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Student Transportation Options Provided by California Community Colleges Often Limited to Parking Permits and Transit Passes

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Issue

Community college students spend more on transportation than their counterparts at public and private four-year colleges, partly due to the lack of on-campus or nearby affordable housing. Recent research highlights how transportation challenges are an overlooked but basic need for community college students (Access, Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce, 2021). While the empirical evidence is somewhat limited, there are established connections between transportation access and educational outcomes. For example, a quasi-experimental study with Rio Hondo Community College in the Los Angeles region found that students who received deeply discounted transit passes had higher student success rates than their comparative peers (Clay and Valentine, 2021). This evidence suggests that transportation investments for California's community college students are worthwhile to explore in efforts to boost community college completion rates.

Understanding the current landscape of what California community colleges offer to students is a first step to making further investments in the transportation and education connection. A UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies research team inventoried the different types and costs of transportation services and programs offered by 115 of the 116 community colleges in California. Calbright College was excluded from the analysis since it is a fully online college. Information gathered for this study was taken from each college's website.

Key Research Findings

Most community colleges offer parking permits and transit passes, but not much else. Across the 115 community colleges, 94 percent offer parking permits and 77 percent offer transit passes; however, other options (e.g., ride-hailing partnerships, carshare, emergency transportation funds) are limited to non-existent. For example, few campuses offer programs beyond bicycle parking to support bicycling to campus. Santa Monica College, however, created a free commuter bike loan program where students receive a bicycle and helmet for two weeks with the option to return or purchase at the end of the free trial period. Two campuses partnered with transportation network companies to provide discounted rides to and from campus anytime, and Santa Monica College offers free shared Lyft rides as an intra-campus shuttle during the evening.

On average, transit passes are more expensive for students per semester than parking permits except for community colleges in rural areas. The cost of parking permits across all community colleges is relatively the same regardless of location (urban, suburban, rural); however, the average cost for community college transit passes ranges from \$24 in rural areas to \$62 in urban areas (Figure 1). The relatively lower parking permit costs is due, in part, to the maximum parking permit price of \$50 per semester and \$25 per intersession (i.e., period between university terms) codified in the California educational code (CA. Stat § 76360).

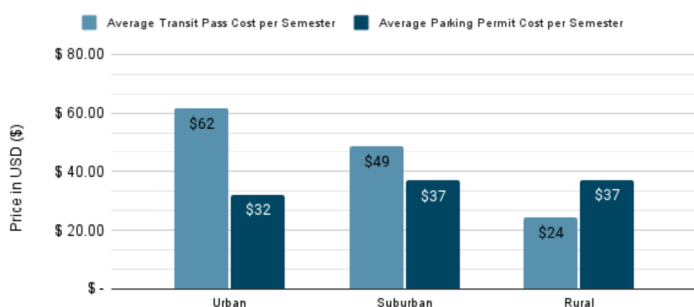


Figure 1. Average cost of a transit pass and parking permit per semester by campus urban form

Enacting a transportation fee paid by all students as part of enrollment is the most affordable approach to providing students transit passes. Community colleges in California have adopted different approaches to providing transit passes to students. For the 37 schools that provide passes through a transportation fee paid by all students as part of enrollment, the average per semester cost is \$16. In contrast, 38 schools offer a discounted pass costing \$47 per semester on average. The most expensive approach is asking students to purchase a student pass through the transit agency (11 schools), which cost students \$105 on average per semester. On average (across all transit pass programs offered by community colleges), students pay \$40 per semester to receive a transit pass.

The cost of a parking permit or a transit pass rarely varies based on whether a student is enrolled full or part-time. Students enrolled part-time typically pay the full price for a parking permit or transit pass. This lack of price variation is more common for parking permits than transit passes, as 11 colleges vary the transit pass cost by the number of units

enrolled. Also, no colleges provided a discounted rate for buying both a parking permit and transit pass. In turn, the sunk cost of parking permits may dissuade students from using transit for some commute trips to campus.

Key Takeaways

- Insufficient transportation options likely affect a student’s ability to complete college; therefore, investments in transportation are worth exploring as an avenue for increasing community college completion.
- Students with inconsistent or non-existent car ownership, or insufficient transit service are likely underserved by the services and programs provided by community colleges in California.
- Strategies to keep transit pass costs low, such as a transportation fee paid by all students at time of enrollment, offer a pathway to improve transportation affordability for community college students.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from “Understanding Transportation Programs and Supports at California Community Colleges” report by Madeline Brozen, Rasik Hussain, and Nicole Matteson with the University of California, Los Angeles. The report can be found at www.ucits.org/research-project/RIMI-4E. For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Madeline Brozen at mbrozen@ucla.edu.

Access, Affordability, Food and Housing Access Taskforce. (2021). *Affordability, Food, and Housing Access Taskforce Report: Addressing Affordable Transportation Needs*. Community College League of California. https://cclleague.org/sites/default/files/cclc_transportation-report_2021.pdf

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