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Understanding Transportation Programs and Services at California Community Colleges

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16. Abstract
High transportation costs and access barriers can make it difficult for community college students to manage employment, household responsibilities, and education, negatively affecting their academic success. Understanding the state of existing transportation services and programs at California community colleges is a first step to addressing these barriers. We inventoried the transportation services, programs, and costs at 115 of the 116 California community colleges as advertised on each campus' website. We found that most community colleges offer some form of parking or public transit student subsidies but little else. Due to the state education code, parking costs were similar across campuses. In contrast, transit pass costs varied from $0 to more than $100 per semester. On average, students paid more for transit passes than for parking permits. Throughout the search process, information on the campus' transportation programs and services was difficult to locate since each campus posted this information in different places on their websites. The findings suggest that more colleges should consider offering low-cost transit passes by assessing a transportation fee or enacting partnerships with other government entities. California community colleges may also want to consider expanding how they provide transportation support and better publicizing information on transportation and standardizing how information is provided. Overall, community colleges, with the support of the State, have opportunities to better support students' transportation needs to ensure that transportation access is not a barrier to educational outcomes.

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Disclaimer

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Introduction

With over 2 million students attending 116 colleges, the California Community College system is the largest higher education system in the U.S. (California Community Colleges, 2022). It also is potentially the most diverse; about 75% of the study body is comprised of students of color. More than 130,000 community college students each year transfer to four-year colleges, many of them into the two large state university systems: The University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU).

While community college completion rates are rising, they remain relatively low. Less than half (48%) of community college students who intend to get an associate degree ultimately complete the required units and transfer to a four-year school (Public Policy Institute of California, 2019). Many community college students struggle to progress in their education while working and handling competing family demands. Transportation access and affordability is one of many factors that contribute to low completion rates. High transportation costs and limited access can hinder community college student attendance, retention, and success. Inadequate support for transportation may even deter some students from attending community colleges entirely.

According to the College Board, an education-focused nonprofit organization, community college students spend more on transportation than their counterparts at public and private four-year colleges (College Board, 2019). The lack of on-campus housing or nearby affordable housing contributes to this disparity. High transportation costs and access barriers make it difficult to manage employment, household responsibilities, and education, creating a vicious circle in students' lives. In California, transportation costs for community college students are around $1,840 per year (Crespi et al., 2021). The average community college commuter spends around one-fifth of their living expenses on transportation (Clay and Valentine, 2021). A recent study from the Community College League of California highlights how transportation challenges are an overlooked but basic need for community college students. The Community College League of California Affordability, Food, and Housing Access Taskforce highlighted this issue in their 2021 report, and this report extends its analysis on transportation issues (Access, Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce, 2021).

Addressing the transportation needs of community college students in California is critical as the community college system contributes significantly to the state economy. Community colleges enhance the economy directly through their workforce and make indirect contributions of an estimated $109 billion annually by producing a more educated and productive workforce (Emsi Burning Glass, 2022). Additionally, California's investment in the community college system has a 5.4% rate of return in public sector savings from the reduced demand for government-funded social services from community college graduates (ibid).

A first step to addressing the transportation needs of California community college students is to understand the current state of transportation services and programs and their associated costs. To do

this, we conducted a baseline inventory of transportation programs and services at 115[1] of the 116 community colleges in the state as listed on each college's website. In this report, we first briefly review the existing research on the relationship between transportation access and education. Next, we summarize our methods for creating a database of school services, programs, and costs, followed by findings and recommendations.

[1] Calbright College was excluded from this analysis because 100% of their courses are offered online.

Transportation Access and Educational Outcomes

The research on the relationship between transportation access and educational outcomes is fairly limited. A few studies examine commute satisfaction among students, and some attempt to test the relationship between transportation access and academic success. A quasi-experimental study with Rio Hondo Community College in the Los Angeles region is the only study that examines this connection in the community college environment. This study found that the 3,686 students (9% of the student body) who received a deeply discounted transit pass (U-Pass from LA Metro) had higher rates of student success than their peers (Clay and Valentine, 2021). Clay and Valentine found that students in the U-Pass program were associated with higher retention rates, higher credit completion rates, and were more likely to receive certifications or degrees than their. The authors find evidence that reduced public transit fares can be an effective strategy to support community college students and improve their academic outcomes.

Among research on the relationship between offering transit passes and student travel behavior or satisfaction, a study of 10 Canadian colleges in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area found that 61% of students reported their commute being a barrier to campus participation, and 30% considered it a barrier to campus success (Taylor and Mitra, 2021). This number rose to 73% among students who were dissatisfied with their commute (Taylor and Mitra, 2021). In a review of multiple U-Pass programs, Han et al. (2019) found that offering a discounted transit pass at colleges benefits transit agencies, colleges, and students themselves as these programs tended to increase transit ridership, decrease car trips, and reduce student costs.

Community college students have distinct needs compared to other higher education students. Because most nearly all community colleges do not have on-campus housing, an estimated 99% of community college students are commuters, making transportation access a critical factor in their education (Crespi et al., 2021). Nearly 40% of community college students are non-traditional students, meaning they often have responsibilities other than school (Baugus, 2020), and 22% of community college students work full time and 41% work part-time (*AACC 2016 Fact Sheet*, 2016). One study estimated that 73% of women enrolled in community college are mothers (McLaughlin and Randolph, 2012). Community college students are also more likely to be low-income and students of color than students of four-year institutions (McLaughlin and Randolph, 2012).

A California Community Colleges survey in 2018 found that 60% of California colleges have a free or reduced-fare partnership with their local transit agency (Access, Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce, 2021). For example, the Orange County Community Colleges (OCCC) program with the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) started providing community college students with free or discounted passes on OCTA buses in 2019. In the first six months of the program, Fullerton College

students took more than 100,000 rides (Access, Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce, 2021).

However, increased transit access is not a panacea for struggling community college students. A report from the University of North Carolina focused on educational access among Latino students noted some of the complexities of providing adequate student transportation (Elengold et al., 2021). Even if students received a discounted transit pass, existing transit service may be ill-suited to their class schedule or may not allow them to stay on campus late. This is particularly a problem in rural areas where transit networks are limited. Some colleges have addressed this problem by introducing a shuttle service that transports students directly to campus. One such program implemented by the College of Staten Island (CSI) led to an increase in enrollment, particularly among students of color, and inspired similar programs at other colleges in the Northeast. This shuttle program is effective because it runs directly between a fixed point, the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, and the campus. The CSI shuttle provides quicker access than local bus options (Kolodner, 2015).

In summary, transportation access and educational attainment are linked, but the research on this topic is relatively sparse, especially research that connects transportation to educational outcomes. As a start, this research surveys the landscape of transportation offerings at all community colleges in California to better understand how strategic investments and policies around transportation for community college students can help more students receive degrees and further their future economic prospects.

Data Collection and Analysis Approach

We inventoried the types and cost of transportation services and programs offered to students across 115 community colleges in California as listed on each college's website, including parking permits, transit passes, ride-hailing partnerships, emergency transportation, and shared mobility (e.g., scooters, bikeshare, carshare). We navigated various web pages and used each college's search function or outside search engines to gather the information. We also categorized each community college as urban, suburban, or rural based on its location, drawing on the work of Voulgaris et al., 2014.

We made certain assumptions to standardize the cost results. Several schools had suspended their parking permits because of the COVID-19 pandemic and remote instruction. Therefore, parking prices are based on costs from the most recent semester they were charged. Most parking permits were offered per semester, and the price was the same for part-time and full-time students. Two colleges included permits in the price of their transportation fee, and one varied the fee based on the enrolled number of units. Transportation fees are fixed amounts of money charged to all students on top of tuition annually or by quarter. Most typically, transportation fees provide a universal benefit such as a transit pass, but in some cases, they cover parking costs. However, transportation fees must be approved by an annual vote of the majority of students as codified in California education code (CA Education Code § 76361). Five colleges did not charge for parking at all. The average parking permit price was determined based on the remaining 108 colleges.

We created three categories of transit pass programs and then standardized costs to a semester (assuming 16 weeks, given that an average semester is 15-17 weeks). Twenty-eight colleges did not offer any form of a discounted transit pass for students. We did not include these in the final analysis. The three categories of transit pass options are as follows:

1. Transit Pass Offered Through Transportation Fee**:** Schools using this approach have a transit pass program that is included in student enrollment fees, either as a separate "transportation fee" or as part of another required fee paid by the students. Every student receives an unlimited transit pass as a result of this universal fee.
2. Transit Pass Offered Through School**:** Schools using this approach have a transit pass program that requires students to attain the pass through a department within their campus. This group also includes programs where students use their Student ID card as their transit pass. While we did not explore this in our research, based on the rates campuses charge students, we strongly believe that campuses in this category subsidize the cost or have a negotiated pass rate with their transit agency.
3. Transit Pass Offered Through Agency**:** Schools using this approach direct students to the transit agency's website to attain their pass and/or register for the program. These passes are typically priced monthly, and we only inventoried costs when agencies offered a discounted student pass.

Findings

Parking and Transit Pass Costs and Approaches

We found that most colleges offered parking permits or transit passes and that, on average, transit passes were more expensive per semester than parking permits. Table 1 shows the distribution by type and costs for parking and transit passes. We examined the differences in parking and transit pass costs by urban form and found that parking prices were similar across land-use types (Figure 1). Transit pass costs varied more than parking pass costs. Transit pass costs were higher than parking pass costs in urban and suburban areas, while parking pass costs were higher in rural areas. Price similarities in parking passes is due, in part, to the maximum parking pass price that is codified in the California education code (CA Education Code § 76360).

While most colleges have similar ways of issuing parking permits, community colleges have adopted different transit pass approaches. Each approach results in different costs (Table 1). The most affordable approach is to charge a transportation fee each semester and make unlimited-ride transit passes available to all students. Colleges using this approach charge, on average, $16 per semester. By assessing a relatively low fee to all students, colleges have revenue that can be used to pay, in part or full, for unlimited transit passes from their transit agencies. In some cases, educational institutions may negotiate or be eligible to receive passes at a discount bulk rate. For example, college districts in Los Angeles County can pay $7 for every enrolled student to LA Metro to participate in the GoPass program. In return, LA Metro provides any student in that district with an unlimited transit pass.

Compared to using transportation fees, a roughly equal number of colleges have students buy passes through the school at subsidized rates. This approach costs students $47 on average, three times more than the average transportation fee. The least common approach was for students to purchase a pass directly from the transit agency, with the agency providing a student rate. Students who had to buy passes through the agency paid the highest costs at $105 per semester. We did not find any clear relationship between the transit pass approach and school enrollment size; it appears that schools large and small take different approaches to transit pass programs.

Table 1. Parking and transit pass costs by approach

	Average Cost per Semester	Number of schools	Average enrollment	Median enrollment
Parking permit[2]	$36	110	19,593	16,973
Parking permit offered through transportation fee	$49	2	13,966	13,966
Transit pass offered through transportation fee	$16	37	19,558	20,703
Transit pass offered through school	$47	38	23,026	22,538
Transit pass offered through agency	$105	11	21,188	16,377

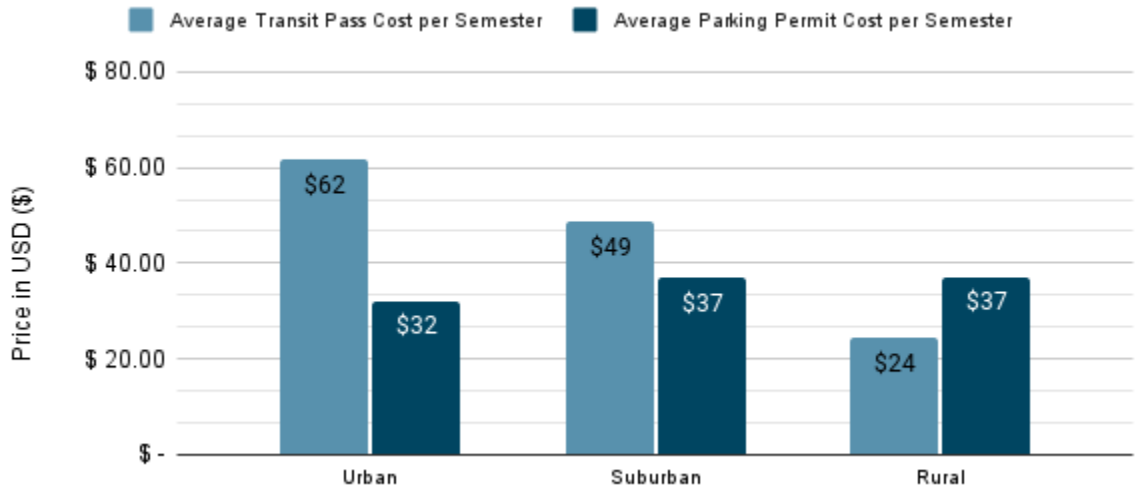

Figure 1. Comparing transit and parking pass costs per semester by urban form

Twenty-five colleges offered free transit passes and these are captured in both the passes through the school and transportation fee categories. Some offerings resulted from partnerships with regional governments or transit agencies, such as the Ventura County Transportation Commission or Santa Maria Regional Transit. Other campuses like Pasadena City College leveraged COVID-relief funds to waive the standard transportation fee.

[2] We were not able to determine the parking permit costs for 3 colleges.

Most schools charge the same price for parking and transit passes whether a student is enrolled full- or part-time. In some cases, transportation fees are differentiated based on credit hours, but this is the exception rather than the rule. In most cases, students who drive for some trips and take transit for others have no option but to purchase a parking pass and pay for transit (whether in a pass or by the ride). The sunk cost of parking permits may dissuade students from using transit for some commute trips to campus. Butte College offers a differential fee according to student unit load, with two lower-cost tiers for part-time students. A sizable portion of colleges (33 of 88) vary the transit pass costs by the number of units enrolled. Still, this subset mainly reflects colleges where transit passes are covered by transportation fees. The data on passes only reflect costs for full-time students and is a limitation of our analysis.

Finally, some schools waive the transportation fee or provide additional support for students in particular programs of need. These benefits are extended to students in the Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS), Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) and NextUp programs. In general, students in these programs have a demonstrated need for financial support because they have low-incomes, are economically disadvantaged or first-generation college students. CARE provides specific support to single parents and NextUp supports current or former foster youth. Community college students within the CARE and NextUp programs receive transportation assistance as a program benefit, which varies between colleges. Some colleges extend transportation benefits to all EOPS students. For example, EOPS students at Mt. San Jacinto College and Orange Coast College do not have to pay the transportation fee and receive a free parking pass. This analysis does not reflect student cost reductions for EOPS, CARE or NextUp students receiving transportation assistance.

Other Transportation Options

Outside of offering a parking and/or transit pass, community colleges offered few other transportation services or programs. Two colleges partnered with a transportation network company to provide discounted rides to and from campus anytime. In addition to these two campuses, Santa Monica College offered free shared Lyft rides as an intra-campus shuttle option during the evening. Two of the most urban campuses, Los Angeles Community College (LACC) and City College of San Francisco, had carsharing stations at or near the campus. Neither community college operates these services, but rather, existing services (BlueLA powered by Blink Mobility at LACC and Zipcar at City College) are located near their campus.

Additionally, few campuses offered programs beyond bicycle parking to support bicycling to campus. Santa Monica College 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.

We found one example of transportation costs covered by grants through a college basic needs center. At Tahoe Community College, students who met basic income eligibility guidelines and experienced unforeseen circumstances that caused dire needs could receive emergency transportation support. This financial support covered emergency car repairs, maintenance, and gas cards. Basic Needs

Center Services were commonplace at California community colleges but more typically provided food and housing resources.

Summary of Findings

1. Parking pass costs were fairly standardized across California's community colleges. This is due to a state law that limits parking permit costs likely kept parking pass prices relatively low overall. However, this has not been the case for public transit passes; on average, a transit pass costs students more than a parking pass each semester.

2. Providing transit passes through enacting transportation fees was the most affordable approach for students to receive a transit pass. Collecting a universal transportation fee also provides a revenue stream that can be used to pay transit agencies for student passes. Some colleges offered free transit passes through partnerships with transit and regional agencies or grant funds.

3. Very few transportation offerings existed beyond parking and transit passes, which may leave students who lack reliable access to a car or to high-quality transit service with few options to get to and from campus.

4. Information about transportation offerings was not standardized and was difficult to locate on each college's website. Parking information was easy to find, but other transportation information, such as information on transit passes, routes, and other programs was difficult to locate.

5. Only one college offered transportation cost support through their basic needs center, a resource that more commonly provides housing or food supports needs to students.

Recommendations

While community colleges in California offer some transportation support, primarily in the form of transit passes and parking permits, it is unclear if these options are enough, especially for students without reliable access to a car or transit service. Based on the findings from this research, California's community colleges, transportation partners, and public policymakers may want to consider the following strategies:

1. **Look for opportunities to standardize student transit pass costs and keep costs low.** Enacting transportation fees is a promising approach as it keeps costs low for students and provides a source of revenue that colleges can use to pay transit agencies for the discounted bulk passes. However, per the state educational code, transportation fees must be put to a majority vote of the student body annually. This places a degree of annual uncertainty in the sustainability of such ongoing pass programs.

2. **Evaluate the need for expanding transportation services and programs beyond transit and parking passes.** Students with inconsistent or non-existent car ownership and insufficient or infrequent transit service are likely underserved with existing services and programs. Colleges can undertake student surveys to get a better understanding of student transportation needs. Examples from other places like off-campus shuttles from centralized transit hubs or partnerships with ride-hailing and on-demand transit services are potential expansion options.

3. **Consider whether transportation should be considered a basic need supported at basic needs centers**. In their 2021 report, the Community College League of California's Affordability, Food, and Housing Taskforce recommended that California acknowledge how insufficient transportation affects student's ability to complete college. Colleges could evaluate whether students would support expansion of basic needs centers to cover transportation costs, using the experience at Tahoe Community College as an example.

4. **Create a data standard for how transportation information is provided at each community college.** To ease access to transportation information, colleges could present their transportation offerings in standardized, easy-to-find locations, such as within the "about" menu on their college website

Community colleges in California have the potential to offer upward economic mobility if and when students complete their degrees. Improving transportation access for students is a challenge but one that colleges can address through increased awareness, planning, and program delivery.

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