

Theme 4: Engagement, Belonging and Identity

Sowing Seeds, Growing Roots: How Engagement Led Me to Flourish in University

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I am a third-year student at the University of Winchester, studying American Studies and English Literature. I am a single parent and carer to my nineteen-year-old daughter, who has an Autistic Spectrum disorder, and I therefore chose to commute to university despite living two hours away. My first experiences at the university were rather challenging. However, my engagement with extra-curricular activities offered by the University of Winchester, beginning with the university's Student Fellows Scheme, transformed a negative experience into one of the best experiences of my life.

As a mature student and as a commuting student, I quickly began to feel very much like an outsider. University was not at all as I had hoped. I had imagined fist-thumping debates with my fellow students, both in the lecture halls and in the university bar! I had not anticipated the glass wall that would leave me feeling isolated, disconnected and outcast. With the gift of hindsight, I am able to recognise that every student arrives at university feeling nervous, wanting desperately to fit in and to make friends, and feeling utterly terrified that this will not happen. However, the 'fresher' experience is very different for accommodated students than for commuting students. By default, accommodated students have a preordained friendship group from the day they move in and, no matter how unrealistic or short-lived those friendships are, they provide a sense of community for those students in their first difficult days, weeks and months and, in many ways, this acts as a shield to protect them from their potential fears and feelings of isolation while they adjust to university life.

I found those initial weeks to be incredibly lonely. I was shocked by the fact that I simply could not make friends. I found it almost impossible to conquer the impenetrable glass shield that was created by the accommodation-based friendship groups and at the time that felt like a huge rejection. Of course, I am now able to recognise that it was not about me, but about those students' own insecurities. In addition to this social barrier, a huge number of practical issues made it very difficult to engage in university life. For example, with a two-hour commute to university, my day began at 05:30 and had to be organised with military-like precision. Every day, I needed to pack the necessary books for all my lectures, pens, pencils and my laptop. On days when I had a long gap between lectures I would be working on my most pressing assignments, so would need to bring all the books and materials I was using for that piece of work. Each day, I was faced with a choice: either prepare and then carry my lunch, a flask of coffee and water bottle or be prepared to spend a fortune purchasing all my food and drink on campus. There was also the question of where to go between lectures. Even if I had been lucky enough to break through the invisible glass wall and make some friends, a trip into town for a coffee after lectures, or even moving around the campus to meet people, was not an option when I was carrying bags of books, my laptop, lunch bag and flask. Instead, I would need to find a space on campus where I could work and that was where I would spend most of my day when I wasn't in my lectures. There was nothing extraordinary about my circumstance, yet I continuously faced obstacles to engaging with the activities and events that took place around the campus.

I was determined that the social gap and practical issues I was facing should not prevent me from making friends and becoming involved with university life. I would deliberately seek out people who were sitting alone in our communal social and learning spaces around the campus. Almost always, the students would be happy to have somebody to talk to, to socialise with and to share and compare experiences. It was then that I started to see a pattern emerging. Frequently, these lone figures transpired to be commuters, also struggling to break through the invisible wall. They too were bound to their space by the impracticalities of

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commuting student life. Time and again, I met people whose experiences of university echoed mine. They were lonely, miserable and beginning to feel that coming to university had been a big mistake. Often, the students were considering their options, debating whether even to continue with their studying. I felt that action needed to be taken. The University needed to find a way to bring these people together, so that they could make friends with other students who understood the difficulties they faced as commuters, and also needed to find a way to ease the practical challenges of being a commuting student, thereby enabling commuting students to engage fully in university life.

I was already in the throes of putting a plan together when I read a poster advertising the University of Winchester's Student Fellows Scheme. The poster said, 'The Student Fellows Scheme is an attempt to both increase the level of student engagement with teaching and learning... and to empower students to address varied issues, problems or barriers to a satisfying teaching, learning and social experience.' It seemed like the perfect platform to find a way of bringing commuting students together and solving some of their practical issues. I wrote an extensive three-point plan that sought to eradicate some of the barriers to engagement that commuting students experienced. I believed that, by creating a Commuter Society, we would give these students the opportunity to socialise and make friends with people who understood their challenges and shared some of their experiences. I felt that the University needed to provide a common area which would include comfy sofas and chairs for students to relax and read in during the long gaps between lectures, but also so that they could chat and socialise with their fellow commuters. I suggested that a microwave and fridge would give commuters the choice about whether to buy or make their own food and requested a kettle, so that a few cups of coffee over the course of the day would not add to the expense of being a commuter. Above all else, I suggested the need for lockers, somewhere for commuters to store their bags, so they could actually go and involve themselves in university life by joining other clubs and societies and by interacting with other students without having to carry all their belongings with them. Finally, I believed that the University needed to take more responsibility for supporting commuting students, whose needs and challenges might often be beyond the boundaries of those expected for students.

The members of the Student Fellows team were really supportive of my ideas and their support for my project never wavered. There were many challenges; for example, trying to secure an adequate space for a common area on campus, but by the end of my first semester at university, we had a Commuter Society with over 100 members, of which I was Chair. Over the duration of my first year, I worked hard to secure the space that I believed was needed for commuters and, by the end of that year, the Commuter Society had its own lounge with dining area, a private study area, shower, lockers, fridge, microwave and kettle! The University of Winchester now includes a section for commuters in its student handbook, provides a leaflet for commuters (with details of support that might be helpful to them), offers recruitment videos for potential commuting students and, at open day events, provides advice and support specifically for commuters. Commuters are now a considered, included and valued group within the University community.

What I was not prepared for when I first became involved in the Student Fellow Scheme were the exposure to new friends and the supportive network of which I would find myself a part. Key features of the scheme were the support offered and the encouragement given for students to become more involved with their university, both of which bred a truly inclusive community atmosphere. As a result, my confidence grew and I found myself becoming involved in other events and activities at the University. I became a mature student representative on our Student Academic Council and a Student Academic Representative for the American Studies programme. Each of these experiences has opened the door to meeting new people, gaining experience and knowledge and developing new skills in areas outside my degree; each has thoroughly enhanced my studies.

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I have found the academic aspects of studying a degree very challenging, less because of my ability than my lack of confidence. I have found the assessments very anxiety-inducing and have needed mental health support throughout my studies; as a result, there have been numerous occasions when I could happily have given up on my degree. The anchor that has kept me here when times have been tough is not some dogged determination or drive to succeed, but my involvement in all other aspects of university life and the friends I have made through those activities with which I am involved - the Commuter Society, the Student Fellows Scheme and becoming a Student Representative. Being involved has made me feel like a valuable member of my university community and has given me a sense of responsibility to the University; that, more than anything else, has kept me centred and made me want to stay and see my degree through to the end, despite how difficult I have found it at times.

It was for all these reasons that I was keen to become involved when invited to join the REACT Steering Group. I enjoyed the idea that people recognise the importance of engaging students in more than just their academic studies, seeing learning as a much bigger picture. In particular, I was intrigued by their remit to model ways to engage students that they called 'hard to reach'. This interested me because I know that as a mature student, a single-parent, as a carer and as a commuting student, I would normally be a difficult student to engage in some of the events and activities that the University offers. Add to that my struggles with confidence and anxiety and, almost certainly, you might think that my engagement would be limited. Yet I am not necessarily the sort of person who might be described as 'hard to reach'. Usually this kind of label is applied to care leavers, children of single parents and people from deprived backgrounds. My experience is that anybody can be 'hard to reach' if universities do not offer the right opportunities.

Student engagement is about feeling connected, feeling as if you belong somewhere and feeling valued. Those connections give you purpose, which in turn gives you motivation, which ultimately brings you success. I know I would not have been able to cope with university had it not been for the connections I have made through my engagement in different projects, events and activities. I fully believe that the success of every student can be secured if universities work to truly acknowledge that 'engagement' covers a vast spectrum of ways that students connect with their institutions and their education and by offering opportunities to engage in ways that are both beyond imagination and beyond academic studies.