

# Transportation as a Barrier to Higher Education: Evidence from the 2022 Student Financial Wellness Survey

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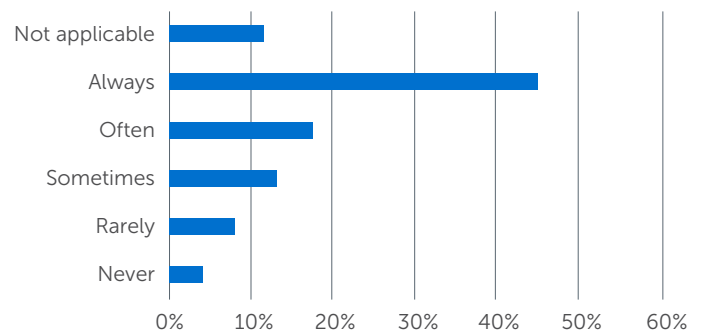
## Transportation Barriers

Students who are unable to reliably commute to their college campus stand to fall behind in school or drop out altogether. For many students, the cost of transportation presents a barrier to higher education entry and completion. In 2020-2021, transportation costs accounted for nearly 20 percent of the cost of attending college for commuting students, according to the College Board (2020). What's more, for many students who seek cheaper forms of transportation, like bus or active transit, other issues persist. Among these issues are prohibitive cost and affordability, inconvenient routes, frequency and schedules, housing and work proximity, and poor reliability, and quality (Price and Curtis, 2018). This brief examines results from 36,332 students who participated in the Fall 2022 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) and analyzes school policies that aim to reduce transportation barriers for students.

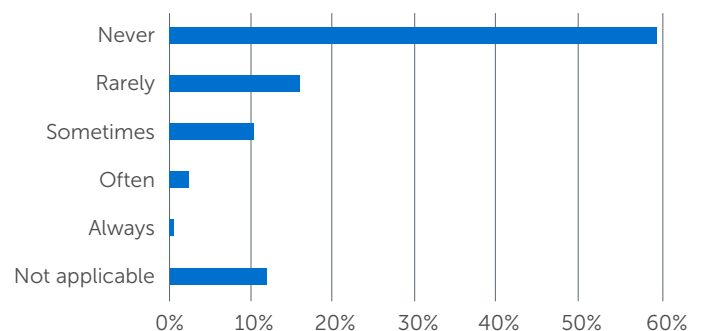
Seventy-eight percent of undergraduate students who responded to the SFWS reported having a car, and just eight percent reported using public transportation to get to school often or always, highlighting the prevalence of private vehicles as a means for transportation in higher education. This finding demonstrates the need for colleges and universities to have the infrastructure in place to support student commuters.

Further, just under half of students in the Fall 2022 SFWS said that parking is always available on campus when they need it. Parking is a critical component of the decision-making process when a student chooses to drive, or not to drive, to campus. When parking fees increase, it drives the number of students substituting away from driving in favor of other modes to increase

Q108: Parking is available on campus when I need it.



Q110: Have you ever missed class due to lack of reliable transportation.



(Delmelle and Delmelle, 2012). However increased parking fees have the potential to change behavior adversely. Increasing fees substantially may result in student transfers, as observed in (non-student) visitors to central business districts, who did their business elsewhere when faced with rising parking costs (Shiftan and Burd-Eden, 2001). Inadequate parking may lead to students being late to classes or missing them altogether.



The reliability of student transportation is also crucial to student success. Over one-quarter of students in the SFWS reported missing class rarely (16 percent) or sometimes (10 percent) due to a lack of reliable transportation to campus. Weighing the potential benefits and costs of school transportation policy is crucial to both helping keep higher education affordable and accessible, and making sustainable transportation decisions at a campus-wide level.

Walking has been identified as the dominant mode of transportation for students living up to 1.5 miles from a small-town college campus, equivalent to roughly a 30-minute walk. Car usage was found to increase most substantially between walk times of 10 to 15 minutes (Delmelle and Delmelle, 2012), and continue to grow beyond 15 minutes. Factors like weather and perceived commute time, and even basic sidewalk availability, may impact student transportation decisions. A study from North Dakota found that students prefer to walk or bike when possible (Ripplinger et al., 2005).

These factors must be evaluated carefully for their costs and benefits, and may vary based on school characteristics. For instance, schools in dense urban areas may find that expanding parking on campus comes at a prohibitively high cost. In this case, expanding access to bus transit for students may be the most cost-effective strategy to shuttle

students to class. Research has found that students with access to public transit through a university pass or program earn more credits in their first semester and first year of school. These students graduate at higher rates and are six percent more likely to be retained. Crucially, this also applies to part-time and non-degree seeking students, who generally do not receive transit passes from their school (Clay and Valentine, 2021).

In conclusion, while transportation may pose as a barrier to higher education, school policy can have a drastic impact on alleviating student transportation problems. Making other forms of transportation, beyond personal vehicles, easily accessible for students is the most direct way to incentivize their usage. Things as large-scale as offering free transit, or as small as offering discounted transit options through student IDs, rather than necessitating students carry an extra card around with them, may have a profound impact on student decisions. Ensuring active transportation is safe, short, and convenient for students – who would rather commute in such a fashion anyways – is another way to promote low-cost transportation around campus. This could be as simple as designating bike zones or making crosswalks more frequent along busy roadways. Finally, making parking available for students without a viable alternative is crucial to student attendance, and thereby, retention.

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Trellis Company ([trelliscompany.org](https://trelliscompany.org)) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation focused on helping people leverage the power of post-secondary education and learning to improve their quality of life and the communities where they live.

Trellis Research ([trelliscompany.org/research](https://trelliscompany.org/research)) provides colleges and policymakers insight into student success through the lens of higher education affordability. With more than three decades of experience studying key issues such as student debt, student loan counseling, and the financial barriers to attainment, our research team explores the roles of personal finance, financial literacy, and financial aid in higher education.

Interested in collaborations or need research expertise? Trellis Research welcomes opportunities to inform policymakers and help organizations address their analytical needs. For more information, please contact Trellis Research at [Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org](mailto:Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org) or visit us on Twitter ([@TrellisResearch](https://twitter.com/TrellisResearch)).

The Student Financial Wellness Survey is a free national survey offered by Trellis Company that explores the connections between student finances, academic success, and more. Interested in participating in the Fall 2023 implementation of SFWS? Learn more here: [www.trelliscompany.org/SFWS-get-started](https://www.trelliscompany.org/SFWS-get-started)

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