

University Commuter Students: Time Management, Stress Factors and Coping Strategies

Patricia Forbus, Sam Houston State University

John Newbold, Sam Houston State University

Sanjay Mehta, Sam Houston State University

Universities are evolving from the traditional, residential student population to institutions with a large population of commuter students. This study investigated the stress factors and methods of coping for these commuter students during their university experience as compared to residential students along with the time management capabilities of both sets of students. A survey was conducted at a four-year southwestern state university that was projectable to the entire student population. Respondents were queried with regard to demographics, stressors and coping behaviors. The research indicates that commuter students experienced differing work/family/school role responsibilities than their residential counterparts which related to differing levels of stress and methods of coping between the two groups of students.

From a demographic and involvement standpoint, this investigation was similar to earlier research. In studies previously conducted, non-traditional students generally were identified as those who had not followed a continuous educational path into college making them, first of all, characteristically older than traditional students, usually over 24 years of age, working full time, and typically having dependents to support. Many non-traditional students attend college part time (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2010). Commuter students have been shown to have many of the same characteristics as those defined for non-traditional students (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). The increase in commuter student involvement in higher education has driven some reflection on the pressures that students might face through their various responsibilities (Osborne et al., 2001).

The experience of the more mature, commuting students and the many challenges that they face in their work, social life, family life, and study are dissimilar to those of the traditional, residential notion of university students upon which higher education principles are usually established (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Mature students tend to diverge from younger students in their expectations of the college or university, in their motivations for attending, and their experiences with higher education (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Adult students have had experiences in life and in their careers that have broadened their general outlook.

This study expands the previous research by investigating time management characteristics, the origins of stress in commuter and residential students, and the coping strategies typically used by each group. This paper sheds further light on the consequences of commuting between a work life, social life, and family and child rearing while attending an institution of higher education and the negative outcomes that may arise. The work/life/study balance is central to commuter student participation. An improved understanding of the complexity of the inter-relationship is important to theorizing lifelong learning and policy development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The size of the commuter/non-traditional student population has been on the increase (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2010). Between 1996 and 2006, the number of these undergraduate college students increased at a rate of 30% to 50% (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). These students bring with them desires and needs that are different from their traditional counterparts on campus (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2009). The shifting campus population toward more mature, married, working, and commuting students necessitates that colleges and universities understand and adapt to the changing student needs in order to improve student satisfaction and involvement with the college experience and their persistence toward degree attainment.

Commuter students tend to be typically older than traditional, residential students (Evelyn, 2002). While the demographic characteristics of the commuter student are reasonably well-understood, the sources of their stress with college life and the coping strategies they employ have not been as thoroughly researched. With their maturity come responsibilities associated with careers, social connections, and families. University students, in general, are a very vulnerable group to experience stress (Negga, Applewhite & Livingston, 2007) and the commuter students' work and family life have both positive and negative consequences. Time management skills have been identified as a possible indication of higher performance and lower stress and anxiety (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). The significant

aspects which differentiated commuter students who were achieving controllable work/life/study balance appeared to be their coping strategies and the level of support from their families, employers, fellow students and from the institution (Lowe & Gayle, 2007).

These more mature students are apt to be diverse from younger students in their expectations of the college or university and in their incentive for attending (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2010). Adult students have had experiences in life and in their careers that have broadened their general outlook. Commuter university students have considerably more time and role strains than residential college students (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003). These commuter students often feel stressed, managing their varied roles and responsibilities (Curasi, & Burkhalter, 2009). The external demands and differing responsibilities create time limitations that residential students may not encounter (Lundberg, 2003). With the increase in commuter students attending college, there is a need to understand how the balancing of the multiple demands and roles of work, school, and life affects adult students. Academic stresses for commuter students include being capable of coping at a higher education level, time management, and study skills with additional concerns centered on coping with existing responsibilities and with the added study tasks (Barron & D'Annunzio-Green, 2009).

An issue of prominence for commuter students is the stress of balancing multiple demands and roles at work, at school, and in their personal life. In keeping with the resource scarcity theory, entering a university produces another functional realm that competes for limited resources: the student's time, energy, and finances (Butler, 2007). In contrast to the traditional, residential student, commuter students have additional responsibilities within their job and personal life that can lead to demand overload and inter-role conflict when combined with school (Fairchild, 2003). A few of the numerous difficulties that commuter students face include academic responsibility, family obligations, work, maintaining personal relationships, time management, financial obligations, and becoming acclimated to the university environment (Negga, Applewhite & Livingston, 2007). It has been suggested that, even though commuter students are more apt to work full time, they are not as stressed by working, commuting, or time limitations because they have more experience at time management (Lundberg, 2003). In other studies, more mature students have pointed out the importance of time management and organization and have found that organization and defining priorities are especially significant (Fee, J. F., Prolman, S. & Thomas, J. (2009).

To enhance the progress of learning and persistence of commuter students, it is important for higher education institutions to understand the stress of these students and provide resources that can decrease stressors and assist commuters with coping. Student health issues have been found to involve stress management and the development of time management skills (Hai-Jew, 2009). The pressures of maintaining a balance between occupational relationships, academic demands, and maintaining personal relationships can be a tremendous task (Negga, Applewhite & Livingston, 2007). Stress has been recognized as an important variable with significant relationships to grade point average (GPA), intent to persist, and goal commitment (Sandler, 2002). Stress among commuter students may develop from overextended workloads, difficulty with time management, issues with interpersonal relationships, or concern about academic failure (Pierceall & Keim, 2007).

Commuter students' choice of travel mode is influenced by many factors including the availability of public transport which could provide the most environmentally friendly mode of commuting (Kerr, A. Lennon, A. J. & Watson, B. C., 2010). Commuting via automobile is a factor in various ecological and traffic impediment, such as pollution and congestion (Abrahamse et al., 2009). Commuter students have described transportation stress related to the high level of traffic, availability of parking, and the amount of time and energy involved in commuting (Hernandez, 2002). There is also stress associated with the inconvenience of needing to return to campus for access to library or computer facilities (Hernandez, 2002). Commuter students have discussed feelings of guilt, sacrifice and conflict in respect to their family relationships along with hardships in their work environments caused by supervisors requiring extra overtime to compensate for the time spent at the university (Lowe & Gayle, 2007).

Differences have been found between commuter and residential students in their perceptions of stressful events (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). This means that a situation regarded as stressful by one student may not be stressful for another (Omura, 2007). This is an important issue when helping students develop coping mechanisms. Stress can have a positive effect allowing individuals to react effectively in times of urgency. Stressed students need to understand that it is an individual's perception of the demands placed upon them that cause stress and not the demands themselves (Robotham, 2008). The time management experience of commuter students has the effect of improved functioning and alleviation of feelings of stress (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007).

Commuter students commonly have a busy life with work and family responsibilities and an established social circle before they enroll in a university course. Study is taken on as an additional commitment (Kember & Leung, 2004). Three successful coping mechanisms work within the environment of career, social life, family life, and study and can be identified as sacrifice, support and negotiated arrangements (Kember & Leung, 2004). The idea of sacrifice comes from the concept that "something has to give," and it is usually associated with the giving up of

personal pleasure or the surrender of aspects of one's social life (Kember & Leung, 2004). Negotiating has been successful at the family level where the household division of labor and childcare are adjusted to accommodate for the changes in schedules and workloads (Sweet & Moen, 2007). But negotiation does not perform as successfully in the work environment because careers are so important that there is limited flexibility for manipulation (Kember & Leung, 2004). Coping in stressful situations can be aided by the support of friends; however, for many mature, commuter students, comparatively little time is devoted to actions traditionally associated with developing support groups. It is the residential students who are more involved with fraternal and social organizations, and dormitories, clubs, teams (Cooper & Robinson, 2000). Commuter students are likely to rely on the same people as they did prior to beginning university, making their new friendships less important for their stress coping. (Buote et. al, 2007).

Overall, coping strategies can be classified as either active or passive. Active coping behaviors can lead to constructive outcomes though planning, support and time management (Giancola, Grawitch & Borchert, 2009). For commuter students specifically, task-focused, adaptive coping was related to learning goal orientation, or learning for "its own sake," which was related to higher GPAs (Morris Brooks & May, 2003). Task-oriented coping action might include engaging a tutor, setting aside more study time, or other active ways to solve the stress-causing problem. With the multiple roles of the commuter student, there is a basic increase in task-oriented strategy in supporting the focus on learning for learning's sake (Morris, Brooks & May, 2003). There are however, some more maladaptive forms of active coping behaviors. These are types of avoidance or escape and lead to more negative outcomes such as venting, denial, missing meetings or classes, and drinking alcohol, smoking and using illegal drugs.(Giancola, Grawitch & Borchert, 2009; Palmer & Rodger, 2009; and Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Earlier studies found that commuter and residential students utilize different active coping styles with more positive active coping skills being utilized more often by commuter students (Morris, Brooks & May, 2003).

Passive coping behavior involves emotional coping or modifying the meaning of events, in order to adapt to or downplay their importance. Again, passive forms of coping can be both positive and negative, depending upon the specific situation. To better understand the issues, concerns, and needs of commuter students, a study was conducted at a southwestern four-year university with a significant proportion of commuter students comparing commuter and residential students and their stressors and coping methods.

RESEARCH METHODS

Exploratory Research

To facilitate the development of the survey instrument, a focus group was conducted with a convenience sample of undergraduate students. The results of the focus group clearly demonstrated that the needs of commuter students may be significantly different from those of residential students.

The Survey Instrument

The instrument developed for the study was a self-administered, structured, and undisguised questionnaire. Besides the fact that this type of instrument is the fastest, least expensive, and most popular (Aldrek & Settle, 2004), our primary motivation for selecting this form of instrument was that it was the most appropriate methodology (given our sampling frame, targeted sample size, time frame, etc).

Recognizing the fact that the instrument was meant to measure ideas and concepts that are abstract and non-observable, extra care was taken in designing the questionnaire in terms of proper phrasing of the questions, and a neat layout of the various sections. Face validity was conducted with three researchers in the Marketing Department. A pilot study was conducted with a sample of the population to determine the accuracy of instructions, the best wording of the questions, the appropriateness of scales, etc. Since the topic under investigation was somewhat sensitive, extra care was taken to eliminate any ambiguity in the questionnaire. Seven-point Likert scales were used extensively to assess students' time management strategies, their attitudes toward stress and their stress coping strategies.

Approximately 3-4 items were developed to represent each construct under investigation. Nominal to ratio scales were used to obtain classification information. The survey took between 10 and 12 minutes to complete. To encourage participation from respondents, all completed responses were eligible to participate in a random drawing.

Operationalizing "Commuter Student"

Commuter status has been operationalized a number of different ways in the preceding research. One commonality of all definitions is the requirement that the student not live within 5 miles from the campus. For purposes of

this research, “commuter” was operationalized living outside of the county where the university is located. This constitutes a distance of over 5 miles. It was felt that students some students who, essentially, live “in town” also lived more than 5 miles from campus. These students were not considered commuter students for purposes of this study. Of the overall ending sample of 480 respondents, 124 (26%) are classified as “commuter”, with the remaining 356 being considered “non-commuters” or “residential” students.

Operationalizing “Active Coping” and “Passive Coping”

A more negative form of “active coping” is operationalized as a factor consisting of two items as follows:

1. “When I get overly stressed, I sometimes skip a class or two.”
2. “When I get overly stressed, I sometimes skip meetings (group meetings, meetings at work, meetings with friends).”

The Cronbach Alpha on this factor is .697 (can be rounded to .70)

“Passive Coping” is operationalized as a single item as follows:

- “When things aren’t going so well, I put things in a broader perspective, organize, and prioritize.”

This item, representing a form of passive coping behavior, is generally considered to be a more mature, positive form of coping behavior. Since it is a single item (i.e., not a factor), it is not appropriate to compute/report an Alpha score

Sampling and Data Collection

The study was conducted among a projectable sample of the student population at a mid-sized southwestern four-year university. The general demographic of the students attending this university include 42% male and 58% female; Whites = 67%, African-Americans = 15%, Hispanics = 14%, and Others = 4%; and Freshmen = 21%, Sophomores = 18%, Juniors = 21%, Seniors = 27%, and Others = 13%.

In order to create the ability to generalize the responses and to eliminate any type of bias in the responses, students of an undergraduate marketing research course were trained to obtain 5 completed surveys each. To ensure accuracy of data collection and completion, 5% of each student’s course grade was tied into this process. A stratified sampling plan was deployed, with strata controlling for both year in school (i.e., freshman, sophomore, etc.) and college attending (College of Business Administration, College of Education, etc.). The ending sample was found to represent student population as a whole with a margin of error of $\pm 4.5\%$. The validity of the sample was examined by a Chi-square goodness-of-fit test where the sample was compared to the population of the institution on key demographic variables. All Chi-squares were determined to be non-significant at the 0.05 level. This is an indicator that the sample is projectable to the population under study.

Data Quality

The items in the survey were developed based upon the literature review, focus groups, and the special circumstances of the institution where the research was conducted (Churchill & Brown, 2007). Since this was primarily an exploratory study, a minimum factor loading of 0.30 (Nunnally, 1978) was used as a guideline for including items in a factor. The reliability of each factor was evaluated utilizing an internal consistency measure. Factors with Cronbach Alpha less than 0.70 were not used for the analysis. In some cases, the analysis was performed utilizing individual items.

HYPOTHESES

Non-Traditional Students

The first objective was to determine whether commuter students today are significantly diverse from non-commuter students. Previous research demonstrated that commuter students are more likely to have the characteristics

of the non-traditional student such as being over 24 years of age, working full time, and usually having dependents to support (Lowe & Gayle, 2007; Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; and Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2010b). This focus leads to the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Commuter students are more likely than residential students to possess the traits of non-traditional students.

Stress

The differences in the characteristics of commuter and residential students lead to the opinion that there is a variation in the intensity of stress and the coping strategies in the college experience. Stress levels among commuter students were perceived as moderately high, and financial issues are one of the biggest contributors to stress (Canales-Gonzales & Kranz, 2008). The responsibilities connected with employment increases students' stress levels, while a majority of working students reports that they feel an obligation to work (Robotham, 2009). The commuting student tackles challenges that the non-commuting student typically doesn't face, especially feelings of isolation, multiple life roles and different support systems (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2010a). Another source of increased stress is linked to the fact that commuter students have more time limitations on academics and campus activities because of a more complex lifestyle than residential students (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2010a). Commuter students are traveling from home or work to attend their university courses. For these students, hours are valuable and appreciated resources, and the campus is a place to "rendezvous" for part of their time (Ruchti, Newbold & Mehta, 2008). Time management, balancing multiple roles, getting to campus are all issues that face commuter students. These lead to the next four hypotheses.

Hypothesis 2: Commuter students are less likely than residential students to have sufficient time to complete all tasks.

Hypothesis 3: Commuter students are more likely than residential students to have a higher level of stress related to a general lack of time.

Hypothesis 4: Commuter students are more likely than residential students to have a higher level of stress related to money issues.

Hypothesis 5: Commuter students are more likely than residential students to have a higher level of stress related to work issues.

Hypothesis 6: Commuter students are more likely than residential students to have a higher level of stress related to commuting issues.

Coping Mechanisms: Active vs. Passive Coping Methods

A coping style is the usual method in which an individual will deal with a stressful situation. With their characteristics similar to non-traditional and traditional students, commuter and residential students employ dissimilar coping styles with active coping skills being utilized more often by commuter students (Morris, Brooks & May, 2003). With active coping, stress is addressed directly with techniques like time management, planning, and developing solutions. A passive coping style is related to mitigating the emotional impact of the stress, through such techniques as minimizing the importance of the source of stress or placing the whole situation in a broader perspective (Palmer & Rodger, 2009).

For purposes of this study, active coping strategies and passive coping are represented by a factor consisting of two items and a single item, respectively, as previously described (see "Operationalizing Active Coping and Passive Coping"). Thus, the final two hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 7: Commuter students are less likely than residential students to utilize negative active stress management methods.

Hypothesis 8: Commuter students more likely than residential students to utilize positive passive stress management methods.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the results of the research. The first hypothesis addressed commuter students' similarity to non-traditional students. To assess this, each respondent was asked about the number of hours spent during a typical week studying, working, and traveling to college, their age, and family status. Table 1 shows that, like non-traditional students, commuter students were more likely to work in excess of 21 hours per week and to spend more than 11 hours per week studying outside of class. Commuter students were also similar to non-traditional students by being older, more likely to be married and caring for children. All of these results proved to be statistically significant. Thus, Hypotheses 1 is accepted.

The next five hypotheses investigated the differences in the stress between commuter and residential students. Hypothesis 2 was concerned with commuter students feeling less likely to have enough time in a day to complete all the necessary tasks. On a 7-point scale, the mean for Hypothesis 2 was 3.6 for commuter students and 4.1 for residential students. The next four hypotheses addressed stress as it related to time, money, work, and commuting issues, respectively. Hypothesis 3, addressing a general lack of time, had a mean value of 5.2 for commuter students and 4.8 for residential students. Stress relating to money issues, Hypothesis 4, had a mean value of 5.4 for commuter students and 4.8 for residential students. Associated with Hypothesis 5, commuter students reported higher levels of stress related to work with a mean of 4.6 while residential students reported a mean of 3.9. As suggested in Hypothesis 6, commuting issues showed a higher level of stress for commuting students with a mean of 5.1 compared to 2.6 for residential students. All of these differences were statistically significant. Thus each of these five hypotheses was accepted.

The last two hypotheses dealt with coping mechanisms. The research showed that commuter students are more apt to utilize more positive passive stress management coping strategies while residential students are more apt to turn to more negative active coping methods. The mean values for passive stress management was 5.3 for commuter students and 4.8 for residential students. The mean values for the more negative active stress management coping strategy was 3.5 for commuter students and 4.0 for residential students. These results were statistically significant. Thus, these two hypotheses were accepted.

Table 1: Commuter vs. Residential Students (Examination of Traits of Non-Traditional Students)

Related Hypotheses	Item	Commuter Students (n= 124)	Resident Students (n= 356)	Chi-Square	p-value
H ₁	More than 21 Hours Working	54.4%	30.4%	28.656	.000
	More than 11 Hours Studying	36.8%	26.0%	5.247	.073
	More than 5 Miles Commuting	98.4%	18.7%	247.212	.000
	Older than 25 Years	33.6%	7.2%	77.932	.000
	Married	24.0%	3.9%	47.447	.000
	Caring for Children	19.2%	3.9%	30.121	.000

Table 2: Commuter vs. Residential Students (Comparison of Means on Attitudinal Dimensions)

Related Hypotheses	Item	Commuter Students (n = 124)	Resident Students (n = 356)	p-value	Accept	Reject
H ₂	Sufficient time for tasks	3.6	4.1	.038	√	
H ₃	Stress related to lack of time	5.2	4.8	.014	√	
H ₄	Stress related to money issues	5.4	4.8	.002	√	
H ₅	Stress related to work issues	4.6	3.9	.002	√	
H ₆	Stress related to commuting issues	5.1	2.6	.000	√	
H ₇	Item: More positive passive stress management methods	5.3	4.8	.002	√	
H ₈	Factor: Active stress management methods	3.5	4.0	.024	√	

Discussion

The findings of this research dispute the inclination to see students only as learners, and point instead to a picture of a student as a whole person with roles as partner, parent, worker, and money manager for which time must be found in busy schedules (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). The findings also pointed out that educational success can be realized by students who experience a variety of life stresses if the right support is available. Their success can also be related to the flexibility of the university. Higher education programs that are available to students in a variety of styles, from a defined full time course to a personalized program or a hybrid course of study would help create an environment that

students need for support in understanding the work/life/study balance (Lowe & Gayle, 2007).

There is an increase in the number of older, working, commuting students who attend institutions of higher education (Giancola, Grawitch and Borchert, 2009). Only about one third of undergraduate students are not working adults (Berker, Horn & Carroll, 2003). With an increase in commuter students attending college, there is a need to understand how work/school/life stresses impact adult students.

There is a difference between the coping styles of commuter and residential students. Since they tend to be younger and less mature, residential students are more likely than their commuting counterparts to choose to “skip out” on course when they become too stressed. More prone to utilize more positive active coping strategies, commuter college students were found to more often cope through positive, passive methods (i.e., taking a “broader perspective”) than did the younger residential college students who relied more on active coping methods associated with cutting class, leaving homework undone, and drinking more (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003).

Students who reported more effective problem solving skills were more likely to use coping strategies aimed towards task-oriented or problem solving. Learning goal orientations were associated with increased use of task-oriented coping that may imply, for example, that a student, who chooses to cope with stress more actively, sets up plans and maps out solutions (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003). In reflecting upon this study, it would appear that the commuter students are already engaging in many of these positive, active coping strategies.

Success can be achieved by students who experience a variety of life circumstances if the right support is available (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). A key role for higher education institutions in relation to stress is the availability of suitable resources to enable individuals to manage stress (Kember & Leung, 2004). Commuter students are in need of solutions to deal with the increasing encumbrances on their lives and their ability to cope with and juggle competing demands on their time. The time management experience of commuter students has the effect of improved functioning and alleviation of feelings of stress (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). The multiple functions that friends fulfill, and their provisions of support and well-being, suggest that having a close friend during stressful experiences would help individuals cope (Buote et al., 2007).

Students who look positively on the openness of administration tend to be more satisfied with the campus environment (Nicolson & Bess, 1997). Commuter students have stronger relationships with administrators and place a greater value on faculty interaction than their non-commuting equivalent (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010).

Limitations and Future Research

The research was conducted concerning the stress and coping mechanisms of commuter and residential students. A further breakdown of the commuter students could be helpful in understanding student needs if a determination were made between the non-traditional commuter students and the more traditional students (many of whom may be first-generation students) who happen to be commuting. Another significant variable between students that would help define their time management capabilities deals with the personality type of the student. By their independent nature, a Type A personality student would seem to be better equipped for goal setting, motivation, and positive thinking. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Type D personality students might experience more uncertainty when faced with change. Controlling this variable within the research of commuter students and residential students would further define the results of future research.

Future research is needed to better understand the balance of work lives and school for both commuter and residential students. It is difficult for universities to implement campus activities and programs when they don't fully understand the lives of either group. Students, in theory, are sharing much of the same burden of work and school commitments and have less time for school functions. Perhaps research should be done on why commuter students and residential students share the somewhat similar stress factors, and have divergent coping methods.

Some particular variables that complicate the study of stress in commuter students and residential students relate to the student's role in the family and the amount of conflict within the family particularly as it relates to sacrificed family time for a student's studies. To better understand the financial stress of the decision to return to college, it would be advisable to research the income level of the commuter students and residential students and the number of dual income households that are represented in the study. In future research, time as a stress factor could be reviewed from the standpoint of the amount of time a student has allocated for taking university classes as compared to the actual amount of course-work time required. Another variable which would assist in understanding the levels of stress relates to the actual commute experienced. It would be important to understand the quality of the commute, the length of the commute as well as whether the commute requires driving in heavily trafficked areas or through a calm country area.

Research has shown that some universities are developing a framework and assessment tool to evaluate their effectiveness in serving commuter students (Compton, Cox & Laanan, 2006). In fact, some universities are specifically targeting and catering to the needs of a sub-set (i.e., senior citizens) of the commuter students (Brandon, 2006). Along with this, it is pertinent for universities to reexamine the methods for informing students of the programs that could be helpful in managing time and stress more positively and proactively. Perhaps satisfaction as a whole could be increased once the university knows what is desired by each distinct group of students.

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Patricia Forbus earned her MBA from the University of Arkansas, and has completed post-graduate work at Sam Houston State University. She is retired from AT&T/Lucent/SBC and has worked as a business development volunteer for the Peace Corps in the Ukraine. Her current research interests include pedagogical research related to first generation, non-traditional and commuter students.

John Newbold is an associate professor of marketing at Sam Houston State University. He received his DBA in marketing from St. Louis University. His current research interests include pedagogical research with commuter, non-traditional and first generation students, market research and competitive intelligence, and marketing strategy. He has written cases on the hospice industry, focusing on the for-profit hospice phenomenon. He has published in Journal of Applied Case Research, the Journal of Finance Case Research, the International Journal of Education Research, and the Academy of Educational Research Journal, among others.

Sanjay Mehta earned his Ph.D. at the University of North Texas in 1999. Currently, he is professor of marketing at Sam Houston State University. His current research interests include pedagogical research related to first generation, non-traditional and commuter students. Also, he conducts research in the area of small business, entrepreneurship, and franchising.