

**Fostering Social and Co-Curricular Engagement with Commuter Students at a Regional
University Campus**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2023

At the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, commuter students make up the majority of the currently enrolled student population. The majority population has expressed their dissatisfaction about co-curricular and social activities and a diminished sense of belonging and inclusion. The focus of this dissertation is on the Greensburg Experiences More Program (GEM), and the central idea that the program is not inclusive nor engaging to commuter students and that there has not been a redesigned or evaluation of the program within the past five years to promote more buy in for the social and co-curricular experiences it provides. By interviewing ten higher education professionals and explore how they engage their commuter student population could provide ways that the GEM program could be changed or adapted. The ten semi-structured interviews consisted of professionals from both public and private institutions from five different states. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed resulting in three different themes, which are as follows a. Time is of the Essence b. Linear Level of Social and Co-Curricular Events and c. Free Everything: From Food to Fun. These overall findings show that the campus needs to make a considerable effort in working with their commuter student as much if not more than their non-commuter student for them to become engaged in social and co-curricular activities. These findings also examine that the best time to engage their commuter students was between the hours of 8:00am to 6:00 pm, to provide more than just an experience by enhancing events with incentives such as food or additional giveaways, and the creation and implementation of the common hour.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	ix
1.1 Problem Area	1
1.2 Problem of Practice	3
1.3 Site Context	5
1.4 Inquiry	6
1.4.1 Inquiry Plan Overview	9
2.0 Review of Supporting Scholarly and Professional Knowledge.....	12
2.1 Life Commitments	12
2.2 Family	13
2.3 Time	14
2.4 Work	15
2.5 Co-curricular and Social Events	16
2.6 Living Learning Communities	17
2.7 Social Clubs and Events.....	18
2.8 Campus Environment	20
2.9 Campus Libraries.....	21
2.10 Advising, Peer Leaders, Commuter Programs.....	23
2.11 Conclusion.....	26
3.0 Method	27
3.1 Theory of Improvement.....	27
3.2 System Drivers	28

3.2.1 Primary System Drivers	28
3.2.2 Secondary System Drivers.....	30
3.3 Change Idea	32
3.3.1 GEM Curriculum Redesign	32
3.3.2 Proposed Change Idea	32
3.4 PDSA Cycle	33
3.4.1 Plan	33
3.4.2 Do.....	34
3.4.3 Study and Predictions.....	36
3.4.4 Act.....	37
3.5 Participants	37
3.6 Data Collections and Analysis Method.....	38
3.7 Conclusion.....	39
3.8 Acknowledgment of Limitations	39
4.0 Findings.....	41
4.1 Time is of the Essence.....	42
4.2 Linear Level of Social and Co-curricular Events	46
4.3 Free Everything: From Food to Fun	50
4.4 Conclusion.....	53
5.0 Learning and Actions	54
5.1 Key Takeaways	54
5.1.1 Key Takeaway #1: What is engagement?	54
5.1.2 Key Takeaway #2: Effective Marketing.....	56

5.1.3 Key Finding #3: Faculty Participation	57
5.2 Recommendations.....	58
5.2.1 Recommendation #1: Allow students to determine the classification of events; social or co-curricular	58
5.2.2 Recommendation #2: Allow outside experiences	59
5.2.3 Recommendation #3: Recruiting additional staff and faculty to become GEM coordinators	60
5.3 Implications for Research and Practice	61
5.4 Conclusion	62
6.0 Reflections.....	64
Bibliography	66

List of Tables

Table 1: Higher Education Professional Interviewee Demographics	38
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Preface

This study and dissertation is dedicated to all the past and present commuter students that I have had the pleasure of knowing. You have made me want to be a better professional, instructor, and advocate. I am forever grateful to you.

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1.0 Naming and Framing the Problem of Practice

At the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, over half of the campus population are commuter students. With this increased commuter student population on campus, institutional advancement has created and distributed numerous surveys targeted to the commuter population, looking at their satisfaction and engagement. With the data collected, many students have voiced their negative opinions on the co-curricular and social activities and a diminished sense of belonging or inclusion on campus. The goal of this dissertation of practice is to foster commuter student engagement in social and co-curricular program by utilizing the Greensburg Experience More (GEM) program.

1.1 Problem Area

In the traditional conceptualization of the higher education system, students have resided on campus and have participated in some form of multi-dimensional engagement that includes factors both in and out of the classroom setting (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021, p. 47). The rising trend within the higher education system, show that more students are non-commuter or commuter and do not always fall into the 18-24 age range, as of 2021 over six million students identified being over the age of 25 (National Center of Education Statistics, 2023). While the student population is changing and evolving, efforts to initiate engagement with students has not. A study shows that the most engaged students include female identifying students, full-time students, non-commuter students, learning community students, international students, and students with diversity

experiences (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 39). This study has no mention of non-traditional or commuter students having strong ties or rapport with their peer and campus community and is supported by the findings of Skahill (2002) who identified commuter students being less likely to develop relationships with peers and lacked connection with the university as a whole. Not only staff, but also faculty members, often perpetuate this idea of remaining within the traditional sense of a higher education experience as well. Jacoby (1990) stated that many of the faculty on higher education campuses have earned their degrees at traditional based institutions where the requirements were 120 hours of coursework and complete emersion within their campus community. Additionally, administrators and faculty have not been able to separate their definition of collegiate experience with the new factors such as being non-commuter or commuter and the possible outside commitment those students have (Kuh et al, 2006, p. 95). Overall, the concern of commuter students not being as engaged as their non-commuter counterparts is acknowledge through studies that show their lack of peer relationships, as well as those relationships with faculty and staff.

In addition, commuters or commuter students may consider social and co-curricular engagement a less important factor in their educational career because they tend to focus solely on classroom objectives and activities (Thomas, 2019). The higher education field is now looking more deeply into the various reasons for commuter students' hesitancy or unavailability to become involved in co-curricular and social engagement activities in ways the non-commuter students interact (Jacoby, 2004, p12). Newbold (2015) also explored the notion that the commuter students' experience is much more diverse than that of a non-commuter student; commuter students may have increased obligations with work, social, and family life balance that decreases their

availability to engage outside of the classroom. In conclusion, these external and internal factors may be the foundation of this lack of engagement in both social and co-curricular activities.

1.2 Problem of Practice

At the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, commuter students make up the majority of the currently enrolled student population. The majority population has expressed their dissatisfaction about co-curricular and social activities and a diminished sense of belonging and inclusion on campus through surveys distributed through the institutional advancement office. The University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg has attempted to implement initiatives and interventions specifically focused on promoting commuter social and co-curricular engagement, such as creating peer/commuter mentors, live and learn communities, and specifically designated spaces for commuter students. My problem of practice centers on the Greensburg Experiences More Program (GEM), and the central idea that the program is not inclusive nor engaging to commuter students and that there has not been redesigned or evaluation of the program within the past five years to promote more buy in for the social and co-curricular experiences it provides.

In September 2018, I became aware of a lack of commuter student engagement shortly after beginning my role. My current role is the Assistant Director of Student Involvement and the First-Year Experience, ensures students are provided with opportunities in and out of the classroom to develop skills they need to succeed in their future outside of the higher education system. In addition to developing and facilitating social events for students, I also work with other faculty and staff to create a diverse series of cultural and education programming that is related to coursework and class topics.

However, though my role within the University is to facilitate a diverse array of programs of the social and academic nature my social identities fit within the White, cis-gender heterosexual categories. In addition to my social identities, I also grew up within Westmoreland county, attended K-12 school in the city of Greensburg and it is where I currently reside. My higher education career started at a small, private, religious affiliated, liberal arts college more than two hours away from my hometown. With the significant difference between the current public school where I am employed at and the private school I attended, my higher education institution did not have a significant commuter population, as all students were required to live on campus unless they lived within five miles away.

My passion for pursuing this project stems from the relationships created with the students at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. Since I began my career here, I was easily able to create and maintain rapport with students, primarily because I am similar in age to these students. Students have always felt comfortable asking for me advice or being able to discuss concerns and requesting feedback with me. Once I developed these relationships, which have strengthened over time, I began to inquire why commuter students do not attend as many social and co-curricular events as their peers. They gave me honest and direct answers, unlike the possibility that they may not be as forthcoming if they were discussing this topic with someone who was in a higher place of “power”, such as a response to the question, “Why do think commuter students are not engaged on campus?” their response was ‘Because they usually just get a class and then leave to like, go home, or go to work or something. I feel like everything's that like night and nobody wants to drive back up here at night.’ In this interview, I previously have had with commuter students; they were already familiar with me due to the nature of my job as well as their ability to remain anonymous. Overall, since commuter students live close by an it is easier to go home, interest in events that

occur later in the day are not as appealing to them nor do they strike their interest to come back to campus.

1.3 Site Context

The University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg is a regional campus of the University of Pittsburgh located in Westmoreland County, which lies about 45 from the metropolitan of Pittsburgh and the Oakland campus. In the 2010 census completed, Westmoreland County's population had a demographic of 140,421 residents over the age of 18, with a median age of 43.8. With the context of this dissertation focusing on students that are in the higher education system, 9.1% of the Westmoreland County population was between the ages of 15-24 and taking into consideration non-traditional age students, 9.8% of the county's demographic consisted of aged 25-34. Along with ages reported, the census showed that 98.8% of the population identified as belong to one race, with majority of the population at 95.3% identifying as White. With these county driven numbers, they are similar to the demographic of the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg student. As of fall 2022, 1,231 students or 93% of the total population identified as being 24 or under and 7% of students identified as being 25 or older. Additionally, 78% of the total reported students identified as being Caucasian with only 7% identifying as Black or African American and 5% of students identifying as Asian. Specific to this problem of practice and the currently make-up of this higher education institution, 590 students reside on campus and 736 students reside off campus. With the statistics shown, both the county and the higher education institution it resides in lack diversity in multiple ways such as racially, ethnically, and generationally.

1.4 Inquiry

The Greensburg Experiences More (GEM) program was created in 2015 by five staff members housed in the student services office. These members' specialties included student involvement, advising, career services, and housing and residence life. The coordinators' goal was to create a program similar to the University of Pittsburgh- Oakland's model, Out of the Classroom Curriculum (OCC), and create a more in-depth curriculum that could increase students' participation in social and co-curricular activities across their time at Pitt-Greensburg. Below is the description of the program, the goals of the overall program, and the time of completion.

The GEM (Greensburg Experience More) program complements and enhances students' classroom learning. Participants engage in structured professional and personal skill development across five core components: leadership development, service, career development, cultural awareness and appreciation and Pitt-Greensburg pride and traditions. These "outside of the normal" learning experiences not only incorporate on-campus events that occur within students' selected area of study as well as areas that could and would benefit them in the long run. Participants engage in structured professional and personal skill development across five core components. Each of these five GEM components includes core requirements. There are also varieties of electives from which students can choose and each component is challenging but will help participants grow personally and professionally. The skills students develop are broadly applicable to work and academic situations. These skills are also marketable to future employers. The requirements of each component are built around the following learning outcomes:

- Leadership Development: Students are exposed to a variety of leadership skills and situations. This helps students define their leadership style, learn how to be an active leader, and how to lead as well as follow.
- Service: Students will gain an appreciation and understanding of serving others in the community. This will encourage student to begin a lifelong commitment to service and ethics.
- Career Development: Students will develop career awareness and professional skills. This will make students competitive in gaining employment or acceptance into graduate/professional school.
- Cultural Awareness & Appreciation: Students will develop a deeper understanding of themselves. Students will discover how their cultural perspective affects their worldview. Students will gain an appreciation of the value of diversity and culture in your life.
- Pitt-Greensburg Pride & Traditions: Students will engage in campus events. Gain an appreciation for Pitt-Greensburg traditions and school spirit! Student's campus engagement will also serve as a catalyst for a broader sense of pride for your community.

GEM builds on the skills and knowledge gained within the academic curriculum. The program provides transferable skill development in the following more specific key areas, which includes working with others in teams, oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment and decision-making, applying knowledge and skills to real-world problems. The program has the ability to be completed in a span of two to four years, with the quickest record of completion being 18 months. A student may be permitted to complete the program in less than two years. However, consultation with the GEM staff is strongly recommended. This consultation will determine an appropriate timeline for completing the requirements. Both the core requirements and electives

can only be completed while enrolled as a student at Pitt-Greensburg. At this time, the GEM program is not intended for transfer to another institution including any of the other University of Pittsburgh campuses. Using Engage, Pitt Greensburg's online co-curricular transcript system, participants will track their progress. As a student approaches the program's conclusion, they will meet with one of the coordinating staff members. Together, they will discuss and reflect on the student's GEM experience. Additionally, the staff is available for consultation throughout a student's journey to help them find events that could lead to completion or work with them on their reflection of completed events. Students who successfully complete the program will receive recognition at Pitt Greensburg's annual Honors Convocation and graduation ceremony.

This program's initial concern and challenges are the steep requirements in the leadership development and the cultural awareness and appreciation areas. With the leadership development, students must be on an executive board or commit to long-term and time-consuming positions within different clubs and activities. With commuter students' lack of availability of time and other requirements, this may not be accessible to them and would hinder or completely derail the continued engagement or completion of the program. Non-commuter students who spend most of their time on campus or live within a small distance from campus are more apt to be able to fit additional executive board meetings into their schedules. Another challenge is the fact that there is only a certain amount of executive board positions on campus. While Pitt-Greensburg houses over 60 clubs and organizations, it may be burdensome for students to breach the gap and assert themselves into the position. With the cultural appreciation requirement, due to COVID-19 events have been postponed and never rescheduled. In Westmoreland County and the current budget of the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, several events have not been able to come to campus, have been restructured, or canceled entirely.

1.4.1 Inquiry Plan Overview

The overall plan for my inquiry is to learn and investigate how other higher education professionals actively engage their commuter student populations in activities on campus. The initial goal is to discover common themes among other higher education institutions to actively engage their commuter students in social and co-curricular and compare to how the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg engages their commuter student population. This will allow me to see areas that that the University of Pittsburgh can be improve on for the commuter student needs and revise the GEM program to be accommodating to increase commuter student participation. The following are the inquiry questions for this problem of practice:

1. How do other higher educational institutions foster social and co-curricular engagement with their students?
2. What steps have other institutions taken to create more appealing social and co-curricular activities?
3. How have you specifically shaped social and co-curricular programs and curriculum to engage commuter students in participating?

Stakeholders

There are three key stakeholders in this problem of practice, which are the GEM Coordinators, faculty and staff, and commuter students.

GEM Coordinators

Though the program was created in 2015, there has only been one additional member to the group when the new position was created within the Office of Student Services, and their job duties included becoming a coordinator of the GEM program. With the newest member evaluating the program and whether or not it is accessible and able to be completed by both resident and commuter students, this may become a cause for contention. Additionally, any possible change to the program may be opposed because that was not initially a part of the plan or course of action.

Faculty and Staff

With the assessment of prevalent and lacking themes within the GEM program and the probability of change that it will need, more faculty and staff will need to be on board so that the program can offer more social and co-curricular events. With the newly implemented union and already in place contracts, faculty may be less likely to want to participate or host events outside of their designated working hours or day. If both faculty and staff are unable or not in favor of hosting additional social and co-curricular events, the program could be unable to progress and flourish.

Students

With the assessment of the program, the current students that are enrolled and actively participating in the program may be able to complete the GEM faster than expected. The students should be consulted with the changes that could happen and what change they believe need occur within the program. Focus groups would be considerably beneficial to both current and future students that could or would have interest in the GEM program. Students, overall, are significant stakeholders

because this program is specifically designed for them and could possibly increase their social and co-curricular experiences.

2.0 Review of Supporting Scholarly and Professional Knowledge

The following review of scholarly research is to increase the understanding of the challenges that commuter students may face like non-commuter students may not. These findings support the need of continuing to develop new ways to foster social and co-curricular engagement within the commuter student population. Additionally, highlighting these factors may increase commuter student's sense of belonging, by merely acknowledging the commitment it stakes to balance many different aspects of life outside of being a student which includes life commitments, co-curricular activities and social events, and campus environment.

2.1 Life Commitments

To gain a better understanding of the commuter student and engage them outside of the classroom, an understanding of what life commitments factor their day to day decisions would be the best foundation to start with. Lifestyle factors that may hinder engagement can include but are not limited to family and work commitments. Family, social, and time constraints are the driving forces for commuter students' unavailability to become actively engaged with co-curricular and social activities on campus. Commuter students may want and have voiced their need to become engaged on campus and within peer and influential groups. However, outside factors that the university nor the commuter student cannot control may inhibit their ability to participate in these activities surrounding social and co-curricular engagement (Jacoby, 2018). The makeup of the commuter student population can be diverse when looking at living situations or home life;

they can be separated into two smaller categories typically fall into two separate living arrangements or housing categories: student living alone (not with family) or student living with family. These living arrangements outside of the university non-commuter housing, along with time constraints and work/employment responsibilities, could significantly impact a commuter student's ability to achieve academic and social success (Jacoby, 2018, p. 291).

2.2 Family

Commuter students have to attend to not only their academic schedules but also family schedules. This may be due to commuter students being more responsible or mature than their non-commuter counterparts, the definition for mature for this instance centers around their motivation for attending a higher education institution and their broadened general outlook and experiences in life (Newbold, 2015). This maturity level could deter commuter students from engaging in social events, not only because of their maturity but because their motivations differ from their non-commuter peers such as providing for their family, taking care of a household, or possibly a full-time job. Some research focused on family ties and commitment, which may not affect all commuter students, but it may be seen more in the non-traditional commuter students (Burlinson, 2015).

Whether full-time or part-time, commuter students with families may miss out on events that they considered to be important such as: family dinners, birthdays, and special gatherings due to attending classes, completing coursework, or attending social and co-curricular events. Looking at family commitments in a different way, those commuter students who do not have a supportive or familial unit to support their goals in higher education could cause students to suffer from low-

self esteem and self worth. These negative feelings of missing out on critical familial events can lead to avoidance of opportunities, whether academic or social (Biddix, 2015).

Though previous research proves to strengthen the idea that commuter students have more familial responsibilities, it does not consider other familial factors such as homelessness, foster care, religious affiliation, and domestic violence. Students who suffer face from food insecurity and homelessness may have a greater percentage of change of being unable to complete their degree as well as could decrease the probability of fostering engagement outside the classroom. At the University of Pittsburgh a Greensburg, a large portion of the overall student population receives the Pell Grant Match program, and similar research findings at institutions similar to University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg show that 30% of students who were in foster care not only receive the grant but were considered homeless as well (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Along with food insecurity and homelessness, minoritized religious affiliation could be a primary driver in commuter students' ability to engage due to commitments to high holidays, observances, and fear of discrimination. Suppose commuter students were offered social and co-curricular activities on the weekends or at night. In that case, this might interfere with their religious practice, possibly causing an internal struggle and significant backlash from their families if they share similar views (Henning et al., 2019).

2.3 Time

Coinciding with family is time for commuter students; those who choose to commute to campus have to plan their day out accordingly to achieve all of their set goals. Time is something that many non-commuter students do not have to keep in the forefront of their minds; their

schedules are fixed by class, possible athletic practices, and offered campus mealtimes (Burlison, 2015). Commuter students need to make sure that they schedule almost every part of their day so that commitments do not overlap, though non-commuter students also need to consider their schedule in regards to the time they do not have the elevated external factors as commuter students do. Commuter students need to factor in commute time to and from campus, work, home life, and any leisure time they may want to set aside. After working out their prior commitment schedule, there may be very little time to spend on campus for any additional activities.

Along with the students holding themselves accountable, many staff and faculty are also holding them to the standard of a student living on campus. In the study by Thomas (2020), commuter students identify academic staff attitudes as an issue because many campus community members thought or assumed that the students lived close to or on campus. With this one-track thinking, students can become frustrated when marked late on attendance and assignments. Commuter students have pushed to have more online assignments and coursework from traditional universities to avoid these issues, but their requests have been denied or partially implemented. With the inability to fit any more in their schedule or the need to commute late at night for co-curricular events, many commuters choose not to participate.

2.4 Work

The final lifestyle component that negatively affects commuter students' engagement on campus is their employment that occurs off of campus. Off-campus employment can control a significant portion of students' time outside of the classroom; it has been shown that over half of students participated in one club or less while working part-time, full-time, or a combination of

both (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). These findings were significantly lower than non-commuter students participating in multiple clubs and organizations. By supporting themselves and possibly their respective families, commuter students may not find a niche in the social campus community, as well as the ability to participate in co-curricular events that could increase their knowledge within their chosen major or minor.

However, Newbold's (2015) research shows that the work-life balance does not necessarily phase commuter students. Those commuter students who are currently enrolled in school and work full- or part-time employment understand the concept of time management. Their outside employment may be where they can decompress from the stresses they are currently undergoing. However, this research idea may only apply to non-traditional commuter students who have several years of time management and organizational practice. With this thought, studies may need to explore more at the age breakout of commuter students to identify better what population is not engaged in co-curricular or social activities.

2.5 Co-curricular and Social Events

The second review area will focus on co-curricular activities and social events, including living learning communities, social clubs, and events. These areas are not explicitly targeted to only non-commuter students, but engagement numbers such as club rosters, utilization of Engage system, and co-curricular participation show that few commuter students choose to participate in these programs outside of the class to benefit both their social needs and academic careers. Along with a lack of engagement during co-curricular events, many commuter students fail to attend

dances, homecoming celebrations, and holiday events that can support stronger rapport between peers and promote a sense of belongingness within the campus community.

As part of most collegiate experiences, many students work towards adding both co-curricular and social experiences to their transcripts and resumes. Many higher education professionals discuss and reiterate the importance of becoming involved on campus, as it benefits both social and academic growth and learning (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 74). When students get involved outside the classroom, they can better develop interpersonal skills, time management skills, increased knowledge within their chosen major and minor, and connections within and outside the campus community. With commuter students not being on campus most of their time, unlike non-commuter students, they are less likely to participate in these events regularly or without doing so as a requirement for an academic course which could impede growth in interpersonal skills and relationships (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 86).

2.6 Living Learning Communities

By definition, living learning communities have historically been defined as "non-commuter programs that allow you to connect with diverse groups of student who share a common focus" (Schritter, 2021). Students are typically grouped by major or interest and participate outside of classroom activities and social events. These communities are beneficial by increasing peer relationships and making the campus community feel more inviting. Though the word "live" can deter many commuter students from participating in these activities, living on campus is not required to participate in this program. Higher education systems are working to involve more commuter students, primarily focusing on incoming first-year students and upperclassmen

students moving off-campus. The living-learning communities have proven to increase not only the retention of students but also help students who may be entering the higher education system at different levels of preparedness. (VanOra, 2019).

Multiple universities have been surveyed for what they are doing to help engage their students and what is to be good practice in involving commuter students in their lives and learning programs and highlighted the benefits that students could receive (Stevens, 2000). These universities discussed the probability that commuter students participating in these programs would greatly benefit them by getting involved in other social events and remaining on campus longer than they previously did when they were not involved on campus. Engaging students, including those identified as commuters has positively shown that students felt supported both academically and socially (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). For example, the State University of New York at Stony Brook changed how commuter students become involved in the live and learn community. Their intervention targeted the incoming first-year commuter students by providing ways to meet new commuter students and develop a stronger rapport with faculty members who taught specifically within their major.

2.7 Social Clubs and Events

Gaining knowledge does not always come from attending classes directed to a commuter student's majors; it also comes from strictly social activities. Creating and developing rapport between peers can be as educational as doing co-curricular activities or course work (Rathore et al., 2018). Getting involved can provide the commuter student with the well-rounded collegiate experience they expect. Increasing social interactions with peers can positively influence students'

academic achievements, development, and overall satisfaction with the university as a whole (Krause, 2007).

Another focus on social engagement is centralized on participating in athletics, whether that would be a university-sanctioned team or intramurals (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013). Their research showed that over three-quarters of the 42 commuter students surveyed did not participate in any athletic activity. Of the 42 students, research showed that 34 students only participated in one or fewer student involvement clubs on campus as well as attended one or fewer student involvement activities. The comparison showed that 66% of the commuter students were less likely to become involved than the 22% of non-commuter students. The study looked at multiple reasons for the decrease in participation from commuter students and found that scheduling was one of the most significant contributors to the non-participation. Suggestions stated that student involvement offices need to coordinate times for different events to fit non-commuter and commuter lifestyles. Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer (2018) also supported the statement that commuter students were not as active in campus clubs and organizations from the National Survey of Student Engagement data. Both studies specifically separated the commuter student population into two separate subgroups, first-year commuter students and senior or upperclassman commuter students. The studies shared similar findings; specifically, first-year commuter students were more likely to be involved initially, and then as their collegiate experience grows, the engagement becomes sparse.

Unlike previously reviewed studies that look at the two specific subgroups of first-year commuter students and senior commuter students, a study completed by Wax et al., (2019) broke the commuter sub-populations down even further and more specifically by crowd affiliation. Wax et al., (2019) suggested that how the commuter student identifies in social settings is a driver of

their feelings of belongingness on campus and their participation in activities. This study does not look at participating in activities as a positive thing but describes activities as high-risk behaviors that can include alcohol, drug usage, and sex. Many social events hosted by universities promote alcohol to gain attendance, the reasoning behind the endorsement of alcohol at a social event is the inaccurate belief that people need alcohol to socialize, celebrate, or have fun (Nieri et al., 2022). Davis (1999) has similar views on how students become engaged on campus but did not specifically break it down into social subgroups but looked at commuter students' hobbies and interests so that they were able to make better connections on campus. She supports implementing worksheets completed outside of the classroom so that students are better situated with the campus, begins talking with peers, and learn about clubs and organizations they may be interested in. This supports the idea that campuses need to work in conjunction with commuter students to identify what they would like both their academic and social experience to look like during the duration of their enrollment.

2.8 Campus Environment

Historically, higher education campuses are still set up to accommodate strictly non-commuter students leaving little space for commuter students to congregate and have a place to go between classes. According to the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg's, this is an immense frustration for commuter students. Many studies suggest that universities are not considering their commuter student-planned spaces, and the intended population rarely utilizes them.

Campus environments can be pivotal in guiding how a student's collegiate career will form shape and how they choose to invest in themselves within the community. Commuter students, as

previously explored, are not on campus nearly as much as non-commuter students. The work, life, and educational balance are significantly different from those students who are able to have their entire lives condensed into one specific area, i.e., a campus environment. The campus environment, by definition, describes and promotes various complex choices which can influence students' learning, growth, and development (Strange & Banning, 2015). Some designated commuter spaces on campuses, specifically four-year institutions, consist of small areas on that do not necessarily reflect a welcoming community environment. Bentrin et al., (2022) expressed that when institutions are not designed for the commuter student population, it can create a sense of viewing the institution where they are receiving a service similarly to the grocery store (p.296). Libraries, advisors and peer leaders, and commuter-specific programs could influence the commuter student's ability or drive to become engaged because they feel welcomed and a part of the community.

2.9 Campus Libraries

Campus libraries are often one of the main focal points on campus, the importance of utilizing this area on campus is reiterated in the first year, transfer, and commuter seminars as well as regular academic courses. Campus libraries are one of the busiest areas on campus, but how well are they able to be utilized by the commuter students. With no particular area designated within the library, tables and study spaces are able to be occupied by both non-commuter and commuter students. When this happens, there are minimal designated or quiet spaces on campus for commuter students to complete homework, research, and study. Data has shown that commuter students from all types of higher education systems prefer study spaces where it is quiet with

limited interactions and the ability to spread out materials (Bauer, 2020; Regalado & Smale, 2015). Spaces like these are limited on campuses and are not explicitly designated for commuter students. The spaces are also typically large tables that are more pertinent and better suited for group study, which the research shows is not essential and does a disservice to the commuter students. Commuter students value their private rooms and singular workspaces so that they are able to focus on their work and utilize their time wisely.

Regalado and Smale (2015) stated that out of all locations that occur on a college campus, the library may hold the strongest institutional expectation as a place where coursework is completed and is critical to true academic engagement, but many commuter students take issue with the lack of space as well as the amenities these areas provide. Contrary to the research conducted by Bauer (2020), research completed in the state affiliated higher education system found that commuter students want larger group spaces so that they can work on their studies with their peers (Regalado & Smale, 2015). Most libraries at colleges and university have small personal desk spaces with “walls” creating a barrier between so that students can remain uninterrupted. This then poses the ideas of the library becoming both a social and academic hub for students to develop relationships with faculty, staff, and peers.

Another notable variable that has not been looked at and is geared toward the non-traditional commuter student. With family responsibilities being a common factor for commuter students, there also needs to be an exploration of students taking care of parents or family members and realizing they may have young children of their own. Higher education systems have begun to look into ensuring that their commuter students have all the resources they need to succeed in their academics and remain engaged on campus. With their report on their students, they needed

to create a space in the library that was not conducive to studying but also allowed the student's children an area to play and interact with others.

Though libraries are historically known for being a quiet place for uninterrupted study and research, we are finding that libraries are evolving and that the commuter student population is divided on whether or not it is beneficial to them. Both the quiet library and the socialization aspect has the ability to enable the commuter student to feel more welcomed on campus as well as foster peer relationships in a non-threatening setting. If libraries were able to designate specific spaces geared to both areas, commuter students, as well as non-commuter students, could become more actively engaged on and within the campus community. Though this has benefited some commuter students, it proved to be distracting for many others, including non-commuter students. The study did not state that this could become a more significant issue within the commuter student population if that space could be taken away from the ability for them to have another area specifically and only designated for commuter students, with no children allowed so that there will be little to no outside distractions.

2.10 Advising, Peer Leaders, Commuter Programs

As previously explored, commuter students are not on campus or do not explore the campus as much as their non-commuter peers. Commuter students are aware of the buildings they have courses in, the library, and the dining hall or other places where they are able to get food or drink. Without knowledge or exploration of the entire campus as a whole, this can limit the engagement the commuter students have with both co-curricular and social events. To alleviate and hopefully eradicate this issue, implementing an active academic advisor, commuter peer-leaders, and

commuter seminars have become a prominent force on campus, thus creating a greater sense of belonging while actively participating within the greater campus community (Bentrim et al., 2022, p.269)

One of the first staff members that all students meet is with their academic advisors; the process is similar at all colleges and universities: students are accepted, and then a meeting with their academic advisor for scheduling commences. Darling (2015) places an academic advisor as one of the main components of a commuter's student success both in and out of the classroom. While meeting with commuter students, academic advisors can gauge what career paths they are considering and their likes and dislikes in social settings. With this information, academic advisors may suggest and encourage commuter students to become engaged on campus by relating social activities to co-curricular and course work that they are planning to study. Academic advisors can either positively or negatively influence a student's success during the course of their learning; focusing on the negatives such as poor grades and what they fail to participate or do in college is a disservice and a deterrent to continue to matriculate (Bensimon, 2007). Developing positive relationships with students and documenting conversations and suggestions can help other faculty and staff help our commuter students in and out of the classroom.

A study conducted in 1993 also acknowledged the importance of the academic advisor's role in the success of commuter students. This study showed that academic advisors were not always aware of the issues that commuter students faced and held them to similar standards as non-commuter students, such as issues dealing with time management, campus community (parking issues), and outside constraints. Ohio University was able to devise a plan that would be able to provide support to commuter students on a level that may be more comfortable and with someone who knows what commuters actually go through in the collegiate career. The Commuter

Mentor program was created in hopes that an upperclassman who is also a commuter would be able to share knowledge that the advisor may not have and steer them in the right direction in areas such as course work activities, clubs, and the most commuter-friendly spaces. A 1998 a follow-up survey distributed to the commuter students had the findings show that they took full advantage of their commuter student mentor and reported increased findings of positive peer relationships (Chapman et al., 1999).

Another way peer leaders can influence commuter student engagement in co-curricular club events is by having a commuter peer leader that the student can racially or culturally identify with. Kodoma (2015) highlights these special population commuter mentors understand what the campus community is like and may be more supportive than the student's family. The author references a study that showed that peer mentors that students primarily received the most benefit in their academic career, but there was a correlation with getting involved in co-curricular activities such as live and learn communities on campus. These peer leaders also were also able to introduce students to the overall campus community and highlight social activities that these students may be interested in. Having similar peer contact increases the new commuter students' sense of belonging on campus, which in return provides a better academic and social career while they are enrolled.

Though both advisors and commuter peer leaders have improved commuter students' engagement in academic, social, and co-curricular activities, colleges, have been creative in developing programs to influence their commuter students to become more engaged. The Pima Community College created a specific program for low-income Latinx male students. To receive the scholarship or award money of fifteen hundred dollars, they needed to actively participate in advising, social events and maintain a certain amount of academic progress (Kodama, 2015). This

program provided a "well-rounded" collegiate career while helping students offset the institution's costs. Graduates of this program stated that it helped them develop a sense of community which in turn helped them branch out on campus and flourish.

2.11 Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review is was to explore one of the most significant contributors to commuter students' disengagement in co-curricular and social activities on campus. From the review, we can see that those lifestyle commitments, including family, time, and work, are significant contributors to the lack of minimal co-curricular and social engagement on campus. Additionally, research has shown that campus offerings such live and learn communities and social events and clubs were also a significant factor in whether or not a commuter student becomes engaged. Finally, the campus environment, including advisors, peer mentors, and commuter-specific programs, all provided positive and negative correlations to commuter students' engagement on campus. Though all three major topics were explored with the research, there was significant overlap within all three categories. For example, without a commuter peer mentor, students would or could struggle to find events on campus or even know what types of co-curricular and social events that were offered. Along similar lines, time constraints were a significant focal point in all of the research that was completed and affected every aspect of the commuter's student engagement on campus. Overall findings show that the campus needs to make a considerable effort in working with their commuter student as much if not more than their non-commuter student for them to become engaged in social and co-curricular activities.

3.0 Method

3.1 Theory of Improvement

With the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg already identifying that the commuter student population is less likely to engage in social and co-curricular activities, meeting with other higher education professionals to see how they foster social and co-curricular engagement with their commuter students would be the initial step in the changing of the already in place GEM program curriculum. By interviewing other higher education professionals who work closely with a large commuter student population, their insight could influence changes to the GEM program to better accommodate commuter students and their current life circumstances that prevent them from engaging in the program as it is currently in place. Changing the core and elective requirements that allow commuter students to be able to complete these requirements while they are on campus or virtually, ability to utilize outside life experiences, and offer more programs that commuter students would be interested and able to participate in could increase the engagement within the program. With this improvement theory, the current aim statement is, “Interviews will be conducted with higher education professionals to find ways to better foster social and co-curricular engagement within the commuter student population to implement changes within the GEM program in Spring 2024”.

With my current role as the Assistant Director of Student Involvement and the First-Year Experience, I work closely with faculty, staff, and students throughout the year and advise the student groups that could benefit commuter students and their social and co-curricular involvement. The redesign of the GEM curriculum to focus on the specific needs of commuter

students that have been identified during empathy interviews and student satisfaction surveys that have been completed previously at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. The changes precisely coincide with the primary and secondary drivers and can be completed within the scope of my positionality.

3.2 System Drivers

To begin the focus of the driver diagram is the aim statement, in direct correlation with my problem of practice of “Commuter students do not engage within social and co-curricular activities at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg”. The aim statement for this theory of improvement is “Interviews will be conducted with higher education professionals to find ways to better foster social and co-curricular engagement within the commuter student population to implement changes within the GEM program in Spring 2024.

3.2.1 Primary System Drivers

The primary drivers of this theory of improvement stem from the fishbone diagram for the problem of practice. These drivers focus directly on the commuter students and how they can impact the aim statement.

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction has been a continuing issue at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg for numerous years, specifically with the commuter student population. The university has attempted to rectify the situation and have commuter students give more suggestions and

answer surveys openly and honestly. This method of attempting to change the system has not been working, thus the reasoning for its primary driver. If commuter students were more satisfied overall with the campus, this might increase their engagement within the campus community, specifically with social and co-curricular events and programs.

Increased Student Retention

Universities have struggled with student retention, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic and the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg is no exception. With the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg being a regional campus, it loses numerous students to the main campus after two years, whether due to their chosen major requirements that are unable to be fulfilled or being unhappy at the regional campus, specifically focusing on population and geographical setting. Many of the students who do leave the regional campus are well aware of their want to transfer to a new campus when they begin their studies at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, which in turn decreases the likelihood of forming rapport with peers, faculty and staff as well as their engagement in social and co-curricular. If students had been engaged within the campus and were able to see the full scope of opportunities they could receive, they might change their minds about transferring to a different institution.

Institution/Life Balance

Many commuter students are balancing their classwork and their lives outside of campus, which can include but is not limited to work, family, and travel. Unlike residential students who have their homes and jobs on campus, commuter students have to plan accordingly to handle many different aspects of their lives that can overlap. From previous empathy interviews, many commuters have stated that once they leave campus, they do not return for events, club meetings, etc. If students were able to adjust their schedules or learn new time management methods, there

might be an increased likelihood of engagement. Additionally, if there were more work study jobs on campus that could increase the time commuter students are on campus and provide an opportunity to engage more.

Sense of Belonging

Throughout campus, there are lounge areas where students can have programs, study, relax, and eat. While these lounges or areas are open to everyone, UHS has also designated an area on campus for commuter students called "Fireside Lounge" equipped with tables and desks and a refrigerator and a microwave. The initial idea of this lounge was so that commuter students could have their own space in between classes, similar to how residential students can go back to the residence halls. Empathy interviews have shown that commuter students still feel as though they do not belong on campus, and these designated spaces do not provide the sense of belonging as they were designed to do so. Commuter students have voiced that they remain on campus for class and typically leave for lunch or completed coursework. They do not have strong ties to the campus community, including peers, faculty, and staff members. Students often shared that they do not feel included on campus or welcomed.

3.2.2 Secondary System Drivers

Student Awareness

Increased student awareness of social and co-curricular events on campus will increase the likelihood that students will become engaged. Student awareness could increase all four primary drivers and help achieve what our aim statement is attempting to do. Making sure that students know and understand all that campus would be beneficial to this theory of improvement and other changes that the institution is trying to put into place.

Availability of Programs On and Off-Campus

This secondary driver also correlates with all four of the primary drivers and is very similar to the student awareness driver. The difference with the availability of programs on and off the campus is that if programs happen at different times and possibly off-campus, closer to the student's home base, or virtually they may be more enticed to participate. Exploring with clubs, organizations, faculty, and staff if there are programs at alternative times besides the typical 7 pm-10 pm or the 11 am- 1 pm schedule could allow them to see the more significant response and recruitment of new members. Additionally, if commuter students could bring their families, significant others, friends to off-campus events, this may promote a sense of belonging and rapport with the university.

Commuter Mentors

The commuter mentor program is already in place within the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, but if revamped, it could produce better results, specifically with retention, belongingness, and interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. Currently, commuter mentors only meet with their assigned peers once or twice a semester, and then that is it; there is no follow-up unless the student reaches out. Since this program is not mandatory, there is no reason for students to build rapport with their peers. The commuter mentors could be a wealth of knowledge and resources for new commuter students but are often not utilized or sought out.

Rapport Development

The increasing connection between commuter students and campus would greatly benefit the primary drivers and aim statement. As previously touched on, commuter students are less likely to remain on campus, thus spiraling into little rapport created within the campus community. If

commuter students could create rapport with relationships with other students, faculty, or staff, they could be more likely to remain on campus longer and join in events.

3.3 Change Idea

3.3.1 GEM Curriculum Redesign

The proposed change idea is to interview ten higher education professionals who work with commuter students and see how they foster social and co-curricular engagement and then implement findings into the existing GEM program and redesign the curriculum to better support commuter student engagement. The GEM program is currently in place for both non-commuter and commuter students to be able to participate in and successfully complete, but data has shown that there are very few commuter students that participate in the program. This program covers both social and co-curricular events and could be a one-stop-shop to engage commuter students, build rapport, increase retention, etc.

3.3.2 Proposed Change Idea

Considering the aim statement and the primary and secondary drivers, the change idea that would be most beneficial was to gain knowledge from other largely commuter based higher education institutions on how they foster engagement within the commuter student population and then revamp GEM program and change requirements to be more commuter friendly. Process measures that needed to be considered were how many themes can be identified from a small

population of professionals and whether or not they could be applicable for possible changes within the GEM program. These measures were easily attained by identifying themes at the end of the ten interviews. The data shows which themes were most prevalent and how many institutions are implementing them and seeing a high commuter student participation. These data results also allow us to see which themes are still struggling to increase commuter engagement and those who are exceeding expectations. Once the data was collected, further exploration of the GEM program and the themes within the requirements was needed to be examined to see if they were falling within the high yielding commuter student engagement themes or the lower or less popular themes. We can see the secondary drivers continue to align with the primary drivers, we can deduce that the aim statement is still being worked towards. If student satisfaction and retention are being achieved by the change of the commuter mentor program, thus shaping a new commuter mentor mentality, commuter students will likely become more engaged.

3.4 PDSA Cycle

3.4.1 Plan

To begin the plan the first step was identifying ten higher education professionals who work in student involvement, student activities, or commuter based programs who work at institutions that have a large commuter student population. Conducting interviews with these professionals, to see how they foster engagement with their commuter student and identify common themes, provided a broader sense of how to change the core requirements and electives

of the GEM program to better fit our students. The inquiry questions that guided my study of the implementation of the change idea are as follows:

1. How do other higher educational institutions foster social and co-curricular engagement with their students?
2. What steps have other institutions taken to create more appealing social and co-curricular activities?
3. What adaptations have you created to social and co-curricular programs that were previously unsuccessful?

3.4.2 Do

During the summer 2023 semester, I identified ten higher educational professionals within the higher education system, who work with a large commuter student population. Along with having a higher commuter student population, I interviewed higher education professionals who were within the tristate area or have social and co-curricular programming models. All institutions were either consider public or private, no community colleges were interviewed in this inquiry. Once I received confirmation of participation, I scheduled ten 30 minute to 1 hour Zoom interviews and use transcription services to identify common themes within the interviews. At the conclusion of the interviews, I compared themes to the current GEM program, focusing on the core requirements of each of the five categories.

Interview Questions:

1. What is your current role within you higher education system and explain what you position entail specifically in regards to how closely do you work with students, faculty, and staff?

2. How many commuter students on average attend your social and co-curricular events, both in person and if applicable virtual events? (Inquiry question – 1,2,3)
3. What methods do you utilize to gauge what your commuter students' interests and needs are? (Inquiry Question – 2,3)
 - a. What percentage of students are responding?
4. What is your definition of how students are engaged within the campus community; do you believe there is a minimum requirement of events, participation hours, etc to be considered engage? (Inquiry question- 1)
 - a. What do you consider to be a co-curricular activity?
 - b. What do you consider to be a social activity?
5. How do you believe you help foster engagement within your commuter student population in both social and co-curricular activities? (Inquiry question- 1,2,3)
6. Do you currently market event specifically with commuter student in mind, what methods of distributing information are you utilizing? (Inquiry question- 1)
7. Are there any commuter student specific programs on campus? If so do they primarily focus on social or co-curricular aspects, or is there a combination of both? (Inquiry question- 1, 2)
8. What events have you seen commuter students active engage in, what components of these events do you believe have peaked the student's interest? (Inquiry question- 1,3)
9. What type of events are commuter students attending more, are they in favor of peer or club run events or events held by departments or faculty members? (Inquiry questions- 1,3)
 - a. Have commuter students expressed which events they prefer and why?

10. What specific reasons have commuter students given as to why they did not go or why they may have been unable to attend specific events? (Inquiry- 2,3)
 - a. What adaptations or changes have been done in attempts to decrease inability to participate?
11. What type of programs have been unsuccessful in engaging commuter student participation? What types have been successful? (Inquiry question- 2,3)

3.4.3 Study and Predictions

For this study, I used qualitative analysis, specifically semi-structured interviews. This type of study utilizing interviews generates transcriptions from audio recordings and descriptive accounts of what occurred during the interview. It will then need to be coded, so that key points are highlighted and then conceptualized so that similar content can be grouped into themes (Menter et al., 2011, p. 144-145). Moving forward I identified themes were the current GEM program is aligned with the high engagement themes as well as were they the themes are not present within the program. This then helped identify requirements that may be deterring the commuter student population from participating and how we could change the requirements to improve participation. My prediction for implementing these changes within the curriculum will make the program more appealing to not only commuter students but to residential students as well. I also believe that these changes may be off-putting to some of the current coordinators because change is inevitably complex, and adding more meeting times and additional changes may add more work for all of the coordinators. We will know that the changes have worked depending on the increased engagement of commuter students within the GEM program.

3.4.4 Act

I will share the results of the findings to not only the GEM coordinators but also with the student services office. With the findings, we may be able to find better way to accommodate our commuter students and share the results with other clubs and organizations so that they will also see an increase in participation at their scheduled events.

3.5 Participants

The goal is to have ten higher educational professionals from higher education institutions with a high percentage of commuter students. Participants were recruited utilizing three different sampling types: convenience, opportunity, and cluster. Initially the goal is to utilize connections that I currently have within the higher education system, which falls under the convenience sampling, since I have made numerous connections over my career in higher education. The participants form the convenience sampling pool could provide the suggestions for other participants who fit the criteria this study is searching for which would then turn into opportunity sampling. Similarly, utilizing cluster sampling, utilizing online group geared specifically to higher education professionals may be beneficial, as they meet the requirement of being well acquainted with this specific population.

Table 1: Higher Education Professional Interviewee Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Department Level	Institution Type	Out of the classroom curriculum
Riley	Female	Director	Public	No
Morgan	Female	Associate Vice President	Private	No
Jacob	Male	Director	Private	No
Lauren	Female	Associate Director	Public	No
Rose	Female	Director	Private	No
Leah	Female	Assistant Director	Public	Yes
Lisa	Female	Director	Public	No
Mya	Female	Director	Public	No
Shanda	Female	Assistant Director	Public	No
Danny	Male	Director	Private	Yes

3.6 Data Collections and Analysis Method

Semi Structured Interview: The individual interviews were conducted via zoom; they were recorded using Zoom and were transcribed utilizing a free web based transcription service. Schuh et al., states that “the primary advantage to interviewing is the capability it provides to build a rich understanding of person, setting, or situation through the perspective of those experiencing it”.

After the transcription is completed, both a single and a cross-case analysis will be completed. This will allow the data to show an individual's thoughts, feelings, and concerns, but it will also allow multiple perspectives on a secular issue or concern. Additionally, themes and subthemes will be built out in a data analysis plane (Schuh et al., 2016).

3.7 Conclusion

My theory of improvement of redesigning the GEM curriculum could be beneficial to commuter students and their engagement in social and co-curricular activities. By becoming more involved in both social and co-curricular activities, they can increase their engagement not only socially but academically as well. This increased engagement would also allow commuter students to build up their co-curricular transcripts that could benefit them when they graduate and apply to other programs or for employment. This theory of improvement will be able to be completed thoroughly due to the position that I currently have at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. The primary drivers and secondary drivers are in place to impact system changes. The PDSA cycle will be able to be done quickly and can be measured accurately.

3.8 Acknowledgment of Limitations

There are a respective number of limitations to this study. The initial limitation of this qualitative study is the possible low sample size this study is looking for. In this study, I am looking for 10-15 higher education professionals who work closely with a higher commuter student population.

If I am unable to reach the high-end number of fifteen, the sample size may not provide an accurate presentation of the commuter student population outside of my current university. Working closely to the sample size limitation, the issue of how involved participants actually are with commuter student will come into play. Some participants may say they are student facing but their counterparts or graduate assistants may have a greater role in working with the students. The next limitation would be my own personal bias and the ability to be non-judgmental within the interview setting. Taylor and Devault (2016) stated as information being to share their experiences and feelings, they also let down their public fronts that they might have kept hidden. In semi-structured interviews, additional questions could be posed for further clarification but if the question is abrupt, challenging or harbor my own personal ideas, the participant may be less likely to elaborate on questions that are imperative to the study and be influenced in how they express their answers (Mentor et al., 2011). The third limitation I would like to highlight is the limitation that all data being collected is being self-reported by the participant and their own biases, and there may not be the ability to verify all the information is correct. Additionally, with self-reported data it can also contain the participant's bias in several different ways such as: selective memories, telescoping, attribution, and exaggeration (University of Southern California, (n.d.)).

4.0 Findings

For this PDSA, the initial step was that I planned and conducted ten interviews with higher education professionals from public and private institutions from five states which included Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, North Carolina, and New York. These higher education institutions were selected due to having similar population to the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg in regards to their size and commuter student enrollment. The interviews were conducted over a series of weeks due to scheduling conflicts as the interviews occurred during regular business hours and the period of the end of the academic year, which is often filled a multitude of social and co-curricular events.

The inquiry was led by the following questions:

1. How do other higher educational institutions foster social and co-curricular engagement with their students?
2. What steps have other institutions taken to create more appealing social and co-curricular activities?
3. What adaptations have you created to social and co-curricular programs that were previously unsuccessful?

During the interviews, which took place over Zoom and lasted between 30 minutes to an hour, the higher education professionals were asked questions centered on the social and co-curricular engagement of their commuter student population. The interviews were then transcribed using a free online platform or by the Zoom program and then coded by themes that surfaced.

After examining all three inquiry question there were three different themes that emerged

from the that qualitative data. These themes included (a) Time is of the Essence, (b) Linear Level of Social and Co-Curricular Engagement, and (c) Free Everything-From Food to Fun. These themes not only emerged from the transcribed data but there were significant participant quotes that supported the themes as well.

4.1 Time is of the Essence

During the interviews, it was apparent that all higher education professionals were attempting to meet the commuter students where they were at in the sense of engaging them in both social and co-curricular activities. The participants discussed that they found that the best time to engage their commuter students was between the hours of 8:00am to 6:00 pm, and more specifically when those commuter students were on campus for their academic pursuit. Participants seemed to acknowledge that most of their student population was not going to attend events, whether it be social or co-curricular in nature, after this period unless it was required for a class or academic pursuit. Though it is acknowledge that commuter students do not always attend the night time events that they have explicitly stated they were interested in, Riley, a director from southwestern Pennsylvania explained how they viewed themselves as fighting that battle;

It's been interesting to see the types of things that the commuters are interested in, because we're offering a lot of those, but they're later in the evening with our residential community. So we're really trying to shift to a balance of that. So for example, just a quick thing, when we license a film, where we know that RAs like to do their take two events at like 8:30 or nine o'clock, will offer like a matinee of the same film that day.

This statement explores that institutions are aware of what types of activities commuter students prefer and are making them accessible during the peak hours the students are on campus. Though the quote provided once example of how they are accommodating the commuter student preferred time frame and event, this only one small example of how events could happen more than once a day to attract more students to new organizations and clubs. Along with providing alternative programming times, other institutions have continued to program similarly to how they did during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is through virtual streaming. Morgan, an associate vice-president from mid-state Pennsylvania explored the benefits of keeping many adjustments from the COVID-19 era and provided a commuter based reasoning:

I would say that things that we have kept is a lot of our events are now, even our live events are now live streamed. So people can pop in or struggling with families or, or find ways to connect in that way.

Though COVID-19 created difficulty in providing experiences for students, one positive thing that came out of the pandemic is the new or more prominent availability for events to be held virtually or they can be live streamed. With these capabilities, commuter students are able to interact with their peers and share similar experiences. Having events held virtually or live streaming them allows for commuter students to participate in the comforts of their own home, without waiting hours for a program to start or having to drive back and forth to campus. Morgan also elaborated on the balance of having both in-person and virtual events:

And the ability to log on virtually has been convenient for those that are coming from work. But they do still like, like our one in person meeting, they do still enjoy coming in getting together, they usually do a service project or putting together later this month, we'll be putting together care kits for a homeless shelter. And they

there really are a great group. So it's not like they don't want to, but I think that that balance is helpful to them.

While the online and virtual programs have been beneficial to fostering commuter student participant, there is still a need to have in-person events that commuter students can attend. Finding a balance between the virtual and in-person events is key to providing a well-rounded social and co-curricular experience. Collecting more data on what type of events commuter students prefer to attend in person or virtually could additionally provide an increase in engagement and participation.

While the majority of the participants have shied away from the virtual programming aspect, there are other implementations that higher education institutions have found beneficial, called the “common hour”. The common hour represents a period of time during the day in which no classes are scheduled for any student. The “common hour” from the participants statements can occur anywhere from 11:00am to 3:00pm, it also varies from institution on the days that it occurs on. Some institution’s “common hour” operated on Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Tuesday and Thursday. Having this common hour during the middle of the academic day allows commuter students to be able to participate in club meetings and attend events during this period. Jacob, a director from a mid-sized college with a majority population of commuter students explored the popularity of their common hour:

We also have a common hour. On Tuesdays and Thursdays between 11:00am and 12:15pm. This works really well for programming, especially for commuters. This is the time that we really try to program the most. We also have mass during this time and then we try to have clubs and organizations meet, at this time as well. But I think that that sets things apart as well because obviously I'm not having to worry

about going to class and they have a class after the break they can stay on campus for the program that's taking place.

The common hour in this situation provides a level of downtime and reflection at this institution, because the period actually exceeds more than hour. Those commuter students who wish to engage on campus have enough time to not only attend club meetings but also observe their religious practice if they so choose to. If commuter students are not focused on their religious identity or observe it differently, then they could possibly have the option to attend one or more clubs meetings or participate in multiple events throughout the week.

While some participants explained that the “common hour” was beneficial in getting their commuter students engaged on campus, others had believed that it was not always utilized in the way that is was intended to. Lauren, an associate director of student development in Pennsylvania focused on how busy to common hour could be for commuter students and the struggle to prioritize there schedule at that time:

The biggest time for commuters is Tuesdays and Thursdays on our campus from 11am to 12pm. There's no classes at all across the board, it's called common hour, okay, it's something that the state system does in most of their schools to give students a built in time in the day to do club work and meet with other students, you know, in that nonacademic capacity. So a lot of our commuter meetings are like this certain, whatever, it's the second or third Thursday of the month during common hour. And that, you know, hopefully allows for students to have the ability to attend. The problem with common hour is it's like a double edged sword. So like, it's positive that the university values that and gives them that time. But then because they give them that one hour, it's like, oh, no, I have seven things I have to

do in this hour, like picking and choosing, and maybe this month, I'll do this computer program, but then maybe this month, I'm in this honor society, and I can do that.

While many higher education institutions see the common hour as a productive and engaging time for their students, some institutions look at it as it is really enough time for their students to engagement with classmates or social and co-curricular programs. Commuter student's interest could span from astrophysics to needlepoint, but only having that hour the ability to explore all options is limited. If commuter students choose a different social or co-curricular activity to explore each common hour, the ability to develop rapport with those students, faculty, or staff could prove to be difficult to form.

Overall, the theme Time is of the Essence showcases that commuters are more likely to participate in events that work within their academic schedules. If higher education institutions utilize alternative methods of engagement whether it be recreating the event at an earlier time, streaming events virtually, or implementing a common hour, it will better engage the student population while providing the experience in participating of social and co-curricular events.

4.2 Linear Level of Social and Co-curricular Events

When questioned what makes a social or co-curricular event, the participants shared had two varied answers. One answer provided a definition as where the two separate events did not overlap and the other definition of where all events could be considered both social and co-curricular. Many higher education institutions can be so prescribed that an if an event is strictly categorized social in nature, as it only provides a means of amusement and has no learning or

skill building attached to the events. Rose, a director from a higher education school based in a larger metropolitan explored that idea that all activities can be a benefit to a student both in and out of the classroom:

We largely consider everything we do to be co-curricular programming. And I think that's because we, I mean, I think everything that we offer enhances the student experience. And so that's why we think it's like in partnership with the curriculum, as opposed to being you know, extracurricular. There are definitely things that I think, have a stronger connection. So leadership development retreats, student organization, officer training, service days, like there's a more educational component. But I would say that everything we do is, you know, enhancing the classroom experience.

While programs by definition could be separated into two definitions of merely social or co-curricular, this idea explores that all programming can provide an experience that could transcend into both definitions, so there is not a necessary need to categorize events. As each commuter student is in a different place in both their learning and social experiences, they may absorb different objectives that what the program was initial set out to provide. Leah, an assistant director of an outside classroom curriculum suggested a similar exploration on all programs being both social and co-curricular but primarily focused on social competencies:

So, and I think just exposure to that backgrounds experiences, social classes, cultures, race, gender, like I think that is, you know, building upon that knowledge, seeing other perspectives, I definitely think is a skill, you know, in terms of even cultural competence and cultural awareness. That certainly plays a

part in the end can overlap with co-curricular and certainly, you know, that can be a little subjective, too, because what could be co-curricular for you based on what you are studying, may not be for someone.

Social competencies are not something that commuter students can always outwardly show, and by not conforming the event, activity, or program into a specific definition allows the commuter student to quietly take what they need from that event, whether it be a social learning experience or something based in their curriculum. Providing commuter students quality experiences and the ability for them to interact with their peers, faculty, and staff is the starting block of fostering continued engagement spanning their academic career.

While the participants shared the common theme that both social and co-curricular events could be intertwined, the idea of events being completely separate entities was still the case for some of the participants perspectives, such as Lisa, a director from Ohio who discussed social activities on a personal level:

A social activity, when you're in it, to me is when you're interacting with another human being, for the sake of entertainment purposes, maybe? Maybe not educational? Right, because you know, it's educational, you know, they have learning objectives or outcome, but just for the sake of being in the space, or being or having seeking human connection.

Social activities occur for the one purpose of simple enjoyment. During these activities commuter students are able to direct their focus from academic course work, grades, etc to something that may not have such a strong impact on their current or future lives. These social activities or programs provide the ability to interact with peers or other members of the higher education institution that commuter students may not usually engage with.

Riley provided their definition that focused primarily in conjunction with academic work,

I think, for me, it would be anything that enhances the classics, you know, that in class experience, how they're applying what they're learning, but also things that go along with the out of the out of class experience. So yeah, it may not be an academic thing to be the leader of your program board, but the marketing skills you grab and the running a meeting and the tangible resume builder skills that we have that join up with what they're getting in the classroom, is my is our goal is it's one thing to, you know, be book smart, but it's another thing to be able to engage with your world.

Even if social activities, groups, or programs may not have a direct tie to academic work, they are able to provide other skills that could ultimately benefit the commuter student's course work or chosen career path. By participating in something that is social, there are skills that can be learned or improved about just through interactions such as collaboration, negotiating, or public speaking. Even by developing these skills in a social setting, looking further down the road they could be able to be able to utilize in a course or graduate school interview, thus having them be in limbo in whether the event was on social or co-curricular.

In analyzing the transcriptions, my overall finds indicate that it the vary of definition of what makes a social event social, and what a co-curricular event entails can be varied not only by each institution but by each higher education professional as well. Whoever is creating the events or prescribing them a definition ultimately lets their own personal perspective reflect that even though the students may or may not getting something else from the event and considered it to be a learning experience for them.

4.3 Free Everything: From Food to Fun

While providing experiences is the initial step for getting commuter students engaged, there was one thing that all of the participants agreed on, to have the events actually be attended there needs to be something to really draw the students in. To have a successful and well-attended event, the best way to ensure that happens is by providing something that a student could see, feel, or taste. Providing this next level of appeal to students, is why the participants state that some of their events have been more successful than others. Throughout the interviews discussion of commuter students leaving campus to find something to eat during their free time in between their courses was brought up because commuter students are not required to have a meal plan. Rose explored that food is primarily the focus at their events, even in conjunction with other giveaways:

I mean, we pretty much always have catering in our event. So there's there is like rare that there's not some sort of like, some component of giveaway because we're always like, either just like giving away catered food.

By appealing to more than one of the commuter student's senses seems to be a success for engagement in events. In this example, this institution is not only providing an experience but they are also providing a meal or some type of snack to go along with it. While commuter students typically do not subscribe to meal plans, this give them an opportunity to receive some form a sustenance without having to pay for this. Providing food or catering events may also be beneficial to those commuter students who suffer from food insecurity at their place of residence.

While that participant discussed having food as a giveaway for students, which would be considered engagement, a different interview discussed tailoring the program with free food as a gateway for student to remain on campus and participate in between class. Mya, a director of student life and the Title 9 coordinator at a university in West Virginia explored the benefits of

reaching engaging one commuter student and in hopes, they will bring other commuter students back to the event:

I think making sure our programs are tailored like that too, so that you can fit it around their class schedule, if they get out and they want to hit it beforehand, too. So we try and make sure that a lot of our programs to for the most part, have that ebb and flow of just like stop by go get food come back, take deal [an item], go grab your friends and come back, take deal to make sure that they're accommodating to that.

While food is the initial way to get commuter students engagement and participant in events, it is also, about what they can take away from the event and hold on to. By providing something they can grab and go, students may be more likely to return after classes or with other commuter students so they can also experience an event. These grab an go items can be a reminder to commuter students that there are events that they are able to attend on campus and hopefully they will continue to look out for more things to attend in the future.

Findings creative ways to engage the commuter student in both social and co-curricular activities is something that all participants discussed across the board. As explored the providing meals or snacks at events brings in a crowd but participants also discussed other ways such as free “swag” or items that students are able to grab and go. These items take little to know time out of the busy commuter schedule but let them experience an activity in a way that provides a sense of participation. Riley, works with a commuter student population of 50% discussed the how the quick hit events seem to be the most popular,

We've did like some novelty type thing and that was a hit, but if it looks like a huge time investment, they're not buying in it other than a movie for some reason.

But if it is, hey, can I do this quick sketch, and you can leave with it and here's you and your friends and they're all about it.

Though longer experiences as the previously mentioned movie matinees engaged the commuter student, institutions need to continue to be mindful of the commuter student's time and available energy between classes. If events are going to keep a commuter student occupied for a long period, they may decline due to their set schedule but if they are able to participate in 15 minutes or less than it is more likely they will become engaged. While these quick novelty experiences may not be providing a great deal of interaction between students, they are providing experiences that commuter students may not have had if they did not attend, such as this institution where the focus is primarily on experiences:

So, appreciation of the arts is a huge one because we offer students cheap tickets, discounted tickets to shows, free museum visits, visits to local botanical gardens, local art museum, you know, sometimes there are trips taken, you know, different arts events and venues.

While providing on campus events is important for commuter student to see the community that is on their campus, it is also important for commuter students to see what their community has to offer as well. Though commuter students are typically aware what is in their surrounding area, many of the student may not have had previous access or the monetary funds to explore places such as art museums or musical productions. Providing these, experiences overlap the social and co-curricular definitions and allow students to explore places that they had not been accessible to before.

Engaging the students by finding out what will make them stay for the events was a common theme through my analysis as reviewed. Free items can vary through making an event

more substantial or eye catching to the commuter student. By having students even stop by an event for the briefest moment, it can snowball into them attending other events just by the new awareness of the club or group that facilitated the initial event they attended. Participants all agreed that they hoped that getting students to stop at just one event by providing these extras things would inevitably increase their awareness of other events and their willingness to participate in these experiences.

4.4 Conclusion

In looking at the themes that emerged from the ten interviews completed with the higher education professions, the three that were most prevalent were Time is of the Essence, Linear Level of Social and Co-Curricular Engagement, and Free Everything- From Food to Fun. With these findings it is easy to see where the Greensburg Experience More program could possibly change, making the overall program more appealing to our commuter student population. Most of the GEM requirements can occur during or after class time when commuter students are either unavailable or unwilling to participate due to their own personal time constraints. If the GEM program modified the requirements or electives that occurred outside of the academic hours, or provided alternative solutions or participation, an increase in the commuter student engagement could arise. Along with the time commitments, allowing students to justify their reasoning of what they consider a social or co-curricular activity could help students complete the program in a timely manner or help them build up their co-curricular transcript. Lastly, elevating the events to make them more eye catching is key, by providing multiple experiences at one event could make them more enticing to students who previously would not have participated.

5.0 Learning and Actions

The purpose of this Problem of Practice was to discover ways to increase engagement with the commuter student population in both social and co-curricular activities by revamping the GEM program. The GEM program requirements and electives have not been changed in numerous years so by creating a study that focused on how other higher education institutions engage with their commuter students in both social and co-curricular events, would allow University of Pittsburgh of Greensburg to see where there could be room for improvement or change within the GEM program.

5.1 Key Takeaways

There are numerous key takeaways that's could benefit the Greensburg Experience More (GEM) program that would allow the program itself to better foster engagement with the commuter student population in social and co-curricular programs. The three most prominent key takeaways are A.. what is engagement B. effective marketing C. faculty participation is.

5.1.1 Key Takeaway #1: What is engagement?

The literature states that models that focus on student success encompass set of five variables, which include the basics of demographics and pre-college experiences, the structure of the institution, interactions with faculty, staff, and peers, student perception of the learning

environment, and the quality of effort put into participating in purposeful activities (Kuh et al., 2008). Student are not coming to higher education institutions in hopes that they will be unsuccessful in achieving their academic and personal goals, they are planning to thrive to attain a goal that they have set for themselves. While the goal of higher education faculty and staff should be to help their students succeed, they are implementing programs that make the students conform with the belief system of the institution in regards to engagement. The current institution and program discussed in this inquiry has a set amount of social and co-curricular events that must be attended to show that the students are engaged. The limitation of specific events that can only account for this achievement is not a good measure of how engaged our commuter student population is. Additionally, by limiting what events can count towards the completion students may not see the necessity or gain the prescribed knowledge that the event is supposed to enhance.

In this inquiry, the interviewees explored that there is not a set definition of what engagement looks like, that is can vary from student to student. In regards to the commuter student population, they may be having experiences outside of the classroom off campus, that are more beneficial to them in both their social and academic pursuits, but they are not able to apply them to the GEM program. The interviewees also explored that if commuter students attend only one or two events this semester that may be the only type of engagement they want or that their schedules allow. This should still be considered actively engaged on campus but the students own pursuits are being amplified by the events they attend; higher institutions need to look at the quality over quantity of engagement. Tom Lowe (2023) stated, “My belief that pedagogical practices need to be centered around the students more than the curriculum...”. This thought process supports that we need to meet the student’s engagement level, not create our own as to eliminate students out of participating.

5.1.2 Key Takeaway #2: Effective Marketing

While higher education institutions market events to their students in more traditionally ways such as flyers and emails, many of the interviewees in the inquiry would suggest that alternative solutions provide better results in engagement in social and co-curricular activities. The utilization of social media, QR codes, and face-to-face marketing could be beneficial to getting commuter students to attend both social and co-curricular events and programs that encompass those traits such as the GEM program. By creating an in your face style marketing movement, more students would be aware of the program itself as well as the subsequent activities associated with it. Currently the GEM program is introduced within the first year and transfer seminars but with little to no follow up in gauging interest. One study done in the American Journal of Business Education (2010) looks at viewing students at higher education institutions as consumers. They stated, “Recalling that the philosophy of providing superior value to customers (relative to competitors) is the marketing concept, this philosophy should be applicable to universities as they too have customers, competitors, external influences, and seek to accomplish organizational goals.” By doing guerilla style marketing, students will be better aware of what the goals are of the GEM program as well as what the GEM program can offer to a student. Additionally, with implementing more social media posts, QR codes, face-to-face events, and the traditional modes of marketing commuter students will be constantly reminded of what is currently going on campus.

Making the GEM program not only more marketable but changing the marketing tactics, could allow commuter students to see the value in participating and be fully aware of the requirements prior to signing up. By doing this, commuter students may be less likely to disengage from the program once they have reviewed all of the requirements and electives. Additionally, utilizing the QR codes and implementation of new social media, would make it easier for

commuter students to be aware of events taking during their down time without constantly checking their email or going to the nearest bulletin board to peruse hundreds of flyers.

5.1.3 Key Finding #3: Faculty Participation

Within the GEM program there is little to no faculty involvement in regards to both the requirements and electives. In conjunction with the lack of faculty participation, there are opportunities to utilize classwork or applying academic learnings to receive credit in any of the five categories. From this inquiry, most of the higher education professionals who were interviewed explore the benefits of having faculty run both social and co-curricular program. They stated that there was more student engagement in these activities, specifically when they are related to their major. The downfall of wanting to increase faculty involvement is that they already have prior commitments to their academics and their outside lives, much like the commuter students. If the GEM program was better able to plan or allow events that occur when faculty are available then commuter students would be able to log more engagement hours while strengthening their rapport with the academic community.

In conjunction with having faculty participate more within the GEM program, allowing students to use their mandatory out of the classroom activities to fulfill requirements could also increase participation. For example, primary and secondary education majors could document things like field placement, conferences, and trainings to fulfill requirements in leadership, service, and cultural appreciation and awareness. Along with being able to complete the GEM program in a timely fashion, students would also be able to develop better rapport with faculty as well as those community members within their field, which then would benefit them when they have graduated and are looking for permanent placements.

5.2 Recommendations

There are numerous recommendations to change the Greensburg Experience More (GEM) program that could be made to better foster engagement with the commuter student population in social and co-curricular programs. These recommendations are a. allow students to determine classification of events; social and co-curricular b. provide alternative experiences for students who are unable to attend programs and c. incorporate more staff faculty into the GEM program coordinators.

5.2.1 Recommendation #1: Allow students to determine the classification of events; social or co-curricular

As a GEM coordinator, I recommend that we allow students to choose what events to them are social and co-curricular in nature. Each event can provide something different to a student; during social events, they may gain leadership and marketing skills. In regards to co-curricular events, students may feel that that is being social for them, by simply interacting with like-minded peers that share a common academic goals or careers. By allowing the freedom to choose, this gives students the autonomy to decide their level of engagement while still fulfilling the requirements of the GEM program. This allowance of having the student determine the classification also provides a space where students can learn how to effectively communicate with professionals and work on their ability to negotiate, thus providing a co-curricular experience in itself. Allowing the commuter students to take charge of their selected participation can further their sense of achievement and work towards future goals.

With how the current GEM program is setup, students may have to go to events that have little to no interest in them. This being because it has nothing to do with their academic pursuits, their own personal preferences, or social groups. By forcing students to attend these events, they are likely not to gain any pertinent or enjoyable experience, which may deter them from going to similar events or completing the program as a whole. Additionally, by making students go to certain events, such a mental health training or a domestic violence speaker, this could trigger students due to their own lived experiences.

5.2.2 Recommendation #2: Allow outside experiences

Currently within the GEM program, many of the requirements and electives are only able to be completed if they are a campus organized event, training, or activity. There are few allowances that students can complete the requirements and electives outside of the university, currently students are able to complete their volunteer experience at outside organizations. If the GEM program allowed students to utilize their own fluid experiences such as attending a play or musical, going to a museum, or a political rally that was not a school-sanctioned event, students could use their time and energy wisely without disruption to their schedules. Allowing students to document these experiences allows the GEM coordinators to see what the students are most interested in without confining them to the biases of the GEM coordinators and the program itself.

In addition, commuter students are well versed within their communities as many have lived in the surrounding areas most of their lives. By allowing students to organize their own experiences within the community, the GEM coordinators may find other new experiences that they were previously unaware of in regards to multi-cultural and diversity, equity, and inclusion

experiences. Commuter students forging their own social and co-curricular paths provides a sense of leadership and allows their thoughts and ideas to be not only heard, but acknowledged as well.

In conjunction with allowing student to use out the school-sanctioned events, the GEM coordinators should also think about reducing the period of which events can be logged. Currently events that have been completed after the initial sign up into the program can be used for credit. This is a significant disadvantage to the commuter student who may have transferred into the university their junior year or did not sign up in their first year. For example, if a student has completed a training on being a pro-social bystander as a first year student, but did not sign up for GEM until their sophomore year they would not be able to log that experience. The redundancy of attending another training if any were offered at all could be a deterrent of students continuing to participate in the program.

5.2.3 Recommendation #3: Recruiting additional staff and faculty to become GEM coordinators

Currently the GEM coordinators are limited to only staff members, which includes five members from the office of student life and success and one member from the office of advising and the registrar. The current members are the ones who decided what the curriculum of the GEM programs looks like such as what requirement and electives there are, what can count towards fulfilling each requirement, and marketing the program to the students. This limits the GEM program to only social and co-curricular events that the GEM coordinators are aware of, thus limiting the events students can attend for credit. If there were more GEM coordinators from different departments or academic specialties, the GEM program could expand to a point, where

commuter students are able to participate more willingly and would be able to have a wider breadth of events to attend.

Another major positive of incorporating more faculty and staff within into the GEM program, is that with such a vast array of commuter students, strong rapport may be already built with a specific staff or faculty member who then could encourage students to participate. With a large amount of students receiving financial aid, a member from their office could be a strong member of the GEM coordinators. Students frequently interact with financial aid in regards to FASFA, grants, and scholarships and the office itself holds many webinars and trainings to help with these processes. Having a coordinator who students know well, could increase the participation within the program as a whole. This could also occur with a faculty member or department head, students are focused on their academics and with faculty being able to support them more with the co-curricular events or events that are major or minor specific, commuter students may begin to see the larger benefit of enrolling into the GEM program.

5.3 Implications for Research and Practice

Based off of this inquiry's findings, it is supported by the literature that commuter student engagement is impacted by not only time constraints and outside commitments but it is also impacted by how the curriculum is focused on their academic pursuits. Hearing from other higher education professionals on how they engage their commuter students in both socially and co-curricular activities was both eye opening and beneficial to see how the GEM program hits the same or different markers similar to other higher educational institutions. Moving forward I believe that there is a need for more research done specifically with commuter student's thoughts

and opinions and not so much of what the educational institutions campus climate portrays. Currently higher education professionals are just meeting their students' basic needs and baseline participation without working towards a larger goal.

Furthermore, I would like to interview incoming first-year and transfer commuter students to see what their needs are both social and co-curricular prior to coming onto campus. This would allow me to see where the GEM program is already doing these events naturally and where there could be areas of improvement. Interviewing incoming commuter students would also allow the GEM coordinators to see what students currently want or what they would like to participate in, if it was available. The campus climate changes year to year and the GEM program has not adapted to the changes in the campus climate nor what is going locally and globally

Finally, the GEM coordinators must consider that their current curriculum is out of date and may be the primary reason that commuter students are not engaging or completing the program. The GEM coordinators should take a deep dive into the current roster and see the demographics of the students who are participating and the specific areas of the curriculum that are not being completed. By doing this it would allow the GEM coordinators to gain a better understanding of how to increase commuter student participation in the social and co-curricular events the program has to offer.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the key takeaways and recommendations for this inquiry. The key findings for this inquiry are (1) What is engagement?, (2) effective marketing, and (3) faculty participation. The recommendations I have to begin to address these key finds are (a) allow

students to determine the classification of events; social or co-curricular, (b) allow outside experiences, and (c) adding additional staff and faculty to become GEM coordinators. These recommendations could greatly benefit the GEM program in fostering the commuter student engagement in both social and co-curricular activities.

6.0 Reflections

The entire inquiry process has not only made me become a better higher education professional but it has also confirmed that commuter student's needs should be taken into consideration of how campus communities focus and operate. The purpose if this inquiry was to learn how other higher educational institutions foster social and co-curricular engagement with their commuter student population so that the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg could work to modify the GEM program. As I conducted these interviews, I found that other institutions struggled to engage their commuter student population and were working towards meeting the commuter students at where they were by altering and adapting their programs. Additionally, I was shocked at how little programming funds are geared towards commuter students' needs and the lack of awareness of what percentage of commuter students are attending events, both social and co-curricular.

As an improver, I learned that change takes time and it is not going to happen overnight or as quickly as I would like. As a staff member, who is also a GEM coordinator, once the interviews were complete I immediately wanted to share my findings and implement change right then and there. I continually had to remind myself that though my intentions were good I needed to consult the other GEM coordinators and make sure that all opinions were going to be taken into consideration. Additionally, my ideas of revamping the entire program would not have been as beneficial as I believe it would be and need to thoughtfully and carefully examine each section and take inventory. In addition to acknowledging change is something that does not happen overnight, I also learned that I needed to acknowledge my own biases about the GEM program and not let them interfere with my findings. I needed to pause many times to reflect that this inquiry was not

about how I believe the GEM program needed to be changed or adapted but how collectively the GEM coordinators could make the program better suited for our commuter students and increase their engagement.

I am eager to begin to work with my fellow colleagues and the commuter student population on changing the GEM program to foster more social and co-curricular engagement. I hope that the commuter students will begin to feel heard and that the changes will benefit them both personally and academically. I continue to take pride that the other institutions are working towards making commuter students feel welcomed and accepted on campus and hope to do so at my current and future institutions.

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