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# Student Access to Community College Relies Heavily on Private Vehicle Use

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## Issue

California's 116 community colleges, attended by 1.9 million students, serves the largest and most diverse student body in California higher education.<sup>1</sup> Transportation plays an important role in student community college access and retention, but the cost and accessibility can create a barrier to success. Community college students spend more on transportation than their counterparts at both public and private four-year institutions, largely due to the lack of on-campus or nearby affordable housing.<sup>2</sup> The absence of high-quality public transit forces students to commute by private vehicle and manage the associated costs of gas, maintenance, and parking. However, these transportation challenges for community college students are frequently overlooked. To better understand the mobility challenges students face accessing community colleges and provide potential policy strategies to overcome these challenges, we interviewed local transportation agencies, community college administrators, and students at five California community colleges between September 2022 and October 2023. We also reviewed state legislation on student transportation to understand current and past policy attempts to address community college transportation challenges.

## Key Research Findings

**Inadequate transportation options and safety concerns compel students to use private vehicles.** In regard to taking public transit, students reported long wait times

and unreliable arrival times, the need to transfer modes or routes, and limited service locations. They also shared safety concerns associated with walking, cycling, and riding public transit, particularly at night. Many campuses do not allow shared micromobility devices on campus, limiting students' ability to use bikes and scooters to connect to transit. Inhospitable weather in some parts of the state make walking, cycling, or waiting for public transit without adequate shelter challenging in some seasons.

*Vision 2030: A Roadmap for California Community Colleges* describes three essential elements to reach the Governor's goal of achieving "70% of all adults ages 25–64 having a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or certificate:" 1) equity in success, 2) equity in access, and 3) equity in support.

**State legislation to expand access to public transit among students has been largely unsuccessful.** Over the past decade, California has proposed legislation to expand the use of public transit passes at the state's community college campuses. Legislative proposals by Assemblymember Chris Holden—AB 2222 (2015-2016), AB 17 (2017-2018), AB 2304 (2017-2018), AB 1919 (2021-2022), and AB 610 (2023-2024)—have addressed expanding programs for student transit passes and student transportation pilot programs. However, all the bills have either become stagnant or were vetoed due to cost concerns (AB 1919). This highlights the need to explore alternative (i.e., public

sector funding) and innovative funding opportunities (i.e., funding opportunities not traditional used for community colleges, leveraging funding opportunities to provide community benefit, public private partnerships, etc.) for student transportation enhancements.

**Enhancing public transit and funding transit passes could broaden access to community colleges.** Some campuses offer student transit passes, but others do not have the resources or funding to provide them. Based on our research, stakeholders reported high satisfaction among students who use transit passes, and students using transit passes were supportive of student transit passes. Additionally, students who did not have access to transit passes said they would be interested if these passes were made available. Statewide programs would reduce the burden on individual campuses to find funding as well as not increase student body fees, a primary strategy for funding campus transportation options. Students also suggested transit pass benefits would be augmented if fares were discounted and provided higher quality service in terms of coverage and frequency. Students may find public transit more attractive and affordable by offering more frequent and reliable transit service, especially for routes that serve community college campuses, along with implementing the General Transit Feed Specification to provide real-time travel information.

**Shared mobility pilot demonstrations and partnerships could help explore the effectiveness of demand-responsive services.** Research participants discussed

challenges associated with long headways for fixed-route public transportation services and challenges using micromobility devices to connect to transit stops. Microtransit and shared micromobility (bikesharing and scooter sharing) can address accessibility gaps and provide connections to public transit. Pilot programs could also explore the potential for campus carpooling and other strategies to address mobility challenges. Policies supporting community college transportation pilot programs with shared mobility providers could bring new transportation options to students and allow flexibility to explore program design and change the program to meet student needs over time. Additionally, community colleges may pool resources and implement transportation pilot programs (e.g., developing a microtransit pilot program that provides service between two nearby campuses and their surrounding areas).

### More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “Strategies for Improving Community College Access in California” prepared by Susan Shaheen, Jacquelyn Broader, Adam Cohen and Brooke Wolfe with the University of California, Berkeley for the California Resilient and Innovative Mobility Initiative. The report can be found at [www.ucits.org/research-project/rimi-4e](http://www.ucits.org/research-project/rimi-4e). For more information about findings presented in this brief, contact Susan Shaheen at [sshaheen@berkeley.edu](mailto:sshaheen@berkeley.edu), Brooke Wolfe at [brooke.schmidt@berkeley.edu](mailto:brooke.schmidt@berkeley.edu) or Adam Cohen at [apcohen@berkeley.edu](mailto:apcohen@berkeley.edu).

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<sup>1</sup>California Community Colleges. 2023. Vision 2030: A Roadmap for California Community Colleges.

<https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/Vision-2030-A-Roadmap-for-California-Community-Colleges.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Community College League of California. 2021. Affordability, Food, and Housing Access Taskforce Report: Addressing Affordable Transportation Needs.

[https://cclleague.org/sites/default/files/cclc\\_transportation-report\\_2021.pdf](https://cclleague.org/sites/default/files/cclc_transportation-report_2021.pdf)

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