



STUDENT SUCCESS TOOLKIT

Transportation Toolkit for Community College Leaders

**May Helena Plumb
& Anthony Schuette**

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About Trellis Strategies

Trellis Strategies is a leading strategic nonprofit research and technical assistance firm focused on advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce. Our commitment is to provide unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, spanning from application through graduation. Leveraging over four decades of experience in serving higher education institutions and assisting students in navigating intricate processes, Trellis Strategies' dedicated team possesses the knowledge, insight, and expertise to empower organizations to turn data into impactful action and tangible results.

As experts in gathering and analyzing both local and national data, we identify opportunities and provide scalable, tailored solutions for our partners. Our approach involves the transformation of institutions through the enhancement of the learner experience leading to higher enrollment yields, retention rates, and improved student post-graduation outcomes.

Guided by our mission, we navigate the non-linear landscape of postsecondary education, assisting institutions in adapting policies and programs to accommodate diverse learner journeys. By dismantling barriers in policy and processes, we aim to enhance learner outcomes and rebuilding trust in the credentialing process. We are dedicated to the belief that education serves as the cornerstone for unlocking new opportunities, fostering individual economic mobility, and growing community prosperity. For more information, visit our website: www.trellisstrategies.org/about-us/

The Transportation Toolkit for Community College Leaders

This document is part of a larger toolkit containing multiple resources for community college stakeholders, which is available at: www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/transportation-toolkit-for-community-college-leaders/

The Modern Learner Journey

At Trellis Strategies, we understand the modern learner as someone whose educational journey is shaped by ambition, resilience, and the realities of everyday life. These students often balance multiple roles, such as working full time, caring for dependents, or being the first in their household to pursue higher education, all while striving to achieve their academic goals.

The pathway of the modern learner is rarely linear. Interruptions, restarts, and shifts in direction are common, reflecting the complex interplay of education with work, finances, and personal responsibilities. These nonlinear journeys reflect the persistence and determination these learners bring to higher education. By understanding their experiences, we can better support progress, re-entry, and completion—creating opportunities that align with both educational goals and workforce demands.

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Executive Summary

Community colleges across the country are increasingly recognizing transportation as a basic need on par with food and housing. To help institutional leaders build their knowledge of this important topic, this toolkit synthesizes results from the Community College Transportation Project, a year-long initiative by Trellis Strategies to better understand student transportation barriers and explore innovative solutions.

Four institutions of different levels of urbanicity (reported here using pseudonyms) served as research and action sites for the Project:

- Rural Hills Community College, a small institution serving several counties in the rural South
- Suburban Valley Community College, a mid-sized institution in a major Midwest metropolitan area
- Metro Ridge Community College, a large institution in a major Midwest metropolitan area
- Capital District Community College, an urban district operating over 10 campuses in the South

Drawing on survey analysis, focus group research, and long-term engagement with community college and transportation stakeholders, the toolkit centers on three key observations:

- **Access to transportation is essential to student success.** Transportation barriers can prevent students from attending class, accessing tutoring resources, or participating in career events.
- **The modern learner has complex transportation needs.** As students juggle school, work, and family commitments, seemingly minor inconveniences can become major roadblocks.
- **Investing in transportation is investing in enrollment, retention, and completion.** In this toolkit, we discuss multiple ways institutions can improve transportation security for their students, from small administrative changes to long-term investments in community.

How to Use This Toolkit

• **Key Findings from the Community College Transportation Project**

The first three sections of this document outline the most impactful findings from the project. Each page is designed to stand alone, and we encourage readers to incorporate these examples into stakeholder meetings to champion the role of transportation in student success.

• **Where to Start: High-level Assessment**

Designed for an individual leader to complete in a single session, this guide provides a high-level assessment of the state of transportation access on campus. The reader can quickly identify a top priority for transportation access, which might serve as the mission of a future taskforce.

The companion documents—available at www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/transportation-toolkit-for-community-college-leaders/—contain practical guidance for community college stakeholders looking to apply these national-level findings to their unique institution:

• **Taskforce Resources**

Step-by-step discussion guides provide structure for a transportation taskforce or other relevant working group on your campus, from assessing existing resources to developing targeted improvements. One of the most important steps in addressing transportation access is collecting campus-specific data on how students commute. We provide three examples of how institutions can leverage different data sources to understand the needs of their student body.

• **Appendices**

The appendices include additional information about the project methodology and detailed data tables for the statistics referenced in this toolkit.

** The Community College Transportation Project was funded by Lumina Foundation, with technical assistance provided by the Community Transportation Associate of America. For more information about the Project, see [Appendix A](#).*

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The Importance of Transportation for Student Success



Access to transportation is essential to completing a postsecondary credential of value

Attendance and academic progress

Transportation challenges can impact students' ability to attend class and engage with academic support services.

- Across three implementations of Trellis Strategies' Student Financial Wellness Survey from Fall 2022 to Fall 2024, **14 percent of two-year respondents reported missing class** at least sometimes due to unreliable transportation.

Enrollment, retention, and completion

Transportation access and costs are key factors in students' decision to enroll, persist through, and complete their degree.

- When asked why they chose not to attend a target institution, **11 percent of prospective students who did not enroll** reported that transportation was a contributing factor.¹
- In a national survey of 33 two-year institutions by Trellis Strategies, **eight percent of some college, no credential learners indicated transportation challenges as a reason for leaving school.**²
- In a quasi-experimental study at Rio Hondo College, use of the Universal Access Pass Program for public transit was associated with a **five-percentage point increase in term-to-term retention.**³

Sense of Belonging

For students who commute long distances or rely on public transit, limited transportation options can limit their participation in campus life and extracurricular activities.



"I HAVEN'T YET MET WITH A TUTOR RELATED TO ANY OF MY MATERIAL, BECAUSE LIKE IF I GO, I'M GOING TO GET [STUCK IN] TRAFFIC. SO, I DON'T THINK I UTILIZE THE RESOURCES [ON CAMPUS] AS MUCH AS I COULD."

Student at Capital District Community College, a large, urban community college district in the South

"[I'VE BEEN] WANTING TO BE INVOLVED IN CAMPUS [ACTIVITIES] LIKE STUDENT GOVERNMENT... [BUT I LIVE] OVER AN HOUR AWAY AND TRYING TO CATCH THE BUS IS GOING TO BE A STRAIN IF I WANT TO BE INVOLVED IN ANY OF THE ACTIVITIES."

Student at Metro Ridge Community College, a mid-large size institution in a major Midwest metropolitan area



"IF WE IMPROVED THE TRANSPORTATION OFFERINGS, WE WOULD SEE A NOTICEABLE UPTREND IN OUR ENROLLMENT."

Staff member at Rural Hills Community College, a small two-year institution serving a rural region in the South

"A LOT OF [STUDENTS] WANT TO BE ON CAMPUS. THEY WANT TO MEET THEIR CLASSMATES; THEY WANT TO MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH THEIR PROFESSORS. TRANSPORTATION IS THE KEY TO DOING THAT."

Staff member at Capital District Community College, a large, urban community college district in the South

* Data on attendance from Trellis Strategies' Student Financial Wellness Survey. Quotes from focus groups conducted by Trellis Strategies as part of the Community College Transportation Project (2024-2025). See [appendices](#) for details.

¹Trellis Strategies, unpublished 2022-2025 results from surveys of learners who were accepted at five two-year institutions (n=2,193).

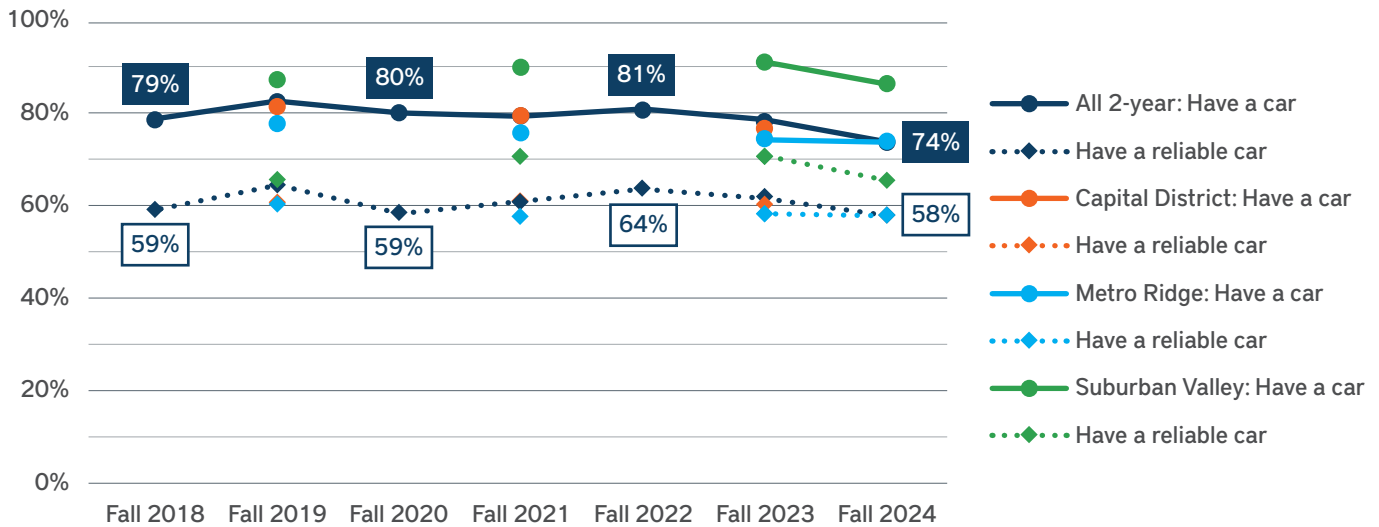
²Trellis Strategies, forthcoming results from a 2025 survey of some college, no credential learners (n=1,944). See also: Sallie Mae & Ipsos. (2024). *How American completes college: Understanding what helps students graduate*.

³Clay, J. R., & Valentine, J. L. (2021). *Impact of transportation supports on students' academic outcomes: A quasi-experimental study of the U-Pass at Rio Hondo College*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice; DVP-PRAXIS LTD.

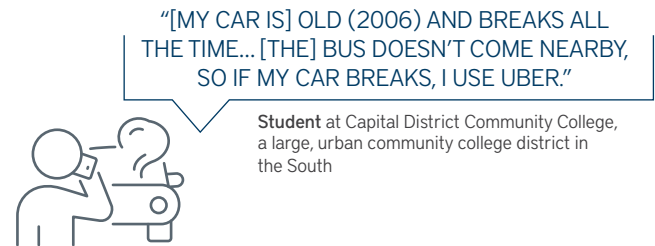
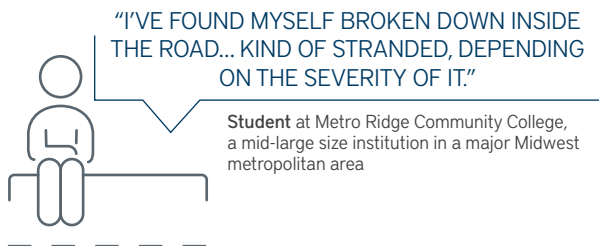


Around two out of five community college students don't have access to a reliable car

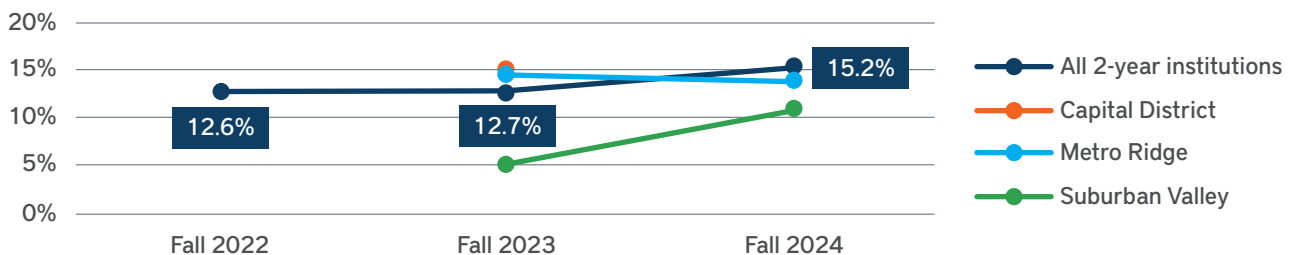
Two-year SFWS respondents who report having a car, compared to those who indicate their car is reliable



Students need reliable transportation in order to maintain attendance, access academic support resources, participate in extracurricular activities, and travel between school and work.



Two-year SFWS respondents who missed class at least sometimes due to lack of reliable transportation



* Data on car access and attendance from Trellis Strategies' Student Financial Wellness Survey. Quotes from focus groups conducted by Trellis Strategies as part of the Community College Transportation Project (2024-2025). See [appendices](#) for details.



The Transportation Needs & Habits of Modern Learners



Community college learners fit their college commute into an already packed schedule

Most community college students work while enrolled.

According to the **2020 NPSAS**:

74% of two-year students
HELD A JOB WHILE ENROLLED IN 2019-20,
including 71% of those enrolled full-time.

85% of these working students
WORKED OVER 20 HOURS PER WEEK.
Two out of five worked 40 hours or more.

Among respondents to the **2024 SFWS**:

31% of those who worked while enrolled in Spring 2024
MISSED A CLASS DUE TO WORK CONFLICTS.

58% of all working respondents agreed
**THEIR JOB(S) INTERFERED WITH THEIR ABILITY
TO ENGAGE IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**.

At least a quarter of community college students are caregivers.

According to the **2020 NPSAS**:

25% of two-year students
HAD LEGAL DEPENDENTS IN 2019-20,
including 4% who had non-child dependents.

28% of those with dependents
OWED OVER \$10,000 IN FEDERAL LOANS,
twice the rate of those without dependents.

Among respondents to the **2024 SFWS**:

82% of those who identified as a caregiver
**SPENT AT LEAST 40 HOURS PER WEEK ON
EMPLOYMENT AND/OR DEPENDENT CARE**.

63% of working caregivers
IDENTIFIED AS A WORKER THAT GOES TO SCHOOL
rather than a student who works.

Investing in the modern learner requires investing in transportation.

As students juggle multiple responsibilities, time scarcity becomes a major roadblock: Modern learners are more than just students, they are also workers, caregivers, and active members of their communities. These non-school responsibilities compete for students' time and energy.



Reliable transportation is critical for non-school activities: In addition to getting to campus, community college students need to travel to and from work, shopping centers, medical appointments, child care centers, and more. The reliability of their transportation is a critical factor in students' ability to attend class while still fulfilling their other day-to-day responsibilities. Knowing that the bus will be on time, that they can arrange rideshares during emergencies, or that parking will be available to them near campus can greatly improve learners' confidence that college coursework can fit into their already busy schedule.

* NPSAS: Data from the 2020 implementation National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (Undergraduate), a nationally representative study from the National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>. SFWS: Data from the 2024 implementation of the Student Financial Wellness Survey, an annual, voluntary survey conducted by Trellis Strategies, fielded at 104 postsecondary institutions in Fall 2024, <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/sfws/>.

Detailed data tables provided in [Appendix B](#).



Students rely on multiple modes of transport to access campus

When students don't have reliable access to a personal car, they often have to use multiple modes of transportation to get to campus. Students who take public transit may need to walk or bike to the nearest stop, transfer between different services on their route, or combine mass transit with individual options such as a rental scooter. Other commuters will choose different modes of transportation on different days depending on their schedule, destination, and budget. In the Fall 2024 SFWS, close to one-quarter of community college students did not have consistent access to a car.¹

Even those students with a car may use other forms of transport, for example to avoid traffic and parking challenges, or because they share a vehicle with others in their household. Among students who responded to Trellis Strategies' surveys, 39 percent indicated they used more than one mode of transport.²



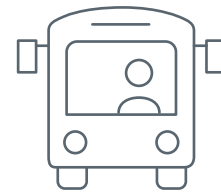
BICYCLING

When infrastructure such as **bike lanes and storage facilities** is available, bicycles and scooters are effective modes of last-mile transport. Shared micromobility fleets provide greater flexibility for one-way or infrequent trips.



WALKING

Individuals are generally willing to walk **0.25–0.5 miles** between a bus stop and their destination. To ensure safety and comfort, this mode of transport requires adequate infrastructure such as sidewalks and crosswalks.



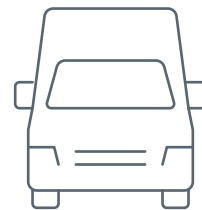
CAMPUS SHUTTLE

Shuttles operated by the college can transport students between campuses or **connect a college to high-demand areas**, such as a central public transit hub or a residential area with a large student population.



RIDESHARE SERVICE

Rideshares are faster and more flexible compared to other last-mile solutions, and they can be the most accessible option for students with disabilities. However, rideshare services have a **high cost compared to mass and active transit** and therefore are typically used as a last resort.



MICROTRANSIT

Microtransit refers to demand-responsive services that use dynamically generated routes to transport passengers efficiently, either **curb-to-curb or between designated hubs**. In addition to services offered by transit agencies, some colleges operate their own on-demand transit within a perimeter around campus.

¹Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., Plumb, M. H., & Ashton, B. Student Financial Wellness Survey: Fall 2024 results. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2024-results/>

²Surveys conducted as part of the Community College Transportation Project (2024-2025). Out of a total of 1,057 respondents, 409 selected more than one option when asked "What mode(s) of transportation do you use?".

Detailed data provided in [Appendix B](#).



Learner Voices: Students have complex transportation needs as they navigate school, work, and family commitments

A student at Metro Ridge told researchers she had received information about her school's Universal Access Program, but the service didn't extend to her area. **"I would like to take public transportation,"** a student at Metro Ridge explained. **"[But] I would have to Uber to a bus station, which kind of defeats the point."** Instead, this student usually drove the 20 minutes to campus. But when her car broke down, she had no back-up method of getting to class. Her unreliable transportation also made it harder for her to get work, adding an emotional stress which further impeded her academics.

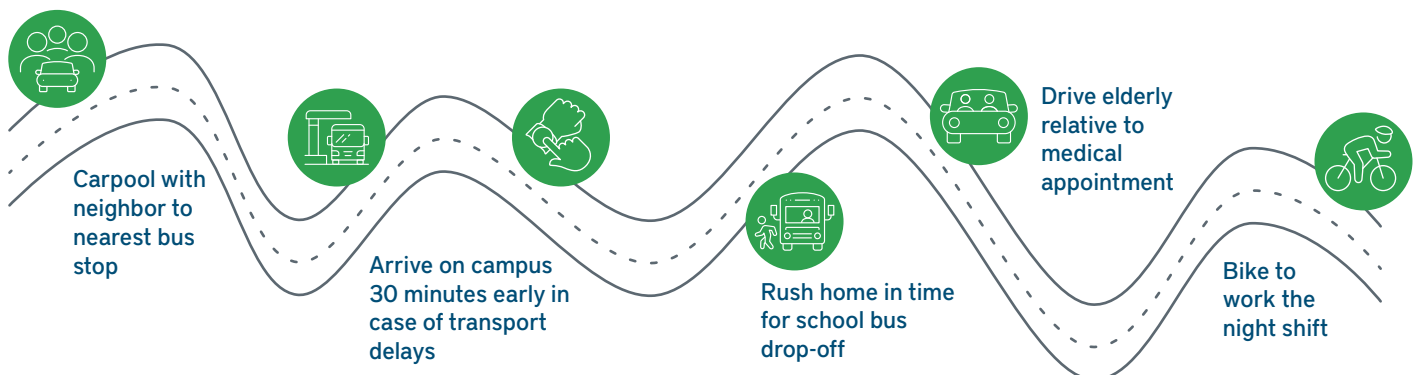
Metro Ridge Community College is a mid-large size institution in a major Midwest metropolitan area.

A student from Rural Hills explained that she frequently worked a night shift before commuting 30 minutes to an 8:00 class. The rural bus service didn't run frequently enough to serve her needs, so most days she drove herself back and forth. If she was too tired from her shift, her partner would drive her and wait on campus until she was out of class. She sometimes carpooled with a friend who works at the college, but that meant staying on campus all day. **"If I don't have to work at all, I ride to school in the morning with them,"** she said. **"[Then] I just stay there and work on homework in the library."** Getting to early morning classes was challenging when her night shift ended late or bad weather affected the roads near her house. The combination of work, weather, and sharing a car caused her to drop one class due to low attendance.

Rural Hills Community College is a small two-year institution serving a rural region in the South.

"I take my car to the train station, then the train stops right by [campus]," one Capital District student described. The train is **"nice, but unreliable";** the first week of the term she was 15 minutes late to class, so now she goes to campus an hour early to ensure she makes it on time. Once on campus, she feels stranded, as walking anywhere is unbearable in the hot, Sun Belt summer: **"If I want to go hang-out some place for lunch, I am at the mercy of getting an Uber, which costs money."** Furthermore, the train schedule is designed around a nine-to-five commute, with the last train leaving campus around 7:30pm. This means she can't take evening classes and is limited in how she can participate in social activities with her classmates.

Capital District Community College is a large, urban community college district in the South.



** Quotes from focus groups conducted by Trellis Strategies as part of the Community College Transportation Project (2024-2025). Day of transit graphic represents a hypothetical student based on observations from qualitative research.*

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Key Areas to Support Transportation Access



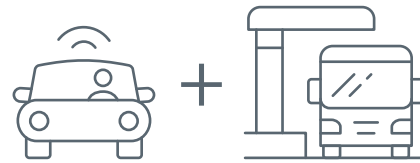
First- and last-mile connections are essential for public transit

Even though around **two out of five community college students don't have access to a reliable car**, few students regularly use public transit to access campus. In the 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS), **only eight percent of respondents reported using public transportation** always, often, or sometimes.

The three case study colleges—identified by pseudonyms in the chart below—are all located in or near major metropolitan areas but have different levels of public transit accessibility. All three Metro Ridge campuses are connected to the metropolitan transit network, while Suburban Valley's nearest bus stop is a 30-minute walk from campus, with no last-mile connection service.

Studies have found that **many community college students would prefer to access campus via a shuttle or public transit**.¹ In focus groups run by Trellis Strategies, both rural and urban students expressed interest in public transportation to campus. Students explained that the length and complexity of the commute was often a barrier to accessing public transit, as was poor transit connection to affordable neighborhoods.

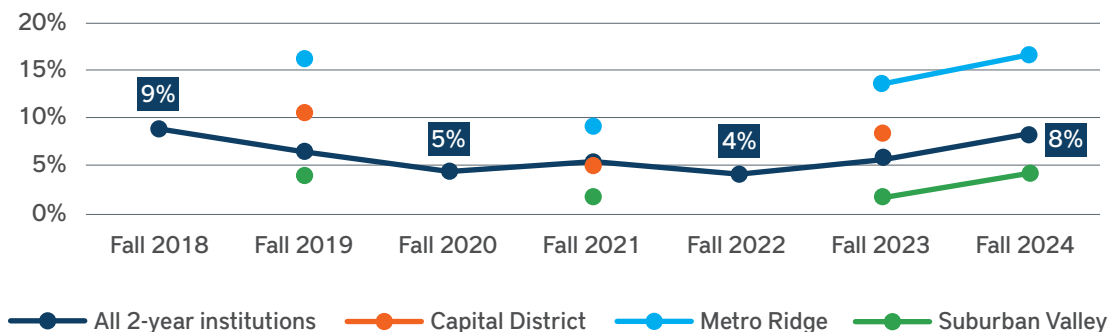
A 2021 analysis by the Seldin / Haring-Smith Foundation found that **only 57 percent of main community college campuses are within a half mile of a public transit stop**. However, 25 percent of campuses are between a half mile and 4.5 miles of a transit stop, representing an opportunity to improve access to campus through shuttle service, bus route expansion, or other low-cost investments in transit systems.²



"I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION... [BUT] I WOULD HAVE TO UBER TO A BUS STATION, WHICH KIND OF DEFEATS THE POINT."

Student at Metro Ridge Community College, a mid-large size institution in a major Midwest metropolitan area*

Two-year SFWS respondents that regularly used public transportation to get to campus, Fall 2018-Fall 2024



*Data on public transit use from Trellis Strategies' Student Financial Wellness Survey. Quotes from focus groups conducted by Trellis Strategies as part of the Community College Transportation Project (2024-2025). See [appendices](#) for details.

¹Azumaya, S., McKinnon, R., Winberry, C., Quinonez, D., Shandobil, B., & Lightsey-Walker, A. (2020). Clackamas Community College shuttle service and access plan. Master of Urban and Regional Planning Workshop Projects 173. Portland State University. <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/33733>

²Crespi, M., Bruecker, E., & Seldin, A. (2021). Waiting for the bus? Transit infrastructure at America's community and technical colleges. Seldin / Haring-Smith Foundation. <https://www.civicmaps.org/community-technical-college-transit-map>



Parking should be safe, accessible, and reliable

Parking infrastructure matters

For some students, driving to campus is the only feasible option. Ensuring these students can efficiently park at or near campus can greatly help these students, who may have many competing uses of their time, make it to class reliably. In the Student Financial Wellness Survey, about 10 percent of students with cars reported that they are only sometimes able to find parking on campus.



"I DON'T REALLY KNOW IF THE CAMPUS IS SAFE ENOUGH, OR IF I'M GOING TO COME BACK [TO MY CAR] AND THE GLASS IS BROKEN, I'M MISSING SOMETHING, AND I'M STRANDED THERE AT NIGHT IN A PART OF TOWN I'M NOT FAMILIAR WITH."

Student at Capital District Community College, a large, urban community college district in the South

Support for car-commuters can come in many forms

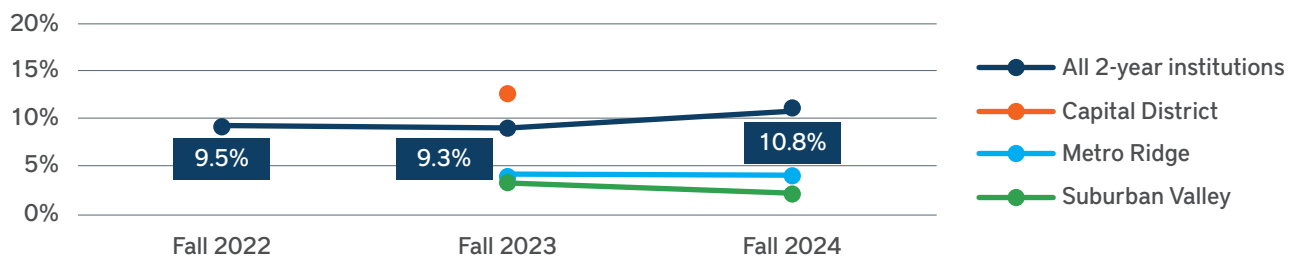
- Research has shown that flexible pricing models, the utilization of smart technologies, and the intentional placement of parking increases student satisfaction with parking.
- Investing in public transit and active transportation infrastructure (such as bike lanes) can decrease traffic and demand for parking, thus improving the experience of students who need to drive.
- Institutions can also encourage carpooling and safe-walking by fostering a community-oriented mindset and creating opportunities for peer-to-peer connection.
- Targeted emergency aid such as gas cards, rideshare credits, and car repair resources can alleviate acute financial barriers for commuting students.
- As with all transportation investments, improvements to parking infrastructure benefit staff and faculty as well as students.

"BEING PREGNANT WITH THIS LONG COMMUTE AND WHEN YOU FINALLY GET [TO CAMPUS] THERE'S NO PARKING.... YOU'RE TRYING TO FIND PARKING AND RUSH OFF TO CLASS, AND YOU'RE WALKING SO FAR. THAT WAS ALSO A HURDLE FOR ME."



Student at Capital District Community College, a large, urban community college district in the South

Two-year SFWS respondents that report challenges finding campus parking, Fall 2022–Fall 2024



*Data on parking access from Trellis Strategies' Student Financial Wellness Survey. Quotes from focus groups conducted by Trellis Strategies as part of the Community College Transportation Project (2024-2025). See [appendices](#) for details.

¹Channamallu, S. S., Pamidimukkala, A., Kermanshachi, S., Rosenberger, J. M., & Hladik, G. (2025). Understanding user satisfaction with university parking: A grounded theory approach. *Journal of Urban Mobility*, 8, 100136.

Where to Start

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High-level assessment of transportation access

What transportation infrastructure currently connects to campus?

Select all that apply.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public transit routes | <input type="checkbox"/> On-campus parking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Campus shuttle services | <input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus parking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pedestrian infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks, traffic calming) | <input type="checkbox"/> Carpooling opportunities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cycling infrastructure (e.g., bike lanes, bike storage) | <input type="checkbox"/> Rideshare services |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

What transportation resources or programs does the institution currently offer?

Select all that apply.

- | | |
|--|--|
| Financial supports/subsidies for... | Programmatic offerings, such as... |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public transit | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation safety initiatives |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rideshare | <input type="checkbox"/> Inter-campus transportation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vehicle repairs | <input type="checkbox"/> Educational programs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gas | <input type="checkbox"/> Prospective student outreach |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

What features of your institution should inform your transportation strategy?

Select all that apply.

- ☐ Are your students primarily commuters?
- ☐ Does your student body include a large percentage of full-time workers and/or parents?
- ☐ Does your institution serve multiple counties?
- ☐ Is your campus far away from residential areas, workplaces, and/or child care centers?
- ☐ Do you have multiple campuses?
- ☐ Other: _____

What are your top priorities for improvement?

Choose 1 from each column.

- | | |
|--|--|
| Mode of Transport | Focus Area |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cycling & Walking | <input type="checkbox"/> Affordability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Driving & Carpooling | <input type="checkbox"/> Length of Commute |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shuttles & Public Transit | <input type="checkbox"/> Safety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

To expand on this assessment and create a detailed plan of action, refer to the Taskforce Resources that accompany this toolkit at www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/transportation-toolkit-for-community-college-leaders/.



Where to Start: Catalysts for Action

1. Create a taskforce to assess transportation needs, innovate solutions, and champion progress.
2. Gather data on student commuting patterns and reactions to campus transportation.
3. Engage with community partners (e.g., public transit agencies, access-oriented organizations).

Evolving for the
modern learner.
