in regards to gender demographics and what influence and impact that may have on commuter student engagement, the implications of this research on the problem of practice is that the higher education experience for this subset of university students could be significantly improved with consideration of such knowledge.

### **3.0 Theory of Improvement & Implementation Plan**

#### **3.1 Framing and Understanding the Localized Problem**

The review of the literature points to the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of commuter student populations in order to better accommodate their needs and encourage their institutional engagement. As I examined information about the commuter student population at Pitt-Greensburg, I obtained information to take into consideration as I work to support and improve their engagement. As mentioned previously, 90 percent of our commuter students are under age 25, considered in the research literature as traditional-aged students, leaving only 10 percent of our commuter students to be considered as non-traditional students. Most of our commuter students live with parents or other family members, rather than in off-campus houses or apartments with roommates, and many of them have family commitments as a result. They tend to work more hours at off-campus jobs and arrange their class schedules to maximize the academic time they spend on campus while minimizing the non-academic time. In addition, the percentage of first-generation students has been increasing every year for the past three years. Although further disaggregation of our commuter student population data is needed, these initial demographics and understanding of lifestyle complexities need to be taken into consideration in order to better understand factors that might serve as barriers to commuter student engagement.

Data from the Pitt-Greensburg Noel-Levitz (2019) survey also reveals areas where commuter students are less satisfied than residential students. These include the categories of support services, service excellence, campus climate, concern for the individual, and student centeredness. Commuters also are significantly less satisfied with knowing what is happening on

campus. Understanding the needs of our commuter students is essential to being able to improve our programs and services and provide assistance.

The literature review proposes initiatives and interventions that universities can implement to improve commuter student satisfaction, increase their involvement, and foster social connections. Pitt-Greensburg has already implemented some of these strategies and programs in an effort to increase engagement and retention of commuter students. These include learning communities, lunchtime and afternoon programming, commuter-designated spaces, and a peer mentoring program. Although the learning communities are currently only available for first-year students, we have found them to be successful in engaging these students, reinforcing what was found in the literature as a successful initiative that provides structured social opportunities. Providing programming and events during times that better accommodate our commuter students' schedules has become more common and has been popular with our students. We also have one commuter-designated space, the commuter lounge, which is located in the main student center. It has a micro-fridge, eating areas, relaxation space, internet access, and general study space, and is frequently utilized by our commuter students. Finally, one of the more successful initiatives our campus has undertaken to address commuter engagement and retention has been the Commuter Mentor peer mentoring program. This program assigns all new commuter students to upper-level commuters who serve as mentors to them during their first semester, and participation rates by the new students typically average between 55-60%. Although the literature review mentions all of these initiatives as best practices that provide opportunities to develop connections and help nurture a sense of belonging among commuter students, it is clear that further strategies and interventions could be implemented to more fully engage commuter students and approach the problem of lack of commuter student engagement at Pitt-Greensburg.

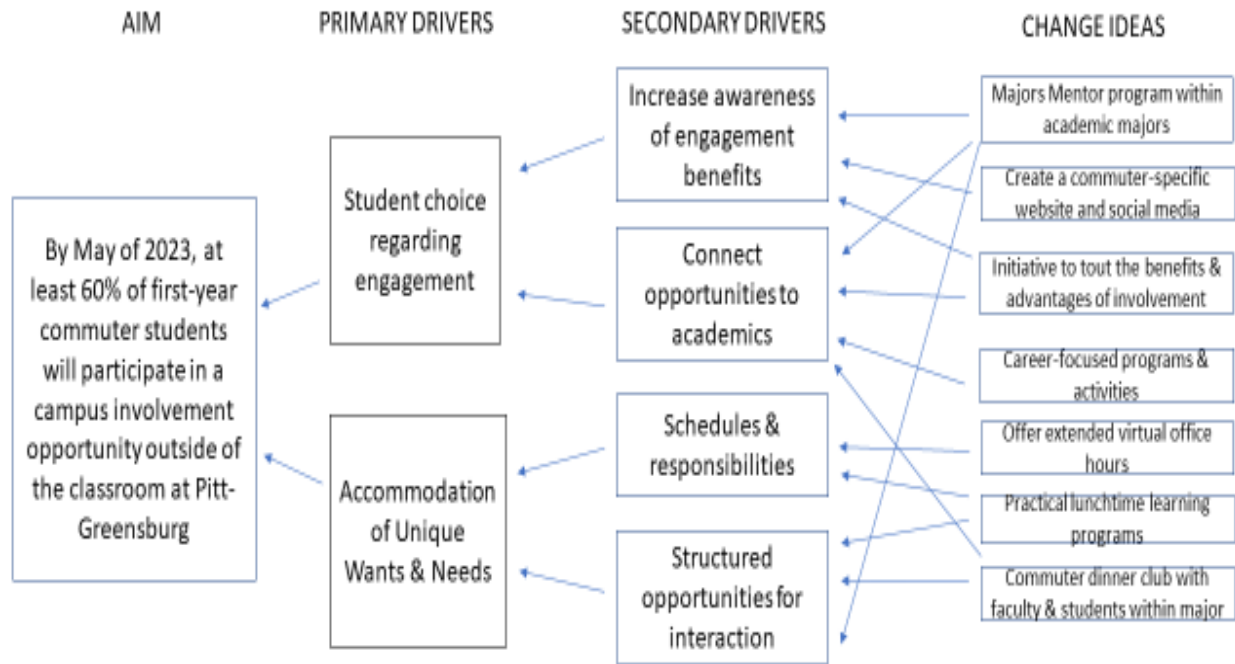
As demonstrated in the literature, commuter students have unique needs that are different from that of resident students. According to a survey I completed, Pitt-Greensburg commuter students reported being involved in academic clubs more than any other type of involvement, except for one-time events or programs. In addition, commuters surveyed who never participated in activities and programs indicated that their focus on academics was the reason they were not involved. Focus group findings also found that commuter participants were involved in organizations that were related to their major, and that their motivation to be involved was many times academically related. These findings helped to formulate an approach to this problem of practice that included connecting co-curricular engagement to students' academic majors. It seemed likely that relating involvement to academic pursuits would help to increase commuter student engagement at Pitt-Greensburg. By using an improvement science approach to this problem, I proposed an intervention and developed an aim and theory of improvement based on guided inquiry questions, and gathered and analyzed data to assess the success of the intervention.

### **3.2 Aim Statement, Driver Diagram, and Inquiry Questions**

Figure 2 visualizes my driver diagram, including my theory of improvement, and shows my intended outcomes (aim statement), driving factors that influence the achievement of that aim, and change ideas that I anticipated would contribute to those driving factors. My aim statement is - By May of 2023, at least 60% of first-year commuter students will participate in a campus involvement opportunity outside of class at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg.

# DRIVER DIAGRAM

## THEORY OF IMPROVEMENT



**Figure 2 Driver Diagram and Theory of Improvement**

The guiding questions I used when developing the driver diagram included, *What different approaches to commuter students could be taken to increase their engagement?* and *What changes to current services and programs would improve the commuter student experience?* Considering these questions, the primary drivers I identified as needing to change in order to affect my aim included *student choice regarding engagement* and *accommodation of unique wants and needs* of commuter students. These two drivers were identified based on research as well as by examining the Pitt-Greensburg system and interviewing and surveying a sample of current Pitt-Greensburg commuter students.

Student choice involves the conscious choice of Pitt-Greensburg students whether or not to engage with the campus outside of academics. Secondary drivers that were identified as components to this include *awareness of engagement benefits* and *connecting opportunities to academics*. If the University could educate commuter students about the benefits of being more involved on campus, such as increased retention and degree completion rates, then we might change their choice to become more involved. Likewise, if the University would offer and promote more opportunities for involvement that connect to students' classes, majors, or career plans, these students may be more likely to choose to participate.

The other primary driver where the University could make a change is with the *accommodation of the unique wants and needs* of commuter students. Pitt-Greensburg could offer services and opportunities that cater more specifically to commuters. Secondary drivers that were identified as components to this primary driver include *schedules and responsibilities* of commuter students and *structured opportunities for interactions*. As mentioned previously, commuter students require university services and programs that are flexible and fit their schedules, due to the many competing responsibilities they have, so offering such flexibility would be more accommodating of their needs. Similarly, commuter students also want more chances to be socially connected with members of their university community, so providing structured programs or specific planned activities and events for them also accommodates their desires.

My theory of improvement was that by offering opportunities that better accommodate their wants and needs, and/or altering their perceptions about engagement by connecting it to academics, Pitt-Greensburg commuter students will become more involved and increase their levels of engagement. Consequently, I will help increase commuter student satisfaction with the



University, and the percentage of commuter students who persist to degree completion at the University will also improve.

### **3.3 Positionality**

When developing and conducting a change initiative, I recognize that my personal identities may influence it. I am able to relate to the majority of the students at Pitt-Greensburg who are White (75%), female (almost 60%), and who come to our campus from the rural areas. But as a White, heterosexual, middle-class, non-first generation, cisgender female from rural eastern Pennsylvania, I needed to consider that my worldview is different than that of our commuter students of color, our male-identifying commuter students, and our first-generation college students. It was important for me to consider these additional positionalities as I implemented the initiative to address commuter student engagement at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. Over the course of this study, I discovered this to be especially relevant with regards to male-identifying students, a point I examine later in this paper.

### **3.4 PDSA Intervention and Cycle**

The interviews, focus group, and survey I completed at Pitt-Greensburg were all guided by the questions of why commuter students may not be engaged at the university and what issues contribute to this, what different approaches to commuter students the university could take to increase commuter student engagement, and what changes to current university services and

programs would improve the commuter student experience. After gathering data from current commuter students, I believed it was likely that relating involvement to academic pursuits may help to increase their engagement. For example, when the survey asked about types of involvement in which current commuters have participated, academic club involvement was one that was cited most frequently, even more so by male respondents. In addition, commuters surveyed who never participated in activities and programs indicated that their focus on academics was the reason they weren't involved. Focus group analysis also found that commuter participants were involved in organizations that were related to their major and that their motivation to be involved was many times academically related.

Therefore, the change idea that I implemented in order to have the most impact on my problem of practice was the creation of a *Majors Mentor* program for students. The *Majors Mentor* program involved returning upper-level students at Pitt-Greensburg mentoring and connecting with second-semester first-year students within the same major. Prior to the implementation of this program, new commuter students in their first semester at Pitt-Greensburg have been assigned both a peer leader within their first-year seminar class, and a commuter mentor. Both of these positions provide general support and engagement to students throughout their first semester; however, they are not assigned by major, and the connections end after one term. The *Majors Mentor* intervention addressed the driver of providing a structured opportunity for interaction and therefore accommodating a unique want and need. It also addressed the drivers of providing the student with an increased awareness of the importance of engagement and connecting the opportunity with academics, addressing the additional primary driver of student choice regarding engagement.

The *Majors Mentor* program was implemented when the other mentoring relationships of peer leaders and commuter mentors ceased for new students, which was at the end of a first-year student's first semester. This intervention therefore not only continued to provide commuter students with a personal connection, but also provided resources and guidance at a time when students were starting to finalize their path within their major and starting to take more major-specific classes. Although this intervention was created to address commuter student engagement, the implementation of the program included almost all first-year students, not just commuters, since all students could benefit from such a program. All first-year students were assigned a mentor from their major or academic area at the start of their second semester and this mentoring continued through the rest of the spring term. The only first-year students not included in this initiative were those who were categorized as nursing and education majors. These two majors were not included because they had similar mentoring programs already in place. At the end of the fall semester, first-year students who were listed as "undecided" were administered a survey which asked them to identify one or two academic areas that they had an interest in possibly pursuing. There were approximately 40 students (13%) who were undecided in their majors. Those students were then assigned a mentor in the spring based on the results of that survey. During the fall, I also collected data on the numbers of first-year students within each major in order to plan for the appropriate number of mentors needed.

In fall 2022 semester, I enlisted the assistance of faculty members and academic advisors to identify and recruit upper-level students within majors to serve as mentors. Upper-level students, mostly juniors and seniors, were nominated by faculty members and then required to submit an application and participate in an interview. As an incentive, these students were offered one academic internship or directed study credit if they were selected and served as a mentor. Out of

21 applications received, 16 mentors were selected, and 8 of them were commuter students. Since this program was implemented with all first-year students, not just with commuters, we connected mentors to the mentees by academic major, not by whether or not the student was a resident or a commuter. Training for these mentors was held in January 2023 before the beginning of the spring semester, in order to prepare the mentors to guide their mentees both academically and personally. All mentors were required to participate in two campus-wide components of the program, which included a daytime social kick-off event in January and an evening study session event in March. Each mentor was then required to plan and implement activities exclusive to their major. The required programs included a faculty/student luncheon, one mentor office hour per week for individual meetings, one career-focused program, and one course scheduling/planning meeting. Encouraged, but not required, were additional social gatherings and collaboration with academic clubs related to their academic area. Mentors were also urged to offer as many of their activities as possible during typical weekday business hours in order to better accommodate commuter students' schedules.

The *Majors Mentor* program started in January of 2023 and lasted the entirety of the spring semester, with 303 second-semester first-year students assigned to a mentor, 98 of whom were commuters (32%). Although this program was offered to all new first-year students, commuter students were identified for data collection purposes as those students who do not live in university-owned housing. Although most first-year students were assigned a *Majors Mentor*, participation was not mandated in any way, only highly encouraged. Faculty members, including adjunct professors, and academic advisors were asked to promote and encourage first-year students within their majors and enrolled in their classes to participate. Staff from the Career Services

Office assisted in providing support and participating in programs and activities that were a part of this experience.

This intervention was designed to not only encourage increased engagement for newer commuter students, but to also provide an academically-related engagement opportunity that motivated some upper-level commuter students to become more involved as well. It addressed my theory of improvement drivers of providing structured opportunities for interaction, increased awareness of engagement benefits, and connecting opportunities to academics. I predicted that by implementing this change idea, Pitt-Greensburg commuter students would be more likely to participate in activities and events, would recognize the benefits of engagement, would be satisfied with the activities and events increasing their engagement, and would increase their interpersonal connections at the University. In the future, I also expect that the percentage of commuter students who persist to degree completion at the University will increase.

### **3.5 Data Gathering Methods and Analysis**

To allow for both breadth and depth in information being gathered, I utilized a mixed-methods approach when conducting data collection. To determine if the change idea helped to increase commuter student engagement, I tracked and counted the number of commuter students who actively participated in the *Majors Mentor* program, who attended events, programs, and activities sponsored by the mentors. I assessed percentages as a process measure - was the change being implemented as planned, and were students using it? This quantitative data included counting, tracking, and recording the number of first-year commuter students who attended overall; and who self-reported in a survey that they attended activities. In addition, a lagging

outcome measure that will be collected in the future includes retention and graduation data of these commuter students.

I also needed to assess as an outcome measure whether the intervention was changing the choice of commuters to be involved by measuring their attitudes and opinions about the program. In addition, I wanted to measure whether the intervention was improving the institution's ability to meet the wants and needs of commuter students. For example, did this program help them generate more connections to campus? Did it increase their engagement on campus, and if so, in which activities did they engage? Data collected to measure these outcomes included a post-participation satisfaction and opinion survey administered to all first-year students assigned to this program. This quantitative data was collected from the students who participated in the intervention through the use of a researcher-developed Qualtrics surveys (Appendix A). I offered an incentive in the form of a chance to be entered into a gift card drawing to increase response rates. I gathered demographic information in these surveys, as well as information about how much they participated in the program. The surveys contained mostly closed-ended questions, multiple choice and Likert scale questions, but also contained a few open-ended questions where students provided personal comments and feedback related to their engagement or lack of engagement in the intervention. For example, the survey asked whether the Majors Mentor program increased their engagement with Pitt-Greensburg and whether the Majors Mentor program helped them to generate connections to campus. Respondents could then elaborate by answering open-ended questions, which included the question “What did you gain from participating in the Majors Mentor program?” and “What changes or improvements would you like to see to the Majors Mentor program that would make you more likely to participate?” Although the overall response rate to the survey was only 12%, even with the offered incentives, 32% of the respondents were

commuter students. A descriptive statistical analysis of the survey was completed and included frequencies in the form of percentages, cross-tabulation of data when helpful, and measures of central tendency, including mean scores. I completed this data analysis in Qualtrics and used statistics to illustrate how the students perceived the survey items on average, to summarize the findings, and to provide an overall sense of how the commuter students viewed the program. Where applicable, I also used demographic data to disaggregate data using percentages and means for sub-populations, such as first-generation students, in order to differentiate between the experiences of subsets of the commuter student population.

At the end of the semester, I also collected qualitative data through interviews with a small sample of first-year commuter mentees as well as commuter students involved as mentors, in order to gain insight and elicit opinions and experiences related to their engagement in the program. Out of the 16 mentors involved, a purposeful sampling of mentors included the eight mentors who were commuter students themselves. Interviews of first-year students were limited to a random sample of four commuter students. I completed the interviews with the first-year students to further examine information gathered from the previously mentioned survey, and to gather supplemental, anecdotal information. All the interviews allowed for more in-depth exploration of the intervention and helped to gather students' opinions of the program and why they chose to participate. The interviews included the use of semi-structured open-ended questions to allow the participants to elaborate on their answers if necessary. Questions included why they participated in the program, how they benefitted, what their relationship was like with their mentor/mentees, how their perceptions changed, what they liked about the program, what they didn't like, what changes they might make, and whether they thought the intervention helped them to engage more with the university. Transcripts of these interview sessions were used to analyze this data content and open-

ended coding was used by highlighting passages and making notes of the key ideas. Patterns in assertions as well as consolidation of statements without changing their meanings lead to analytic statements uncovering themes and trends from this student feedback. See Appendix B for the interview protocol and questions. I also collected comments and feedback from the open-ended questions on the Qualtrics survey and analyzed them for themes using the same process. Both of these processes helped achieve better understanding about how the *Majors Mentor* intervention fit into the overall experience of the commuter students.

Finally, when examining data, I disaggregated it to examine if there were any differences and/or improvements across populations. This included students of color, first-generation students, and non-traditional students. In addition, to see if we are maintaining balance in our University system while implementing change, it will be important in the future to assess data related to academic success to ensure that possible improvement in the co-curricular engagement of commuter students does not have a broader negative impact on other areas of student success. This could be assessed through measures related to grade point averages and retention of these students.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Since commuter students make up the majority of Pitt-Greensburg students, it is vital to address commuter student engagement. My theory of improvement was that if Pitt-Greensburg offered an intervention that better accommodated commuter students' wants and needs, and/or altered their perceptions about engagement by connecting it to academics and increasing awareness about the benefits of co-curricular involvement, these students would become more involved and increase their levels of engagement. Consequently, I anticipated that commuter



student satisfaction with the University would increase, and the percentage of commuter students who persist to degree completion at the University would also improve.

## 4.0 Results and Findings

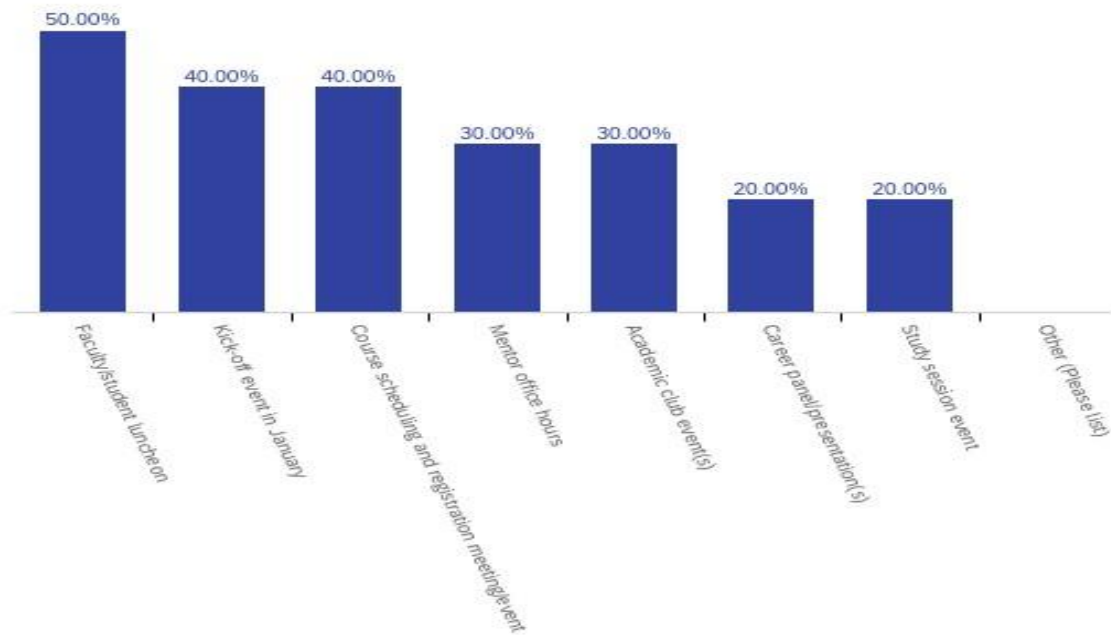
The results gathered regarding the *Majors Mentor* initiative demonstrate that, overall, this pilot program helped commuter students to connect more actively with the campus community. Throughout the intervention, first-year commuters attended activities and events, certain types more than others, and related that they gained certain benefits from participating in the program. In addition, upper-level commuter students who served as mentors in the program shared that the program benefitted them positively as well, improving their own engagement. Based on the survey results and interviews, both first-year and upper-level commuter students offered suggestions for viable changes to the *Majors Mentor* program that could improve the experience for students in the future. Through this process, I also learned that by relating involvement to academic pursuits, engagement for Pitt-Greensburg commuter students was increased by the *Majors Mentor* program. In what follows, I explain these findings in greater detail.

### 4.1 Quantitative Data

In analyzing the quantitative data, I examined the event attendance numbers as well as the results of the surveys that were completed by the first-year students. Out of the 303 students who were sent the survey, 37 total responses were received resulting in a 12% response rate. Although the response rate to the survey was limited, this was not entirely surprising. Since the intervention was implemented in the spring semester, the survey was not administered until the end of April, at the end of the academic year. This is a difficult time to get students to complete a survey because

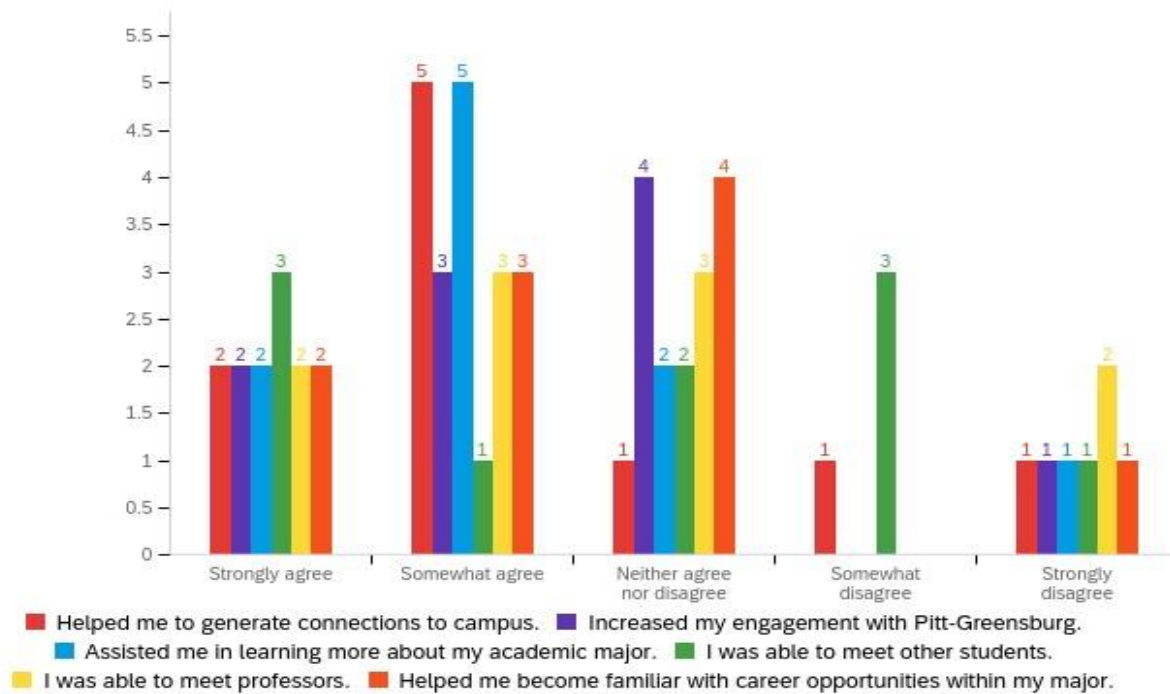
they are generally preoccupied with final exams and other end-of-year activities. Of the 37 responses received, 12 (32%) identified themselves as commuter students. Upon analyzing the self-reporting of these commuter students' responses, I discovered they attended events within the *Majors Mentors* program, and their attendance at activities was higher at those which involved connecting interpersonally with other members of the campus community than at presentations (Table 1). For example, 50% of the commuters reported attending lunches with the faculty, 40% attended the kick-off social event where they met their mentor, 40% attended a course scheduling meeting with their mentor, 30% participated in mentor office hours, and 30% attended an academic club event. This compares with only 20% attending a career presentation and 20% attending a study session event. In addition to the participation numbers recorded in the survey, attendance records tracked and reported by both the University and the mentors documented that, overall, 30% (29/98) of the commuter students invited to participate in the initiative attended the programs and events offered. These numbers reported suggest that the survey sample received was fairly representative, at least in terms of attendance. In addition, considering that attendance was not mandated in any way, and that this was a pilot program, a participation rate by first-year commuter students of 30% or higher in the overall program, as well as at most of the specific activities, indicates that they were at least realizing some advantages of the program.

**Table 1 Commuter Mentee Participation in Majors Mentor Program**



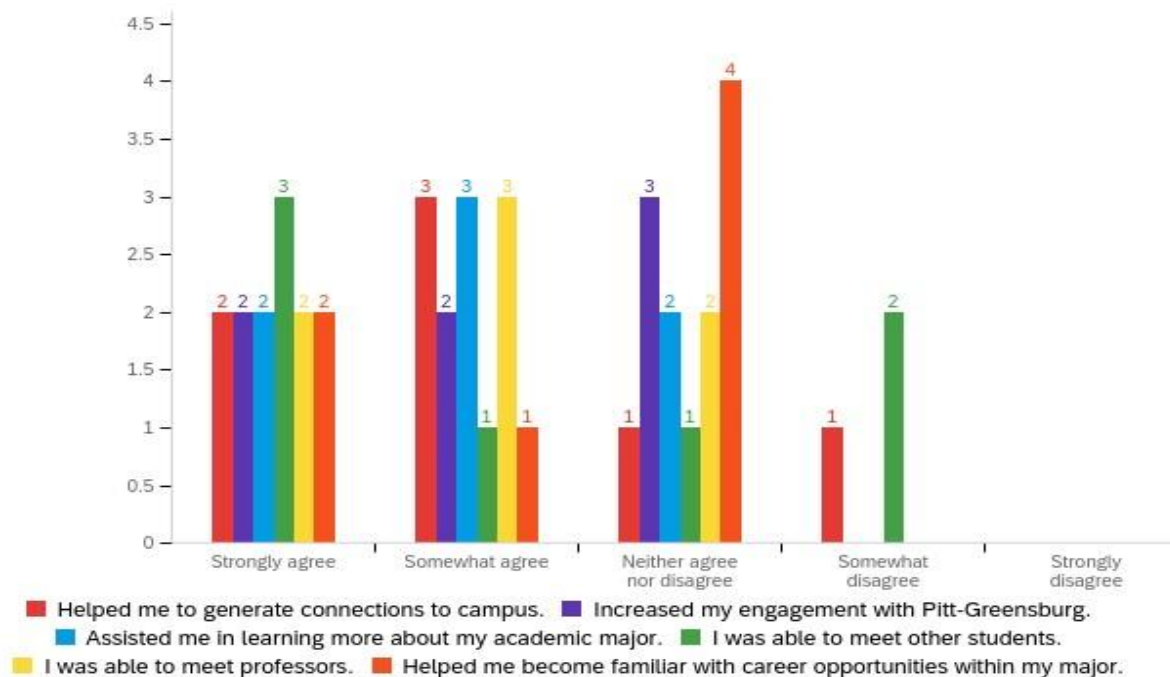
Also measured in the survey administered to the first-year students were their attitudes and opinions about whether the *Majors Mentors* program was meeting certain needs. Based on a Likert scale, with 1 representing strongly agree and 5 representing strongly disagree, the participants' responses indicated their level of agreement with various statements in the survey. Overall, first-year commuter students indicated agreement that the *Majors Mentor* program helped them to generate connections to campus (mean = 2.4) and assisted them in learning more about their major (mean = 2.3) (Table 2). They also indicated that the program increased their engagement with Pitt-Greensburg (mean = 2.5), and helped them to become familiar with career opportunities within their major (mean = 2.5). The two areas that commuter students indicated slightly less agreement with and tended to score more neutrally was the program helping them to meet professors in their major (mean = 2.7) and making connections to other students (mean = 2.8). In these two areas, the program did not seem to meet the needs of these students as strongly.

**Table 2 Overall Commuter Mentee Satisfaction with Majors Mentor Program**



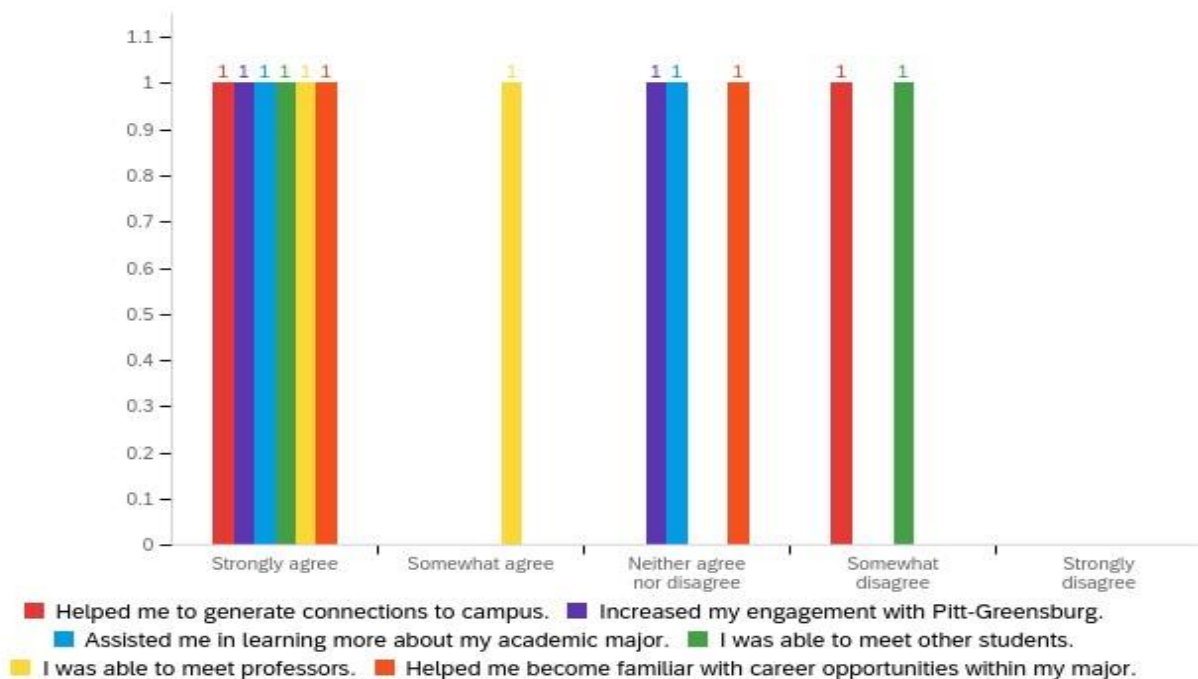
Interestingly, when the data was disaggregated, the seven female-identifying commuter respondents agreed more strongly with each one of the statements, as indicated in Table 3.

**Table 3 Female Commuter Mentee Satisfaction with Majors Mentor Program**



In addition, as shown in Table 4, those commuters who self-identified as first-generation college students (defined in this survey as neither of their parents/caretakers possessing a 4-year college degree) also agreed more strongly with each statement, except for a slight difference in the statement about helping them to generate connections to campus (mean = 2.5). The two first-generation commuter respondents indicated especially stronger agreement with being able to meet professors through the program (mean = 1.5).

**Table 4 First-Generation Commuter Mentee Satisfaction with Majors Mentor Program**



## 4.2 Qualitative Data

While analyzing the qualitative data, similar overall themes related to the *Majors Mentor* program meeting the needs of commuter students emerged. By highlighting key ideas and then coding the 12 interview transcripts, patterns regarding motivation, benefits, connections,

challenges, and improvements were compiled. In addition, responses to the open-ended questions from the Qualtrics survey were also utilized to glean key ideas and themes.

Most evident was the confirmation that commuter students are motivated to be involved with the university when an experience is related to their academic pursuits. Interviews with both the mentors and mentees revealed that their involvement prior to the *Majors Mentor* program was limited, or was related predominantly to academics in some way. For example, three of the four mentees interviewed expressed that they were only involved in academic clubs outside of class, with the final mentee not having any involvement outside of classes. Four mentors said that they were involved outside of classes themselves prior to the program. In addition, when asked why they chose to participate in the *Majors Mentor* program, academically related reasons, such as faculty encouragement and desiring assistance or experience related to their academic or career path, were mentioned as the motivation.

As one mentee expressed, “I felt like the *Majors Mentor* program would be really good for me, because I didn’t really know where to start in terms of getting hours for physical therapy and what the requirements are to get into PT programs.” When referring to faculty outreach, a mentor stated “It was the fact that I did well in school and they (professors) started reaching out to me, and then it turned into this whole, big thing.” Moreover, benefits that the mentees mentioned gaining by participating in the program were academically related. Mentees cited gaining connections with faculty in their major and obtaining career information and advice related to their major. Almost half of the commuters who completed the survey confirmed this by answering the open-ended question about what they gained as, “I learned about what classes I will have to take in the future pertaining to my major,” “Seeing how older students are applying to grad school,” and “Learning about new minors.” One commuter respondent in particular enthusiastically

expressed how academically helpful this program was for her by writing, “The biggest thing for me personally was help with my schedule for next semester. My mentor was a superstar and helped me SO much in figuring out what classes I should be in.”

Interviews with the mentees and mentors also demonstrated that the *Majors Mentor* program was successful in helping them to generate connections to the campus. This seemed especially true for the mentors themselves; five of the eight mentors interviewed related that the experience of serving as a mentor improved their own engagement. Many of them commented that because of the Covid-19 pandemic, they missed making connections early in their college experience, so serving as a mentor helped them to make connections to others, both with faculty members and with peers. Three of the mentees interviewed mentioned that they established a positive relationship with their mentor; and that their mentor was helpful, provided advice, and gave individual assistance. The theme of making connections was also evident when mentees were asked the benefits they received from participating in the program. Three of the four mentees interviewed mentioned making connections with faculty, connecting with their upper-level mentors, and creating connections and a friend group with their peers. As one participant commented, “I made the connection with them where I’ll be able to be more involved on campus and stay after to go to this event to hang out with them.” Additionally, in the survey open-ended comments, almost half of the commuter respondents answered that they gained friends, met older students, and encountered other students who were in their same major. However, consistent with the disaggregated data in the Qualtrics survey, the only male-identifying commuter mentee interviewed did not mention gaining any connections during the program, or establishing a relationship with his mentor, while the three female-identifying interviewees all did.



Interviews with the mentors, as well as with the mentees, also revealed themes of two key challenges encountered within the *Majors Mentor* program. The first was the challenge of helping more mentees to realize the benefits of participating in the program and therefore increasing their attendance. Three of the mentors interviewed stated this as a frustration about working within the program, and others interviewed pondered ways that we might be able to market the benefits to mentees in the future. Even a number of the mentees themselves mentioned that they would like to see more students involved in the program. One mentee mentioned that the more people there are at an event or activity, the more connections they get to make as a student. Another mentee reinforced this idea by stating, “I think I probably would attend more events if there are more students, because whenever I went there, there weren’t any students from my year.”

The second key challenge uncovered was time conflicts, which prevented commuters from participating fully in the *Majors Mentor* program. Mentors revealed that some students didn’t attend activities and events due to conflicts in their schedules. Although most of the *Majors Mentors* events were scheduled during the weekday when commuters are typically on campus for classes, mentors commented that it was still a challenge to accommodate everyone’s schedule. One mentor brought up the concern about our campus not having an “activity hour” each day when no classes are scheduled and student organizations can schedule meetings, activities, and events. Two mentees interviewed agreed that time conflicts created a barrier to involvement with the program. One mentee pointed out that this was one of the reasons why he didn’t engage as much in the program, and another mentee declared that she would have loved to participate more, but “it just kind of isn’t feasible to stay after school.”

Finally, qualitative data analyzed provided insight into improvements that could be made to the *Majors Mentor* program. Five key ideas were gleaned from this analysis. First, faculty

support and involvement was important in determining whether the mentors' efforts were successful or not. Some mentors interviewed experienced faculty partners who were supportive of the program, announcing activities in their classes and attending events, and the mentors found that more mentees participated as a result. Other mentors could not even get faculty to commit to attending free lunches with the students, let alone make announcements in classes. Mentors in these majors experienced less involvement from their students. Mentors therefore emphasized that the program needs to enlist the support of faculty in all majors.

The second improvement suggested by mentees is that there should be mentors more specific to every major, not just an academic area. This point was mentioned both during an interview with a mentee, as well as in the open-ended comments in the survey, with one respondent writing, "Make it relevant for every major and don't just shove a major into a category of a mentor who doesn't understand." This area of improvement speaks to the importance that commuters put on relating involvement to academic pursuits.

Both mentors and mentees suggested the third key improvement idea, which was to include sophomores as mentees in the future in addition to first-year students. Some mentors related that second-year students attended their events just as much, if not more, than the first-year students. They pointed out that first-year students seemed less focused on their academic major than sophomores, and therefore, sophomores took more interest in attending the activities, a view some of the mentees reiterated as well. One mentee stated, "I'm still not sure what I want to do with my major, so I think you already, you did have some things, but I just didn't go to them." Another mentee related, "I remember there was an event, it was building an application for med school, and I was like, that's not really something I have to worry about for a few more years."

Finally, the two most frequently mentioned improvement ideas that both mentors and mentees suggested in the qualitative data were introducing the program earlier in the academic year and sponsoring more fun social events within the program. Half the mentors mentioned that it would have been helpful to connect earlier with their mentees in their major, setting the tone for participating beginning in the students' first semester. Mentees agreed, with one commenting in the survey that they would like to "meet the mentors sooner than January." Most of the mentors and mentees also expressed that they believed that the *Majors Mentor* program should sponsor more social events to attract students to participate in the program. More than 100 mentees, residents and commuters, attended the large, social kick-off event. "Have programs that are more fun and not always educationally based," suggested one mentee in the survey.

### **4.3 Predictions Verses Outcomes**

Although the percentage of first-year students who participated in the *Majors Mentor* program was only half of what I hoped for with my aim statement, the outcomes of both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered and analyzed supported most of the predictions I made regarding the *Majors Mentor* initiative. Commuter students, both mentors and mentees, participated in the program, activities, and events, and agreed that the initiative increased their engagement with Pitt-Greensburg. Those that took part in the program increased their interpersonal connections at the University, and upon reflection, they recognized the benefits of engaging through this program.

One limitation of the data was that other than first-generation and female/male-identifying populations, many other sub-populations of commuter students were not represented when I

disaggregated the mentee data. For example, all of the commuter mentees who responded to the survey and who were interviewed, answered demographic questions which identified themselves as white, traditional-aged, and either cis-male or cis-female. Therefore, no data was available to examine differences across other populations, such as students of color, transgender or gender variant/non-conforming students, and non-traditional students. Although many of these populations were represented within the mentors themselves, that sample was so small that conclusions relative to these populations could not be drawn. Future studies at my institution should focus on how this intervention may affect these minoritized populations of commuter students. Nonetheless, for the commuter students represented by the data, the *Majors Mentor* program was demonstrated to help them engage and connect more with the campus community. As one mentor shared, “It was such a big thing for me. If you don’t get involved on campus, you’re not going to have a good four years. You’re not going to have any good, meaningful connections on campus, and you’re going to be more isolated.”

## **5.0 Learning, Action and Reflections**

The purpose of my intervention was to address the problem of lower commuter student engagement at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. As research shows, commuter students are characteristically less engaged than residential students, so I knew it would be a challenge to implement an initiative that would result in significant change (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Newbold et al., 2011). However, I also recognized that by using improvement science, and implementing a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle, I could test the *Majors Mentor* program as a way to generate connections and increase engagement for commuter students and then analyze how this intervention could be improved (Bryk et al., 2017). As I examined the data collected at the conclusion of the *Majors Mentor* program, key findings surfaced which supported my theory of improvement, as well as what had been found in the literature. In addition, I identified ideas for improving this initiative and implementing it again in the future.

### **5.1 Key Findings**

My theory of improvement was that by creating an intervention which connects to academics, and therefore alters students' perceptions about engagement and better accommodates their needs, Pitt-Greensburg commuter students would become more involved and increase their levels of engagement. One of the key findings collected from the data revealed that by relating involvement to academic pursuits, engagement for Pitt-Greensburg commuter students, especially for the mentors, was increased by the *Majors Mentor* program. Collectively, outcomes

demonstrated that the commuter students involved in the program made the conscious choice to engage with this program, one of the primary drivers in my driver diagram. Although the intended outcomes I had targeted in my aim statement (60% of first-year commuters participating) were not met, 30% of included first-year commuter students did participate in the program activities and events. In addition, 50% of the upper-level students who served as mentors in the program were commuter students, half of whom indicated during the interviews that they had not been involved at the university outside of classes prior to the *Majors Mentor* program. Qualitative data also revealed that the students' motivation for being involved in the program was mainly associated with academic reasons. These results align with the previous literature which asserted that commuter students are degree focused and desire opportunities which provide them with career related development activities (Jacoby, 2014; Thomas, 2019).

Findings also reveal that these students recognized the benefits they received as a result of being involved in the program, most often citing academically related gains. They had an increased awareness about the benefits of engagement and connected to the opportunity as a result of it being academically focused, both of which were identified as important secondary drivers related to the primary driver of student choice. Dugan et al. (2008) referred to the importance of this awareness as key to helping commuter students recognize the value of involvement in campus organizations. Both the qualitative and quantitative data revealed that commuter students involved in the *Majors Mentor* program increased their engagement at Pitt-Greensburg, and recognized this as a benefit. Survey responses demonstrated that mentees recognized the benefits of participating in the program, and interviews with both the mentees and mentors revealed why they engaged in the intervention.

Connecting co-curricular engagement to students' academic majors through the *Majors Mentor* intervention also addressed the other primary driver of accommodating the unique wants and needs of commuter students, specifically, increased opportunities for social interaction. As mentioned in the literature, commuter students desire more chances to be socially connected with members of their university community (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Pokorny et al., 2015). They also need to be provided with opportunities for social interactions and with intentional outreach, to facilitate making connections with fellow students and faculty and staff members (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2014). Therefore, a secondary driver that was identified as a component of the primary driver (accommodating of commuter students' unique wants and needs) was, offering structured opportunities for interactions.

The quantitative and qualitative findings of this study demonstrate that the *Majors Mentor* program provided these structured opportunities and helped these students to build new relationships and generate connections to campus. In the survey data, the commuter mentees agreed that the program helped them to generate connections to campus, with female and first-generation mentees also agreeing that it helped them to meet other students and faculty members. Why male mentees who completed the survey didn't agree as strongly with making connections to others is something that needs to be examined in the future. Regardless, the survey data reported that, overall, mentees participated most often in the program activities which connected them personally with other members of the campus community. This included the lunches with faculty, the kick-off social event, and the course scheduling and registration meeting with their mentor. As Burlison (2015) indicates, a peer-to-peer mentoring program where interactions occur between students can help students to identify with others and have a greater sense of connectedness. Findings from both the open-ended questions in the survey and the interviews with the mentees

and mentors, described how participants frequently mentioned increasing their interpersonal connections as a benefit of participating in the program. Although some faculty members participated more than others, mentors related that their engagement with faculty and peers increased, and mentees cited forming positive relationships with their mentor as well as with faculty. The *Majors Mentor* program fulfilled the need of commuter students to be more socially connected with the university community, increasing their engagement.

## **5.2 Strengths of the Intervention and Process**

In addition to the *Majors Mentor* intervention successfully engaging a population of commuter students at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, there were some other strengths and positive outcomes of the change and overall process. Foremost was the response of the upper-level students to the introduction of this pilot program. Although this was a new initiative to our campus, the number of applications received for the mentor positions from students in a wide variety of majors was pleasantly surprising. When formulating the idea for this program, I anticipated there may not be enough mentors to be able to provide for some of the majors or academic areas. However, 21 upper-level students applied, and a mentor was able to be selected and assigned to almost every targeted major or academic area, which was very encouraging. It was also very validating that half the applications received and half the mentors selected were commuter students. In addition, the mentors interviewed reported that the program was successful in improving their own engagement. This is significant because the intervention was meant to increase engagement for all commuter students, not just the first-year commuters.



A specific activity that was found to be particularly successful within the program with both the commuter mentees, as well as the overall population of mentees, was the social kick-off event that took place in January. This event introduced the mentors to their mentees in a fun, open-house style format, which included free t-shirts, cookie-making, and other fun activities in a relaxed atmosphere. More than 100 mentees attended this event. The mentors and mentees interviewed expressed that more of these types of social events should be sponsored in the future in order for students to be able to interact socially. The attendance at this event as well as the reflective data collected from the interviews reinforced that commuter students desire to be socially connected with their peers.

Another key strength of the *Majors Mentor* intervention was the collaboration that took place throughout the process of creating and initiating the program. When I started the project in the fall of 2022, I recognized the importance of enlisting an ally who would have some understanding and influence in the academic realm of the university (Heifetz et al., 2009). I therefore approached the Director of Academic Advising who enthusiastically supported the project and was instrumental in helping to make it a success. The program became a collaboration between the departments of Student Life and Academic Advising. Other departments also contributed to the successful launch of this program, including Career Services, who helped the mentors with their events, and some faculty partners, who recommended mentors, promoted the program, and attended events. These colleagues offered helpful and valuable ideas and suggestions, and, overall, responded positively to this new initiative. Partnering with the Director of Academic Advising also helped me to successfully manage the extra responsibility of implementing the program while balancing my other work obligations. The *Majors Mentor* program succeeded as a result of all of these collaborative efforts and the individuals involved

recognizing the importance of student engagement in improving the college experience for our students.

Finally, although there was no designated budget to fund the *Majors Mentor* program, another positive outcome of the planning process that presented itself was an opportunity through the University of Pittsburgh's *Year of Emotional Well-Being* to apply for a grant to obtain funding; and present a poster presentation about the program. I wrote a proposal outlining how student engagement and sense of belonging are essential to students' emotional well-being, and I received a \$3,000 grant for the program. As a condition of the grant, I was required to present this project as a poster presentation at the University of Pittsburgh's campus in April. During this exhibition, I was approached by several students from that campus who asked about the program, most of whom commented afterwards they wished Pitt had a similar program in place; and how helpful a program like that would be for them on the Pittsburgh campus. This anecdotal evidence, based on my personal interactions, reinforced that the intervention we implemented could be beneficial to other campuses as well.

### **5.3 Limitations of the Intervention and Process**

While there were many positive outcomes and strengths of the *Majors Mentor* program, it was not without some limitations. For example, participation rates of both first-year commuter mentees, as well as first-year students in general, was not as high as expected. The aim statement of 60% of first-year commuter students participating was perhaps idealistic, and a 30% actual participation rate is not inconsequential. However, both the mentors and the mentees themselves indicated that it was frustrating that more mentees did not participate. This lower participation rate

was possibly due to the timing of the implementation, starting the program in the spring semester instead of introducing it the fall, maybe not allowing ample enough time for mentees to engage with their mentors and the program. It is also conceivable that the mentees, as first-year students in their majors, weren't invested in the program. In addition, the quantitative findings from the survey were also limited by the small sample of students who completed it (only 12 commuter students). Therefore, the conclusions drawn from these findings would be strengthened by surveying future iterations of the program and gathering more quantitative data. A second iteration of the intervention is already underway for the fall 2023 semester, introducing the program earlier to students and including second-year students as mentees, who might be more interested in major-related assistance and engagement. I am hoping that by increasing the overall number of participants, changing the timing of the survey to take place before the end of the academic year, and by collecting feedback after specific activities and events, this second iteration will not only result in more data overall, but also disaggregated data that is more representative of minoritized commuter populations. I would also like to gather more administrative data broken down by attendance numbers at specific events.

Another area for future growth for this intervention that was identified through the quantitative and qualitative findings was that students desired more opportunities to socially interact with each other as well as faculty members within the program. This was especially true for male-identifying mentees who reported lower levels of agreement in the survey with being able to meet other students and professors through the program. The interviews with the mentees and mentors affirmed that an improvement they would like to see to the *Majors Mentor* program would be additional activities and events where they could informally socialize. This is consistent with what the literature reveals as a unique need of commuter students and fall 2023 plans for the

program have already incorporated this improvement, scheduling more social events where students and faculty alike can interact.

Finally, as the *Majors Mentor* program was being implemented, it became clear that faculty support, or lack thereof, affected how successfully it was received by the mentees in the various majors and academic areas. Although all faculty members were informed about the project in the fall semester and asked to nominate mentor candidates, and a few were involved in the planning, some faculty did not promote or support the program. Majors and academic areas who had faculty members that announced the activities in class, encouraged mentees to participate, and joined the events themselves, had more engagement from their mentees than those that didn't. This was evident during weekly staff meetings with the mentors as well as when the mentors were interviewed at the end of the semester. To address this limitation in the future, it may be helpful to enlist the support of university administrators and faculty committees in encouraging faculty to support and promote the program.

#### **5.4 Next Steps and Future Plans**

Despite some of the limitations associated with the initiative, findings overall support the continuation and expansion of the *Majors Mentor* program at Pitt-Greensburg. In fact, the implementation of the intervention in the fall of 2023 has already begun, using the feedback and suggestions received from the previous participants to make programmatic improvements. Operating under the improvement science model, implications have been revealed for how Pitt-Greensburg could advance this program as a way to generate connections and increase engagement for commuter students.

One modification that has already been implemented in order to increase the program's impact is the inclusion of second-year students as mentees. As previously mentioned, qualitative data gathered from both the mentees and the mentors support including sophomore students in this program. Mentors reported that sophomores were previously attending the activities and the events that they sponsored. In addition, mentors and mentees both related that first-year students are not yet immersed in their major enough to recognize the importance of attending some of the activities and events. To implement this change in fall 2023, mentors have been limited to junior and senior students. Second-year students are now being included with first-year students as mentees and have been assigned mentors based on their declared major. By applying this change to the program, I hope to not only increase attendance at activities and events that are sponsored, but also expand the benefits of the program to a larger population of commuter students.

Similarly, another change that was suggested was to recruit and assign more mentors specifically by majors rather than academic areas. Even though the number of mentors who participated in the pilot program was higher than expected, there were a few of the smaller majors where mentees had to be assigned a mentor in a related academic area rather than their specific major. These included communication, creative and professional writing, English literature, public policy, Spanish, and visual and performing arts. Qualitative findings demonstrated that some mentees in these majors felt that the program was not relevant to them if their mentor did not have the exact major as them. In September of 2023, I reached out to more faculty members, as well as division chairs, in order to partner with them to recruit mentors. Pitt-Greensburg has three academic divisions, Humanities, Behavioral Science, and Natural Science, under which specific majors are categorized. Division chairs are designated faculty members in each area who are responsible for coordinating processes and addressing concerns that arise within their respective

division. As a result of my outreach to faculty members and the division chairs, to date, we have recruited mentors specific to more majors this year. In order to provide commuter mentees with supporters who can better understand the unique needs they have and challenges they may be facing, efforts have also been made to ensure that commuter students remain well represented within the mentoring staff, and we should continue these efforts as future iterations of this intervention proceed.

Likewise, as demonstrated by qualitative findings and personal observations, faculty involvement and support of the *Majors Mentor* program was found to be an important factor which influenced the success of the program. Therefore, steps should be taken to enlist more of them as allies. I have already presented the initial findings of this intervention to university administration, including the President, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and the division chairs, and have asked them to support and promote the intervention to faculty. Because the division chairs have closer connections with the faculty in their areas, they have been especially helpful in encouraging faculty involvement. Benefits and advantages of the initiative were also presented to faculty during a campus presentation. In addition, individual outreach to faculty in majors that struggled with the program last year was completed. By taking these steps, faculty support of the program has already expanded, and I hope will continue to grow.

Next, as mentioned previously, Pitt-Greensburg has already initiated the *Majors Mentor* program during the fall semester instead of waiting until the spring. I decided, based on the feedback from the qualitative data, that the program should be started earlier in order to set the tone for participation. Both mentors and mentees interviewed believed that the program would be better received if it was introduced to mentees earlier in the academic year. Mentees would have more time to connect with the mentor(s) in their major, and expectations would be established

promptly. Currently, mentors have already been selected, and several activities and events are already planned for the fall 2023 semester.

Finally, to better meet the needs of our commuter students, more social events that help students to meet each other and meet faculty members should be implemented. Quantitative findings from the survey demonstrated that the events which offered interpersonal interactions were better attended by the commuter mentees. In addition, survey results showed that the mentees were somewhat indeterminate about the program helping them to meet other students and professors. This was especially true for male-identifying students, demonstrating a need for more activities which might foster connections for this subset of commuter students and increase their engagement with the program. Moreover, commuters who did participate in the program indicated in the qualitative findings that a main benefit of participating was establishing relationships with their peers and with faculty. Therefore, activities and events that mimic the socialization that the interactive kick-off event provided, and was well-attended during the pilot program, should be incorporated into the intervention. Planning of these events have already been included in the fall 2023 iteration of the program.

### **5.5 Implications for Practice**

Findings from this improvement science intervention have broader implications for practice and further research. My theory of improvement was that by creating an intervention which connects to academics, commuter students' engagement could be increased. This theory aligned with the literature which found that commuter students tend to be degree and career focused (Jacoby, 2014; Thomas, 2019). The *Majors Mentor* program is an initiative that could be

investigated by other institutions as a possible change idea which aligns with the literature and might address the problem of practice of commuter student engagement (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Newbold et al., 2011). Although the amount of quantitative data collected in my study was limited, and therefore may not be conclusive, the qualitative data demonstrated that Pitt-Greensburg commuter students who participated in the initiative increased their interpersonal connections and chose to be more engaged in co-curricular experiences as a result of the program. Further iterations of this intervention, both at my institution and at other universities, should be implemented in order to collect more conclusive data and findings.

The *Majors Mentor* program was designed to improve outcomes within a specific institutional setting, namely a small, public university whose commuter student population comprises more than half of the student body. Consequently, larger institutions or those that are demographically different may have difficulty replicating this intervention and/or may not experience similar results. This intervention was implemented at a university where there are only 24 academic majors, faculty and staff personally know the students, and collaboration between individuals and departments is easily achieved. These characteristics contributed to being able to successfully apply the *Majors Mentor* program. This program may be more difficult to employ and may not improve outcomes or have the same implications at institutions with dissimilar characteristics or a smaller population of commuter students. In addition, some funding, approximately \$5,800, was essential to administer the program, paying for mentor training expenses, activities and events, and incentives. Institutions or departments that lack the budget to pay for such an initiative, may be challenged to implement it successfully.

Further research on how such an intervention may affect sub-populations of commuter students should also be completed. As previously explained, the limited data collected during this



study was not able to ascertain the impact the *Majors Mentor* initiative may have had on students of color, non-traditional students, or students who identify as gender variant or gender non-conforming. My institution, as well as other institutions who implement such a program, should prioritize strategies for assessing outcomes of such an intervention from a more representative population of commuter students.

## 5.6 Reflection

Throughout the process of selecting, defining, researching, and approaching a problem of practice, I have learned so much about improvement science and have developed my skills as a scholarly practitioner. Even though I have worked in higher education, specifically student affairs, for almost 30 years, the concept of using a Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle and tests of change to approach a problem was completely new to me. It has been enlightening to learn about this approach and the processes used to achieve it. Engaging in activities like root-cause analysis, creating fishbone and driver diagrams, and examining the system, have helped me to learn a step-by-step approach to understanding my problem of practice more fully. Commuter student engagement at universities, or lack thereof, is considered to be a “wicked problem”, one that many institutions face and that lacks a clear solution. Engaging in the activities related to improvement science allowed me to identify the challenges more specifically to my institution and the commuter student population at Pitt-Greensburg. It also assisted me in formulating possible change ideas that were in my sphere of influence to implement.

An important lesson I learned as an improver was engaging more in “seeing the system” and understanding how to view the issue from a different perspective. Heifetz et al. (2009) taught

me about observing, listening, and asking questions in order to fully understand the system where the problem exists. They refer to this as “getting on the balcony” to view the problem, seeing it from all points of view. This was one of my favorite lessons learned as I became a scholarly practitioner. I loved the concept of taking a step back, or up to the balcony, in order to gain perspective. I also found it to be a much more effective approach than just brainstorming a quick idea that I think might work. Furthermore, “getting on the balcony” and “seeing the system” allowed me to discover how our institutional system was failing commuter students, not how the commuter students themselves were failing. It shifted my mindset from viewing the students as having a deficit, to recognizing that the university needed to take responsibility for the problem (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). I started to focus more on what Pitt-Greensburg was doing, or not doing, to engage its commuter student population.

Another lesson I learned was the importance of identifying stakeholders who are impacted by the problem of practice, and the significance of developing allies. This was especially essential when I was formulating my change idea. Because the *Majors Mentor* initiative was an academically related mentoring program, it fell mostly outside my sphere of influence. Based on what I learned in the EdD program, I recognized that I would need to expand my sphere of influence by capitalizing on personal relationships I had with those within the sphere of influence, and establishing those people as allies. My first step was approaching the Director of Academic Advising, whom I knew well, and I recognized would support such a program. She immediately recognized the value to piloting the intervention and became a valuable contributor who assisted me through the entire implementation of the program. I also enlisted the President of the university as an ally, since he is a stakeholder with a vested interest in seeing our students engaged, satisfied, and retained at the university. He also understood the benefit such an initiative might provide,

recognizing how it could assist not only commuter students, but all the first-year mentees that were included in the program. Other institutional stakeholders who helped me to gain some insight about how the mentoring program might work most effectively included current commuter students, faculty members, and staff from the career services department. I learned that adaptive leadership includes identifying and working with stakeholders to better understand the system and work within the campus climate (Heifetz et al., 2009).

One thing I learned about myself as an improver during this project is that I need to recognize my positionality as it relates to the problem of practice. As I was formulating the *Majors Mentor* program, I recognize now that my personal identity as a cis-female may be limiting my ability to understand what male-identifying commuter students want and need from an intervention. My personal identities might also be limiting how I can relate in this context to other sub-populations of commuter students, such as students of color, gender variant or gender non-conforming students, or non-traditional students. In recognizing this limitation, it is important that as a scholarly practitioner I remain committed to examining the problem of practice from demographically different viewpoints by conducting more interviews, surveys, and research. Moreover, I learned that even though positionality might somewhat limit my understanding, improvement science involves implementing a change idea that continues to be refined over time. This iterative process requires recognizing limitations, implementing changes that address the limitations, and then trying again.

I believe that the knowledge I have gained about improvement and improvement science has helped me to gain momentum when it comes to driving change in other areas. As I investigated my problem of practice related to commuter student engagement, I became interested in approaching a related problem, that of male student engagement. I now have the framework and

tools to know how to go about investigating this problem and formulating a change idea. In addition, I have gained confidence in my abilities to affect change, even outside my sphere of influence. Prior to this project, I have typically been a leader who respects institutional hierarchy and departmental lines. However, I realized that improving the system sometimes means challenging the chain of command and working outside of normal boundaries in order to affect change. Using the improvement science process has been such a positive and affirmative experience that I plan to continue to it as the standard when approaching future problems of practice.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

By designing an academically-related co-curricular experience for commuter students, the purpose of my intervention was to increase commuter student engagement at the University of Pittsburgh at Greenburg. The *Majors Mentor* program that I implemented as the change idea was meant to address the primary drivers of student choice regarding engagement and accommodation of the unique wants and needs of commuter students. Qualitative and quantitative data gathered at the conclusion of the intervention demonstrate that commuter students involved in the *Majors Mentor* program increased their engagement at Pitt-Greensburg and became more socially connected with the university community. It provided structured opportunities for interaction and intentional outreach through peer-to-peer mentoring that helped to facilitate this engagement, something reinforced in the literature as best practices (Burlison, 2015; Jacoby, 2014). Although the intervention may not be replicable or applicable to all other higher education institutions,

further iterations of the initiative at Pitt-Greensburg will be implemented, using improvement science to continuously learn and improve the system.

My involvement with this intervention, assessment, and the EdD program overall has changed the way I think about and manage improvement. I understand now that I must approach the work with a growth mindset, not with the mindset that something will always be fixed through one simple program or change. Improvement science is about trying cycles of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA), intentionally planning and initiating change, studying the effects of this change, then acting again. It is a continual learning process. I was excited to implement the *Majors Mentor* intervention on our campus and explore how it impacted our students. I was proud to present information about the project in the form of a poster presentation at the University of Pittsburgh. I was also thrilled that the President of our university asked me to explain the initiative to faculty and staff at his state-of-the-campus address this past August, as an example of a positive, collaborative program which may help with retaining students. I feel very accomplished in the work I have completed, but recognize that I should continue to learn and grow as a scholarly practitioner, leader, and improver throughout my career in higher education.

## Appendix A Qualtrics Survey

Demographic Questions (multiple choice):

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What category best describes your race?
4. Are you a first-generation college student?
5. How many hours per week do you work at an off-campus place of employment?
6. Are you a residential student or a commuter student?
7. (If commuter) How far do you commute to campus?

Content (multiple choice):

8. How often do you participate in campus-sponsored programs and/or activities?
9. Which of the following activities did you attend during the *Majors Mentor* program? (Select all that apply):

*Kick-off event*

*Faculty/student luncheon*

*Mentor office hours*

*Career panel/presentation(s)*

*Course scheduling and registration meeting/event*

*Academic club event(s)*

*Study session event*

*Other*

If this is selected, display logic prompts them to please list.

*None of the above*

Content (Likert scale rating):

10. Please rate how much you agree with each of the following statements (5-point Likert scale: strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree ):

*The Majors Mentor program helped me to generate connections to campus.*

*The Majors Mentor program increased my engagement with Pitt-Greensburg.*

*The Majors Mentor program assisted me in learning more about my academic major.*

*I was able to meet students through the Majors Mentor program.*

*I was able to meet professors through the Majors Mentor program.*

*The Majors Mentor program helped me become familiar with career opportunities within my major.*

Content (open-ended):

11. What did you gain from participating in the *Majors Mentor* program?
12. What changes or improvements would you like to see to the *Majors Mentor* program that would make you more likely to participate?

## Appendix B Interview Protocol & Questions

The procedures and plan I implemented for beginning the interview was to introduce myself, thank them for participating, assure confidentiality, and obtain their permission to record the session. I then explained that the purpose of the interview is to better understand the experience of students who participated in the *Majors Mentor* program. For first-year students, I started off by asking the individual to tell me a little bit about themselves and how their first year at Pitt-Greensburg was, in order to build rapport, set a welcoming tone, and possibly obtain additional data in the context of their experience.

Questions (30–45-minute interview):

1. Why did you choose to participate in the *Majors Mentor* program? (Prompt: Can you elaborate on that a bit further...)
2. What type of involvement have you had with the campus outside of classes and the *Majors Mentor* program? (Prompt: Tell me a little more about that...)
3. What was the most successful (for mentors)/your favorite (for mentees) part of the *Majors Mentor* program?
4. What was the least successful (for mentors)/ your least favorite (for mentees) part of the *Majors Mentor* program?
5. Describe what your relationship was like with your mentor/mentees. (Choose depending on their role.)
6. What do you believe are the most effective strategies for communicating with students about the *Majors Mentors* program?



7. How have your perceptions changed about involvement and engagement on campus as a result of participating in the *Majors Mentor* program? (Follow up with “describe your current sense of belonging to the campus community” question if need clarification.)
8. How did you benefit from participating in the *Majors Mentor* program?
9. What changes or improvements would you make to the *Majors Mentor* program?

Prompts and follow-up questions were used if clarification was needed, and/or if the individual was not very talkative and further conversation needed to be generated. I was prepared to interject with a comment such as “Let’s move on to the next question” if the interview got off track and in order stay within the time limit. I concluded the interview by asking if there were any final comments that the individual would like to add about the Major Mentor program, and I explained what I planned to do with the information, and thanked the student for participating.

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