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What Government Can Learn from Colleges about Transportation Policy.

A new report details transportation policies on college campuses that could help municipalities promote public transit, biking and car-sharing services.

Cities should learn from college campuses for setting transportation policy, according to a new report by Frontier Group and the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) Education Fund.

The report highlights the city of Palo Alto, which is studying options for a transportation plan that would encourage drivers to switch to mass transit, biking and car-sharing services. The city's goal is to reduce single-occupant car trips by at least 30 percent. As the Palo Alto Weekly reported last September, the city is likely to borrow ideas from nearby Stanford University, which successfully reduced solo driving by offering "a fleet of about 60 shuttle buses, free Caltrain passes, and cash incentives through the Commute Club, whose 8,000 members shun solo driving."

The report's authors argue that city leaders have some of the same incentives for de-emphasizing car-related commuting as their college counterparts. Some colleges are supporting pedestrian, bike and transit-related options as a way to free up real estate that would otherwise go to parking lots. Expanding transit options may also serve as a way to attract and retain a young workforce — the authors point to research by the Urban Land Institute last year that found members of the demographic group known as Generation Y breaks from older Americans in placing a higher value on walkable communities and access to public transit.

In some cases, colleges have become more experimental than cities in implementing transportation policies that are mindful of environmental impacts and efficient in using land, said U.S. PIRG senior analyst Phineas Baxandall, the report's lead author. "Some of the motivations [for universities] are more direct," he said. "Their land is even more limited. They don't have any powers of eminent domain to deal with land problems. They're even more focused on young people than cities are."

Much of today's college transportation experiments happen around bikes. For example, the University of Madison-Wisconsin has increased its share of students biking to campus by investing in on-campus bike repair services, subsidizing membership in the city's bikeshare program and increasing the school's supply of bike racks. The University of Dayton went a step further by offering free bikes to a random selection of freshmen who pledged not to bring a car to school for their first two years. The University of Colorado, Boulder, has contributed funding to city construction of underpasses with bike lanes and pedestrian walkways, so students, faculty and staff can reach campus without using a car.

The report also details a number of university programs that reduce the cost of using buses, subway cars and trolleys. About 104 colleges offer a Universal Transit Pass, better known as a U-Pass, which gives students unlimited and free access to local transit, according to the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). The map below shows the distribution of those discounted and free transit fare programs across the country; however, Baxandall said

college representatives have contacted U.S. PIRG after the report published Feb. 5 to say that many more colleges offer discounted and free college transit than what AASHE captured.

For schools with a high proportion of commuters who live too far to bike to campus on a regular basis, the report points to another best practice at the University of California, Davis (UC-Davis), which offers incentives to carpool. UC-Davis has a carpooling program called goCarpool, with a variety of perks including discounted parking permits, reserved spaces and a pre-tax payroll deduction for the cost of parking permits.

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