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Author
Wu, Lucie

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Improving BruinHub, a Space for UCLA's Long-Distance Commuter Students

Lucie Wu, MURP • 2023

Issue

In 2019, UCLA cityLAB published a report to better understand the challenges that UCLA's long-distance commuter students regularly face. CityLAB partnered with UCLA Transportation to conduct a survey which found that 5.6% of commuting students have one-way commutes of 90 minutes or more. This is estimated to be around 1,700 students when extrapolated to the number of off-campus students in the 2018-19 academic year. Another 5% of student survey respondents had experienced homelessness at one point during their time at UCLA (Cuff et al., 2019). In response to these findings, UCLA Campus Life, UCLA Recreation, and cityLAB came together in the fall of 2021 to create BruinHub: an on-campus space dedicated to addressing the needs of long-distance commuter students. Upon its opening, 803 students signed up to use BruinHub. Since then, every quarter between 200–400 students sign up to use BruinHub. As pictured in Figure 1, BruinHub amenities include dedicated space to rest, work and prepare meals for students who commute 60 or more minutes to and from campus.

One year after BruinHub's formal opening, the cityLAB team sought an evaluation of the space and the programming behind it. Both BruinHub and this evaluation are situated within the larger problems that long-distance commuter students face, including persistent housing, financial, and food insecurity. The research detailed throughout the remainder of this policy brief seeks to respond to these challenges. Guiding research questions include:

- Does BruinHub serve the intended target audience of long-distance commuter students, including commuters who are experiencing some form of housing insecurity?

- What changes to the current and proposed BruinHub program(s) would further benefit this intended audience?

Study Approach

This study relied on a mixed-methods approach, combining data collected through the BruinHub Passholder registration form, student and staff interviews, and on-site observations. Eleven individual interviews were conducted with students representing a variety of commuter, housing, and student characteristics. Four individual interviews were conducted with staff and administration from UCLA Campus Life and UCLA Recreation. Lastly, three separate observation periods at different days/times were conducted to further observe the characteristics and behaviors of students who use BruinHub.

Research Findings

Together, the observations and interviews conducted as part of this project led to the following three key findings about BruinHub, its impact and potential improvements:

- » Thus far, BruinHub has been successful in regards to the overall creation and design of the space. Commuters have found the amenities, including the pods, lockers, study areas, fridge, and microwave, useful. Still, both students and staff would like to see more space dedicated to BruinHub and corresponding resources across campus.

- » Barriers to addressing the challenges faced by long-distance student commuters persist. BruinHub has been effective, but there are specific commuter needs that are still not being met, including overnight access.

- » Students and staff offered a range of recommendations for how to increase the effectiveness of the BruinHub. Specifically, they expressed a need for overnight access to the space and potential improvements to the current reservation system.

Figure 1. Sleeping Pod Located in BruinHub on the UCLA campus

Recommendations

Spatial Recommendations

- **Maintain the lockers** by having staff check in on them more frequently, and improve communications around how to properly use these lockers.
- **Create signage** near BruinHub pods detailing their reservation process.
- **Improve wayfinding** in John Wooden Center to ensure that all students can easily find and access the BruinHub.
- **Increase overall capacity.** There is a high demand for spaces such as BruinHub and the sleep pods across campus. The opening of BruinHub Strathmore, which almost doubles original capacity, marks a promising next step in this direction.

Programmatic Recommendations

- **Create a pilot program for overnight access.** For a multitude of reasons, students have expressed that they want to have the option to stay overnight at the BruinHub. Staff, however, mention internal constraints with regards to staffing and permits. A pilot study for overnight access would be a relatively low-commitment way to assess the effectiveness of this program before securing necessary permits.
- **Create a dedicated staff position** at the BruinHub to both improve and enforce the reservation system. Seek additional funding and resources to prioritize hiring for this position.

- **Host more commuter events** and seek creative ways to connect commuter students, such as through a buddy system or carpooling program.
- **Change the name of BruinHub to Commuter Hub.** This title more clearly states and conveys the purpose of the space.

Outreach & Data Collection Recommendations

- **Improve the passholder registration form.** Revise questions to provide necessary clarifications and definitions within the form.
- **Conduct more data collection** to better understand the specific needs of commuter students at UCLA, especially from an administrative standpoint.
- **Recognize the unique challenges** that long-distance commuter students face at the institutional level. Consider responses such as priority enrollment, increased access to resources, and more strategic programming
- **Conduct more targeted outreach and marketing efforts** to increase awareness of BruinHub, commuter services, resources and events.
- **Create a formal definition of "commuter,"** which will lead to better data collection from university officials and more focused programming with their needs in mind.

For More Information

Wu, L. (2023). What's the hub, Bub? A post-occupancy evaluation of BruinHub (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t5905px

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