

BACK TO COLLEGE

On the road: Matt Compton gets a CD ready for his drive to school - a time he uses to get away from everyone and collect his thoughts.



STAFF PHOTOS BY HEATHER SONTAG

Home and away: Matt Compton enjoys the comforts of home, above, and time on the job, at right, with Nancy Carrara of Deloitte & Touche.



Commuting students juggle college, work

Many have found the drive to higher education

Editor's note: This is the second and final installment in our look at the back-to-college scene, comparing dorm and commuter students.

BY CARA PLOWMAN
STAFF WRITER

Although going away to college is a natural transition for a lot of high school graduates, Matt Compton is among those who opt to stay at home and commute to school.

Compton's decision to commute to Wayne State University allows him to work in his field of study, while taking classes.

At his parent's home in Canton, Compton's bedroom is laid out like an apartment, complete with an office area for studying, an entertainment system and a recliner. He maneuvers the furniture with ease, even though it's crammed into a space not much larger than a dorm room.

The life of a commuter

Commuters spend a lot of time in their cars, either driving to school and looking for a parking spot in the endless rows of vehicles or driving to work.

Compton, 21, usually starts his day at 7 a.m. After getting ready, he jumps in his car and prepares himself for the 45-minute drive into Detroit, usually making it to class at 9 a.m.

"I love my morning drive and my afternoon drive. That's my time to get

away from everybody, to collect my thoughts," he said.

Between classes, he spends down time at the gym or in the student center.

Compton, who is a business major and German minor, then heads to work.

For commuters, Compton's routine of balancing class and work will sound familiar.

Commuting to school has its disadvantages, but for Compton, a junior, it's the only way to juggle his need to make money while getting an education.

While in high school, he started looking at colleges and realized that money would play a key role in his decision. With a 4.0 high school GPA, Compton could have gone to any school. Ultimately, he chose WSU because of a full scholarship offer. Factors like WSU's downtown location, its reputation and cost made it attractive. Compton calls the campus a "hidden treasure."

"I'm in the city and I love it. Because I'm in the city, titles are so much greater."



Last year, when Compton sent out resumes to corporations in the Detroit area, he received a call from Deloitte & Touche, a business consultation firm. He's worked there since May.

In the Deloitte & Touche office, Compton is lauded by coworkers who go on about the work he has done and his commitment to the company.

"He's incredibly motivated," said coworker Nancy Carrara, senior international human resources consultant. "He always says he wishes he could do more."

Whenever a fellow employee strolls by his roomy cubical, Compton warmly asks how they are or demands a hug.

"It's very encouraging to see young people who are motivated, good people. He seems like he's very well-balanced," Carrara said.

At Deloitte & Touche, which handles taxes, human resources and payroll for businesses, Compton takes care of payroll for Volkswagen and Rolls-Royce.

Gaining work experience while in school is a leading force for commuters students.

Paul Tennes, 20, stays busy working on two degrees at two different schools, all while gaining experience in his field as a patrol officer. The Canton resident is a junior, behavioral sciences major at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and studies at Schoolcraft College in the Criminal Justice Academy. He also works at the U-M-Ann Arbor in the Public Safety Department.

Tennes is working for certification to be a police officer.

"I'm able to have a full-time job and take classes at the same time. I work to be financially secure but also to bring experience into my field along with my degree," Tennes said.

Focus is key to Matt Compton's success, something that might have been missing if he had been living on campus.



Home work: Matt has plenty of room to study in his room.

On the job

Commuters save money on room and board or other expenses that come with dorm life. That was a big factor, said Denise Compton, Matt's mother. "The fewer loans you have when you graduate, the better off you are."

In addition to wanting to save money on his education, Compton chose to commute so he could earn on-the-job experience during school.

Living with the folks isn't so bad when you think about it

Editor's note: Cara Plowman served as a summer intern for the Observer, working as a staff reporter. She is managing editor of Oakland University's Oakland Post.

When I graduated from high school, my grandma told me that college would go by fast but it would be the best four years (maybe five) of my life. Three years later, as I ready myself for my senior year, I look back and realize she was right.

College can be an expensive four-year party if you're not careful. As a student who lives at home and commutes to class, I've found an easy way to save money without losing out on "college life."

Even though many commuters still choose not to get involved in campus activities, many more

now do. Those who try out for a part-time job, join clubs and spend time on campus realize that they can get the best of both worlds: the experience of commuting that they can live on campus.

Since I started college at Oakland University in fall 1998, I haven't really stopped moving. From working long hours at the school newspaper, attending basketball games and swimming matches, learning about campus politics and student government and hanging out with people I've met, I have managed to make



Cara Plowman

my college experience unforgettable. All that and I still made it to most of my classes.

Commuters definitely have the reputation of lacking school spirit, but more students are getting involved on campus now. For those who still aren't active, remember, you picked the school you wanted to go to. Why not show support for sports teams, join organizations and hang out in the student center? It's the best way to meet people.

I picked OU because it was close to home, inexpensive and has a good reputation. At first, I dreaded the thought of living with my parents for another four years, but then I realized that I have the rest of my life to pay bills and live on my own. What's the big rush?

Besides, college isn't about sharing a 10-foot by 10-foot dorm

with someone you barely know, committing for tests or going crazy at keg parties. School is about learning, growing and making potentially lifelong friends. If you manage to save a few bucks along the way, more power to you.

After I graduate next spring, I'm proud to say I will not have any student loans to pay off. Because I stayed at home, applied for scholarships and worked hard, I was able to pay for everything without borrowing money. OK, mom and dad did help a lot.

One downside that a commuter can't avoid is driving. Waking up early for classes, bad weather and rush hour traffic take their toll. The good thing about it is the time you get to be alone and think. For me, it's

worth it - just to be able to eat home-cooked meals and take showers in peace.

The roommate situation was the deciding factor in my decision not to live on campus. At OU, about 1,100 students take the plunge each year and move into dorms. The small, square rooms resemble those of a cheap motel. One window, one closet and one bathroom are not qualities I look for in my living space (so, call me spoiled).

Some people remain close to their college roommates after graduation, but I've heard too many stories to venture down that path. As my luck would have it, I'd end up getting the roommate you hear people talk about. The one that locks you out of the room every time her boyfriend visits, invites 20 people over to party the night before

your big exam and insists on cranking up the stereo every night at 2 a.m.

No, thank you. So what if I live out of my car, get stuck in rush hour traffic every day and can never find a spot to park. Underclassmen who live on campus have no car, no privacy and no peace and quiet. Before picking a school, I weighed the positives and negatives of commuting and living on campus. Your decision might be different, but think both options through.

Don't just run out and apply for a dorm without talking to people who have lived in one already. Mom and dad are a lot less likely to let you move back home after you've left for a while.

Besides, who wants to eat cafeteria food three times a day anyway?