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# **OVERCOMING TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS TO IMPROVE POSTSECONDARY STUDENT SUCCESS**

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# **BRIEF**

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# INTRODUCTION

The college completion agenda is a national imperative, driven in large part by international data showing that higher education attainment in the United States has slipped relative to other countries, and by data showing the low credential attainment rates of students, especially in public 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities. A commonly shared fact is that in 1990 the U.S. ranked first in the world in four-year degree attainment among 25-34 year olds, yet today the U.S. ranks 10th.<sup>1</sup> Another widely cited fact is that 55% of students who started college in 2011 earned a credential within six years, a percent that has remained relatively flat over the years; moreover, about 35% of students initially enroll in public 2-year colleges and completion rates for these students are even lower.<sup>2</sup> The most recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse shows that 37.5% of students who started at a public 2-year college earned a credential within six years.<sup>3</sup> It is also clear that college completion rates vary by race and ethnicity: whereas 66% of white students and 69% of Asian students earn a postsecondary credential within six years, only 50% of Hispanic students and 39% of Black students complete college within six years.<sup>4</sup>

Improving the number of college students who earn credentials and closing the race and ethnicity equity gap is important because since 2011, the U.S. economy has added 11.5 million more jobs for workers with credentials and training beyond high school compared with only 80,000 jobs for workers with a high school diploma or less.<sup>5</sup> To help address this national imperative, The Kresge Foundation developed the **Urban Higher Education Ecosystem Solution**.<sup>6</sup> This ecosystem refers to a network of interconnected institutions including colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations, employers, K-12 school districts and government agencies, all of which play a role in a student's path to a postsecondary credential. The idea guiding the Foundation's efforts is that significant numbers of low-income students and students of color in urban environments face challenges with employment, housing, transportation, food, financial aid, and childcare - all of which affect college completion - and addressing these barriers requires the entire ecosystem to work together. In fact, data from the 10 largest cities in the U.S. show more than 3 million undergraduates enrolled in open access and less selective public 2-year and public 4-year colleges and universities in fall 2015, representing almost 22% of all college enrollments at public institutions; of these 3 million students, at least 37% were low-income based on the receipt of a federal Pell Grant, and about two-thirds were students of color.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2017). *Population with Tertiary Education*. Available at <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A. & Bhimdiwali, A. (2017, December). *Completing College: A National View of Student Completion Rates – Fall 2011 Cohort* (Signature Report No. 14). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Report available at [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SignatureReport14\\_Final.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SignatureReport14_Final.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Lumina Foundation (2017). *A Stronger Nation*. Available at <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2017/#nation>


<sup>6</sup> <https://kresge.org/programs/education/aligning-and-strengthening-urban-higher-education-ecosystems>

<sup>7</sup> Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), calculations by DVP-PRAXIS LTD. See also *The Condition of Education*, available at [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_cha.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cha.pdf)

# TRANSPORTATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

A key aspect of the urban higher education ecosystem is transportation, which represents a significant component of a student's cost of college attendance, especially for students who commute to college.<sup>8</sup> According to recent estimates by the College Board, transportation costs for an average commuter postsecondary student in 2018-19 will account for 18% of their total living expenses.<sup>9</sup> College commuters represent a majority of all college students, and low-income students in particular are more likely to attend college close to home; a recent report from New America stated that regional public universities enroll a much higher share of low-income students than state flagship universities do, and even larger shares of students from low-income families attend open-enrollment institutions like public 2-year community colleges.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, getting to college from home (and work) is an issue that is especially important for low-income students attending public 2-year and 4-year institutions. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average cost of owning a personal vehicle is upwards of \$9,000 per year, accounting for the costs of the vehicle itself, gas, and maintenance.<sup>11</sup> While public transportation is often more affordable than owning a car and paying for parking, students may still have difficulty affording the price of transit tickets and passes. In addition, the routes and schedules available to them may not align with their school and work needs; the length of time it takes to traverse public transit between home, school, and work can be onerous; and, the geographic proximity between students' housing and public transit may be inconvenient. The concentration of low-income students in open access and less selective institutions, and the significant number of college students in large cities, point to the issue of transportation as an important aspect of the college completion agenda.



**“For too many communities of color and rural areas, access to higher education is hindered by inadequate public transit. Lowering the transportation barrier will help close gaps in educational attainment rates.”**

**-Anita Cozart, Senior Director at Policy link and Founder of the Transportation Equity Caucus.**

As part of the Urban Higher Education Ecosystem Solution, The Kresge Foundation contracted DVP-PRAXIS LTD to examine the nexus between transportation and higher education by reviewing research literature and publicly available reports; identifying and interviewing a convenience sample of thought leaders, transit officials, and higher education leaders working on transportation and postsecondary access and success; and designing and facilitating a Roundtable of field “pace setters” in December 2017 to participate in a thoughtful discussion of transportation barriers and possible solutions. This effort focused on mass transit and less emphasis was given to innovations in the private sector such as on-demand ride-sharing solutions.

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<sup>8</sup> Cost of attendance includes “tuition and fees; on-campus room and board (or a housing and food allowance for off-campus students); and allowances for books, supplies, transportation, loan fees, and, if applicable, dependent care.” See <https://fafsa.ed.gov/help/costatt.htm>

<sup>9</sup> See <https://professionals.collegeboard.org/higher-ed/financial-aid/living-expense/2018>

<sup>10</sup> *Moving on Up: What a Groundbreaking Study Tells us about Access, Success, and Mobility in Higher Education* (2017). Edited by Stephen Burd, New America Foundation (October).

<sup>11</sup> *Consumer Expenditures* – 2016. (2017). Bureau of Labor Statistics

This review of transportation barriers to college completion and potential solutions revealed **three key takeaways:**



**(1) Colleges and universities have been providing transportation solutions for students for at least two decades, including discounted or free transit passes, shuttle or vanpool programs, and more recently, partnerships with rideshare companies.**

**(2) Although the transportation barriers documented in this brief are widely understood as affecting college success, and the solutions identified are intended, in part, to improve student outcomes, there is very little evidence documenting the relationship between retention and completion in college with the availability and utilization of transportation programs.**

**(3) Transportation solutions are not one-size fit all, and must account for the capacity of the urban ecosystem transit infrastructure; namely the extent to which public mass transit is robust and far-reaching within a community.**

The remainder of this brief provides a brief summary of transportation barriers for college students, followed by promising programmatic and policy solutions to address these barriers, and ending with a brief conclusion for a philanthropic role to catalyze local, regional, state, and national efforts on this important issue affecting postsecondary access and success.





# LANDSCAPE OF TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS

A national study of transit riders by the American Public Transportation Association found that 72% of public transit riders were primarily workers and 11% were primarily students; students could be attending elementary or secondary schools, or higher education.<sup>12</sup> This study – based on a sample of almost a half a million transit riders between 2000 and 2005 – also reported that 59% of transit riders were adults 25 years of age or older, more than half were women, and 50 percent described themselves as Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander or multi-ethnic; and, almost two-thirds of transit riders reported household income of less than \$50,000.<sup>13</sup> Put simply, this self-described “largest ever on-board survey study about the public transportation industry” suggests that public transit riders are disproportionately adults between 25-54 years of age, are disproportionately people of color, and are from lower income households. It stands to reason that addressing transportation barriers for college students could be a strategic way to improve college completion for low-income students and close postsecondary attainment equity gaps.

According to a national survey of 570 colleges and universities; however, postsecondary institutions are not effectively addressing transportation issues and “fall short of providing free or discounted bus or transit passes for the campus population, creating carpooling or vanpooling programs, and providing incentives to not drive alone.”<sup>14</sup> This finding comports with data from thought leaders, transit officials, and higher education leaders interviewed for this project, and is aligned with the discussion at the December 2017 Transportation and Higher Education Roundtable hosted by The Kresge Foundation. A common sentiment was that “transportation is the single biggest pain point” for students, and that while “campus locations may be centrally located near public transportation, students may not be.”

Four key transportation barriers were identified from the literature review, interviews and roundtable discussion: (1) cost and affordability; (2) routes, frequency and schedules; (3) housing and work proximity; and, (4) reliability and quality. A brief summary of each of these barriers is described below.

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<sup>12</sup> American Public Transportation Association (2007). *A Profile of Public Transportation Passenger Demographics and Travel Characteristics Reported in On-Board Surveys*, Washington, DC (May).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.


<sup>14</sup> McIntosh, M., Gaalswuk, K., Keniry, L.J., and Eagan, D. J. (2008). *Campus Environment 2008: A National Report Card on Sustainability in Higher Education*. National Wildlife Federation, Merrifield, Virginia.

## Cost and Affordability

Public transit is expensive, especially for low-income students who may not be able to afford the up-front costs of monthly or term-length transit passes, and thus pay the most-expensive “per-ride” fees to get from home to college. Commuter students are also more likely to work, to work more hours, and to work off-campus compared with residential students.<sup>15</sup>

Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that 43% of full-time students were employed as were 78% of part-time students; and about ¼ of full-time students worked more than 20 hours weekly while 70% of part-time students worked more than 20 hours weekly.<sup>16</sup> These data show that significant proportions of students work, and suggest that cost and affordability may be especially challenging for students who use public transit for both work and college, and could

be even more problematic for students who have dependent children. Using the \$2.25 per-ride fee in Chicago as an example, a student working five days a week and attending classes three days a week (a typical college class meets Monday-Wednesday-Friday), could spend \$36 per week traveling between home and work, and between home and school, and this estimate does not include weekend travel or additional trips to the grocery store, doctor, or a child’s school. A monthly pass in Chicago, by comparison, costs \$100, which is the equivalent of \$400 per college semester; this discounted price requires an up-front payment in full, which may be unaffordable for low-income students. Despite growing popularity, ride-sharing services like Lyft and Uber cost an average of \$10 or more per trip.<sup>17</sup> At this rate, they may supplement students’ transportation needs, but are not an affordable, everyday alternative to public transportation.



**“There is not a dedicated funding stream for [transportation]... Often, students use their Pell grant to cover basic living expenses and education fees, and there’s not enough left over to fund transportation.”**

**- Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Senior Policy Analyst, Center for Law and Social Policy**

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<sup>15</sup> Jacoby, B. (2004). *Engaging First-Year Commuter Students in Learning*. New Directions in Higher Education.

<sup>16</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 503.40, accessed December 12, 2017 from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16\\_503.40.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_503.40.asp)

<sup>17</sup> Jacobson, D. (2015). “Here’s How Much the Average Ride Costs on Uber and Lyft” (2015). Time.com. Available at <http://time.com/money/3959091/uber-lyft-price-per-trip/>

## Routes, frequency and schedules

A survey of colleges and universities by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences found that 90% of campuses are connected to public transit via fixed bus routes and less than 10% of campuses can access urban or light rail systems.<sup>18</sup> This survey suggests that bus-dependent transit infrastructure is the most common way students can access public transportation to get to college, and that more robust infrastructure that encompasses bus and rail systems (including subways and light rail) are atypical for most college and universities.

Transit routes, frequency, and schedules are typically geared toward the work commuter and may not align with college students' transportation needs. For example, transit schedules tend to be less frequent on evenings and weekends – times when working adults are more likely to take classes – and may also be less frequent during the midday period (10am-3pm) that is the most popular and widespread time for college classes to be offered. Additionally, the length of time a student spends riding public transportation – especially if they need to transfer one or more times, and if they are working and going to school or if they have children – can be onerous.

Experts spoke about challenges of being dependent on public transportation, especially when relying on connections, because “it’s hard to get where you need to go on time and within a reasonable amount of time.” Higher education leaders raised the corollary challenge of designing transportation schedules that account for the diverse contexts of students' lives, and many Roundtable participants pointed to the lack of political will to address transportation barriers for college students.

## Housing and work proximity

Although many urban postsecondary institutions are located on or nearby fixed transit rail and bus routes, these routes may not be conveniently located near students' homes or work. In many communities, it is too expensive to live near transit lines, especially rail, and students get pushed further away from the most desirable transit lines, having to rely on busses with multiple transfers to get from home to school. In Modesto, California, the local community college conducted focus groups of students and found that “the lack of reliable transportation was a major



**“The biggest transit challenges appear to be for working students. Public transit isn’t feasible for students who also juggle responsibilities with family and work.”**

**-Abby Thorne-Lyman, Transit Oriented Program Management, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART)**



**“It is becoming harder and harder to live near transit stations – it’s too expensive...[Students] are getting displaced further away from transit accessible housing.”**

**-Guillermo Mayer, President and CEO, Public Advocates Inc.**

<sup>18</sup> Krueger, T. and Murray, G. (2008). *Transit Systems in College and University Communities: A Synthesis of Transit Practice*. National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC: Transportation Research Board

obstacle,” especially for low-income students.<sup>19</sup> According to experts, “transportation is an access issue...and is one of the barriers students face for enrollment and keeping up in college.”<sup>20</sup> The proximity of student housing and work locations also point to the capacity of urban transit infrastructure as a key factor affecting college completion - if mass transit is not readily accessible, because jobs or affordable housing are in suburbs or exurbs rather than central cities, or because fixed bus and rail routes do not serve certain areas within the urban ecosystem - it is even more difficult for students to get to college.



### **Reliability and Quality**

The reliability and quality of public transit is undermined by operational deficits faced by transit systems, leading to over-crowded trains and busses, and to lower quality rides without space to sit and without access to Wi-Fi that could enable transit times to be productive for school work. These operational deficits are difficult to overcome, in part because of significant structural issues in funding with “80% of federal transportation dollars flowing

to highways, streets, and roads,” and public funding in general biased toward capital expansion rather than operational support. The result is that transit systems “are often in major fiscal distress and don’t have enough money to invest in maintenance...nor do they have the capacity to collect key data on riders and use that data” to make the case for operational investments. Further exacerbating these fiscal challenges is that open access and less selective public colleges - whose students could benefit from more reliable mass transit

- are also “under-resourced” and “do not have excess money to subsidize students” or to pay for additional transit services for students that can complement fixed route transit.

In sum, transportation barriers for college students run the gamut of cost and affordability, to accessibility and convenience of routes and schedules, and the quality and reliability of public transit systems. Moreover, the way students experience these barriers depends on the capacity of the transit infrastructure in their communities, and is further affected by the proximity of mass transit options to students’ housing and jobs. Accordingly, identifying solutions to transportation barriers may have preconditions that reflect transportation system capacity within the Urban Higher Education Ecosystem.

<sup>19</sup> Perez, M. (2017). Modesto Students Can Now Ride Transit for Free. Streets Blog. Available at <http://cal.streetsblog.org/2017/07/05/modesto-students-can-now-ride-transit-for-free/>

<sup>20</sup> Attributed to Jennifer Brown Lerner of the American Youth Policy Forum in Kolodner, M. (2015). Can better transportation increase diversity on college campuses? Hechinger Report. Available at <http://hechingerreport.org/can-better-transportation-increase-diversity-on-college-campuses/>



# PROMISING PRACTICES TO ADDRESS TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

Colleges and universities, public transit authorities, student advocates, and students themselves all have incentives to pursue program and policy solutions to student transportation needs. At the local level, solutions tend to focus on programs such as subsidized or free student transit pass commonly referred to as “U-PASS” or shuttle and vanpooling services. As noted earlier, private sector solutions were not the focus of this project, and the current on-demand ride share examples we identified have not achieved the scale and affordability necessary to be justifiably considered as alternatives to public transit for low-income students. Federal, state, and local policy solutions are less common, but can assist in providing student subsidies for these solutions.

## *Programmatic Solutions*

In a survey of transit providers servicing college and university communities, respondents reported an increased interest in opportunities to partner with postsecondary institutions in an effort to increase ridership on transit; survey respondents also indicated a willingness to consider programmatic improvements, such as high-frequency and late-night services, and pointed to unlimited access to transit programs for students through a fee agreement between postsecondary institutions and transit operators as a frequent solution.<sup>21</sup> From a transportation perspective, transit agencies that partner with colleges and universities “tend to have higher per capita ridership figures than do other comparably sized areas, and specific routes serving a campus are often the most heavily patronized.”<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, colleges and universities are looking for ways to meet the transportation needs of their students. For example, colleges and universities in cities with robust transit infrastructure are helping to lower students’ transportation costs by offering transportation subsidies and by negotiating discounts with local transit systems for their students; in communities with less robust transit systems, colleges and universities are subsidizing vanpooling, and developing new connections to existing transit systems. Examples from a 2010 study included a negotiated discount for students at The Peralta Colleges in California to use Alameda-Contra Costa Transit bus system; free bus passes for Centralia College students in Washington; and regional transit passes at no direct cost for University of Utah students.<sup>23</sup>

Given the preponderance of programmatic solutions, we highlight several examples identified through this project:

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<sup>21</sup> Krueger, T. and Murray, G. (2008).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., and citing TranSystems, Planners Collaborative, Inc. and Tom Crikelair Associates, *TCRP Report 111: Elements Needed to Create High Ridership Transit Systems*. Transportation Research Board, National Research Council, Washington, DC, June 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Orozco, V. & Mayo, L. (2010). Keeping Students Enrolled: How Community Colleges are Boosting Financial Resources for Their Students. In Demos.

The *Connecticut State College and University System (CSCU)* launched a U-PASS program in fall 2017 for all 63,000 undergraduate students who are assessed a \$20 fee per semester. For students using mass transit to get to school, this fee (\$40 a year) represents a significant discount from the \$63 monthly pass they had been paying. CSCU leaders acknowledge that accessibility varies among their campuses, and while some rural areas may have less robust public transit, for the most part believe this new subsidized universal pass will have tremendous benefits for both suburban and urban colleges and universities in their system. Leaders acknowledge that timing of schedules is a bigger challenge than service availability, noting that for “some satellite schools it takes an hour via public transit to travel ten minutes between locations,” while also reporting that “on some campuses [we] can see the bus dropping students at the front door.” The \$20 fee per semester is charged to all students regardless if they use the U-PASS.

The *Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LACMTA/Metro)* is piloting a U-PASS program with 15 colleges and universities based on a reduced fee agreement between the transit system and postsecondary institutions. The U-PASS program is flexible for participating colleges, with Metro establishing an up-front cap on the fees paid by the postsecondary institution for the initial semester of participation based on an estimated 10% student ridership, riding 13 times per week at \$0.75 per trip, and reconciling the final cost based on actual boardings by each college’s students each semester. In other words, colleges can offer a discounted transit pass for their students with the total cost for the initial semester guaranteed to not exceed a predetermined amount regardless of ridership, and Metro is tracking actual student usage of the U-PASS each semester and adjusting prices accordingly.

At *California State University-Northridge (CSUN)*, for example, the maximum cost for the initial semester of \$102,093 for 455 participants, was paid by students at \$95 each for a 21-week pass (\$46,075 or 45%), and the remaining \$56,018 (55%) was paid by the college. In actuality, CSUN sold 1,663 passes in this initial semester, receiving the additional 1,208 passes free of charge, but still collecting \$95 from each student, resulting in excess revenue of \$58,742 that was required to be put back into the program to fund future semesters. Since the initial semester, CSUN has maintained approximately 1,600 U-PASS participants and continues to offer the passes at the \$95 discount rate, while covering the balance of the cost for actual boardings each semester. LA Metro’s U-PASS Program was designed in this way to allow colleges to manage start-up costs by collecting enough money from the students to cover the cost, and also be able to reduce the cost of the program based on actual ridership.



**“Metro is making a financial investment in the U-Pass Program because we recognize the value of gaining lifelong riders.”**

**-Devon Deming, Director of Commute Services, LA Metro**



*The City University of New York* struck an agreement with the Metropolitan Transit Authority to offer students in the Accelerated Study in Associates Program (ASAP) free universal transit passes that are good for an entire college semester rather than the typical monthly pass available to all riders. The college recently scaled this program to 18,000 students, and is spending \$13 million annually on these transit passes; notably, CUNY does not get a discount from MTA for these passes and the entire cost is covered by the ASAP budget.

*City Colleges of Chicago* (CCC) offers a Ventra U-PASS program for fulltime students, because “about 85% of our students take public transit to get to classes.” CCC spends about \$5 million annually for the Ventra card so students can ride the city’s transit system free of charge, which was initially paid for through student fees and is now rolled into the tuition charged by the system.

*Portland State University* (PSU) provides a discounted quarterly pass for students to access TriMet public transit, including busses, light rail, and streetcar services. PSU is “incredibly well-served” by public transit according to college leaders, and the \$60 per month fee to students (\$180 per quarter) is 40% lower than the standard \$100 monthly pass offered by the transit system. The University uses parking revenue from daily and monthly parking fees to subsidize the cost of the transit pass for students, which cost about \$1.2 million annually.



*King County Metro Community Connections* recently launched a demonstration project that prioritized areas around Seattle underserved by the region’s fixed route bus and rail network; this program supports a collaborative process with communities, including local colleges and universities, to identify shuttle or ride-share programs the county can develop to better serve students and communities. These transportation solutions are intended to complement fixed-route transit operated by Metro Transit of King County, and examples include community vans, real-time rideshare options, and shuttles that connect retail areas or commuter parking locations with local colleges and universities.



In sum, the more common solutions to student transportation barriers revolve around discounted or free transit passes that result from partnerships between colleges and universities, and public transit agencies.

### *Policy Solutions*

We identified a few emergent policy initiatives to address transportation barriers for college student. In California, the state legislature approved Assembly Bill 17 to support a pilot project for programs statewide to further subsidize transit fares for middle school, high school, and college students; however, AB17 was vetoed by the Governor who indicated a sustainable funding stream needed to be identified before he could support the legislation. And in Denver, city leaders are collaborating with school districts, colleges, the transportation department and My Denver (a parks and recreation program that gives kids free access to cultural activities) to broaden access to the public transit system for college students.

These policy solutions are intended to expand access to transit pass programs without relying on membership in groups like low-income college students or employees of particular companies. Experts interviewed for this project suggested that policy solutions need a broad coalition because “the majority of people in most communities have not experienced mass transit,” and “political leaders, transportation officials, and the general public may not perceive college students as a worthy constituent of transportation subsidies or other publicly-funded solutions.” The idea driving these emergent policy initiatives is to build support for transit pass programs by broadening eligibility for access to non-profit groups, retirees, the elderly and disabled, as well as to employees and college students.





## CONCLUSION

The nexus of transportation and higher education represents largely under-examined terrain, at least from the perspective of transit solutions as a strategy to increase student retention and completion. Given the disproportionality of low-income students and students of color who enroll in open access and less selective public 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities, addressing transportation barriers in the Urban Higher Education Ecosystem can also be a solution to address equity in college completion.

Philanthropic investments can catalyze local, regional, state, and even national efforts by illuminating and elevating the need for transportation solutions as part of the college completion agenda; supporting demonstration projects that document demand and utilization of varied transportation solutions; and building the evidence-base on effective transportation solutions through rigorous research and evaluation. These important steps can build awareness and support for long-term, sustainable solutions that will require public investments and widespread cost-sharing among community members because improving transit capacity and operational support may be an essential part of any solution

