

## LIGHT RAIL CAN HELP CONNECT MORE STUDENTS WITH CAMPUSES

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

At many college and university campuses, concerns about environmental sustainability are a frequent topic of conversation. Students advocate for a smaller carbon footprint, whether that involves trayless cafeteria systems and locally sourced food, increased use of recyclable materials, or more attention to constructing dorms and classroom buildings that meet environmental criteria and make the best possible use of renewable sources of energy.

At the same time, many faculty and administrators are concerned about the approaching “demographic cliff,” a term coined to describe the lower population of traditional college-age students over these next few years. It was driven by the 2008 recession, when birth rates in the U.S. dropped precipitously as many families delayed having children.

One way to address these two concerns might be to increase our investment in public transportation, especially light rail, in order to bring more students to campuses without adding to the costs and pollution generated by individual car travel.

As colleges seek to generate tuition income, they will need to expand recruitment beyond the traditional 18- to 22-year-old population who have historically moved into dorms, eaten their meals in the dining hall, and made campus the full-time center of their lives for four years.

Recruiting students from older age groups and less economically privileged backgrounds includes many approaches, including online education. But for careers such as engineering, life sciences, nursing, or teaching, the need for hands-on training in classrooms and laboratories limits the effectiveness of remote learning.

Light rail provides opportunities and access for students who may not be able to afford to live on campus and who may not have a car to provide their own transportation back and forth to class.

According to the Sierra Club and the Rail User Network, the transportation sector in the United States produces 29% of our nation’s greenhouse gas emissions, and individual passenger vehicles account for 28.5% of fossil-fuel refining capacity.

In the United States, more than 250 colleges and universities are within five miles of a train station, according to Amtrak. But five miles can be a daunting distance on a snowy or rainy day, and it is too far to expect students to navigate on their own – especially students commuting from home, where they may

likely have family responsibilities and other commitments that make cost-efficiency and time management a priority. And train schedules don’t necessarily align with course schedules. In my local area, the commuter rail runs frequently during traditional morning and evening rush hours, but there are two-hour gaps between trains after 9 a.m. until the 5 p.m. commute home begins.

Could colleges and universities work with their local transit authorities to improve connections to campus, keeping nontraditional, daily commuter students in mind? Could our leaders advocate for increased light rail to bring students to campus so they can benefit from all the in-person resources we have to offer? These would be ways to make our institutions more accessible, reduce our universities’ carbon footprint, and perhaps augment our enrollment numbers at the same time.



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