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## Policy Briefs

### **Title**

Class Act: An Assessment of Los Angeles Metro's U-Pass Program

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### **Author**

Yowell, T. Ryan

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# Class Act: An Assessment of Los Angeles Metro's U-Pass Program

T. Ryan Yowell, MURP

## Research Topic

In 2016, Metro introduced the Universal College Student Transit Pass (U-Pass), its reduced transit fare pass program for college and university students, with the expressed goal of increasing student transit ridership. An increase in college student transit ridership has great potential in Los Angeles County, where public transit ridership is declining, traffic congestion is worsening, and more than 1 million students are enrolled in postsecondary education at public institutions.

Researchers have found that reduced transit fare pass programs for university students are successful in increasing student transit use and reducing trips by private automobile to campus, generally with modest operational costs imposed on transit agencies. Is this true for U-Pass? A relatively young program, U-Pass raises questions for Metro staff about added costs and service demand on Metro buses and trains in exchange for increased ridership and student savings. Using ridership and survey data from the first two years of U-Pass, this research explores the relationships between U-Pass and student transit ridership, service demand and operating costs, and fare revenue productivity of curb space.

## Main Findings

- U-Pass is fulfilling its promise of increasing student transit ridership. One in five U-Pass participants did not ride Metro before the program.
- Pass prices and student participation vary drastically by school. Occasional transit riders are less likely to opt in to the pass as its price increases, creating a feedback loop of declining student participation and increasing prices to cover a relatively small group of frequent transit users (see Figures 1 and 2).
- The introduction of U-Pass typically results in limited changes to service on lines accessing institutions; U-Pass' impact on Metro's operating costs varies by institution, but is usually relatively modest.
- Metro receives less fare revenue under U-Pass than it would under participants' previous travel and payment behaviors — even with the addition of new riders. Metro may lose nearly \$1 million in fare revenue per academic term, as most U-Pass participants report previously paying the full fare before U-Pass

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The model of a transit pass — whether riders must opt in or are automatically enrolled — matters for pass adoption and use.
- U-Pass is fulfilling its promise of increasing student transit ridership. One out of five U-Pass participants did not ride Metro before the program.
- By requiring students to purchase their pass, participating institutions are stifling the success of the program, and may be increasing their costs as well.
- If one in four public college students made three roundtrips on Metro each week during the typical semester, they would complete 36 million trips — nearly half of the annual ridership lost since 2009.

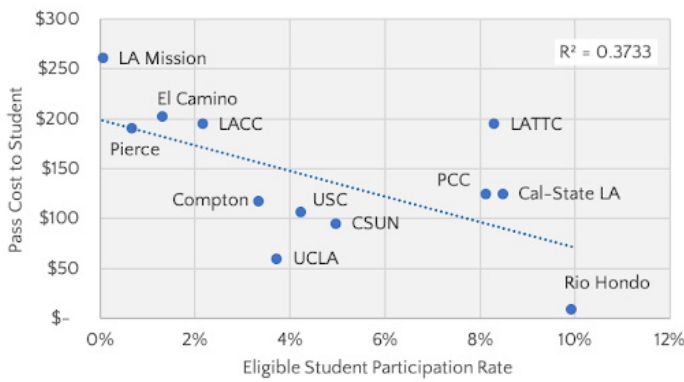


Figure 1: U-Pass cost and participation rates, Spring 2018

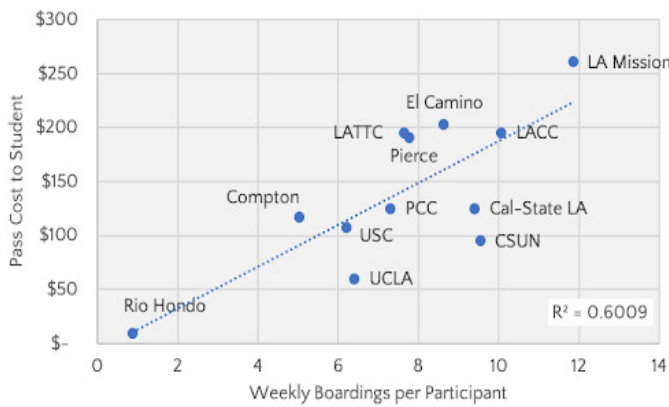


Figure 2: U-Pass cost and weekly boardings per participant, Spring 2018

reduced transit fare pass programs, the researcher analyzed a variety of Metro datasets, including: U-Pass new participant survey responses, invoice summaries, boardings by hour at select stops, and weekday vehicle revenue service hours on select lines. Additionally, the researcher incorporated measures of transit accessibility and the built environment into their analysis to examine the relationship between transit quality and U-Pass participation. Finally, the researcher conducted informal interviews with Metro service planning staff to supplement quantitative findings

### Conclusions/Recommendations

- High pass prices discourage or prevent new and infrequent riders from opting in to U-Pass, preventing the widespread adoption of transit among those students who would otherwise occasionally take transit.
- The model of a transit pass — whether riders must opt in or are automatically enrolled — considerably affects pass adoption and use. Rather than requiring students to opt in to U-Pass, colleges and universities should automatically enroll students in the program as part of their school enrollment.
- Metro should develop a communications toolkit for institutions that includes standardized, vetted language about the program that can be incorporated into institutions' marketing materials.
- Because increasing transit ridership is a state priority, the California Legislature should provide Metro funding to support the continued fare subsidy as a method of increasing college and university student ridership.

### Study

This research used a mixed-methods approach to explore the performance of U-Pass. In addition to reviewing literature on

### For More Information

Yowell, T.R. (2019). *Class Act: An Assessment of Los Angeles Metro's U-Pass Program (Master's capstone, UCLA)*. Retrieved from: [escholarship.org/uc/item/52p581ph](http://escholarship.org/uc/item/52p581ph)

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