

# GETTING O



By Josh Cohen

**There are plenty of tools out there to boost campus bus ridership. Knowing how to use them makes all the difference.**

**N**o one needs to be reminded that parking decks are expensive to build and maintain. In 2010, the University of Florida built a \$20 million LEED-certified, 927-space parking deck.

Likewise, no one needs to be told that campus transit is expensive. North Carolina State University spends almost \$5 million annually to run their 29-bus Wolfline shuttle service.

But there's a major difference between the two: parking garages aren't as scalable as buses. If more people use your garage, it doesn't ease congestion on campus, conserve the natural resources on your campus, or reduce your greenhouse gas emissions.

If you're going to spend millions of dollars annually to provide transit, it makes sense to get more people on the buses. It costs the same to run those buses whether they are totally empty or completely full.

So how do we fill buses? Through the judicious use of technology, transportation demand management (TDM), and engagement with riders.

## **Technology**

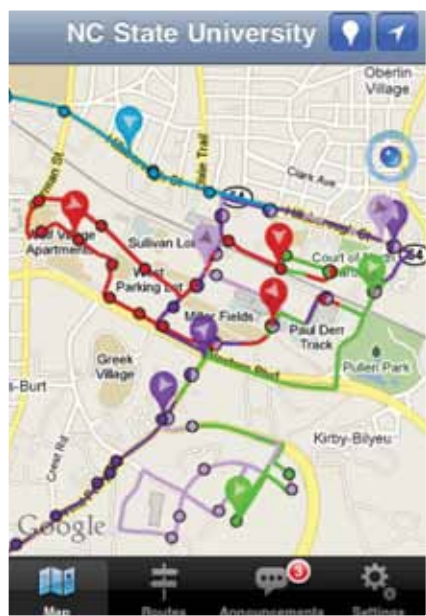
In 1995 when I entered college, no one had a mobile phone. Only the student body president had one by the time I graduated. Today, 99.8 percent of college students have them, according to a study from Ball State University.

As the technology expectations of university students increase, real-time passenger information becomes more popular. Real-time passenger information gives riders access to bus locations and estimated arrival times from the web, mobile web, native iPhone, Android, and BlackBerry apps, and at their bus stops.

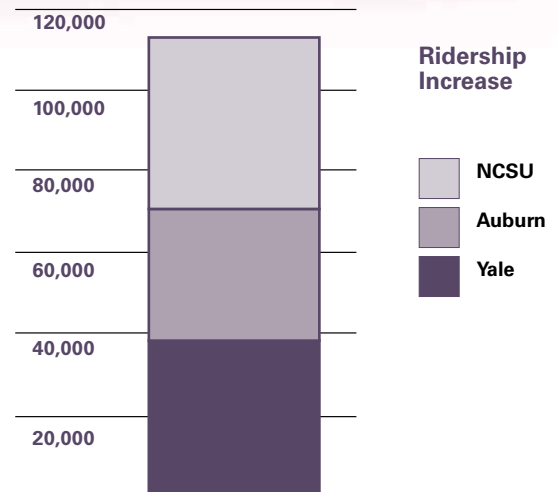
As a transit manager using this technology, you'll get fewer complaints, fewer calls asking where the bus is, and a spirit of goodwill because you're providing something tangible to your riders instead of just taking their student fee money. You can also increase your ridership.

THINKSTOCK

# N THE BUS



TransLoc iPhone app (left) and Android app (right).



Recently, we looked at data from three customers who provided ridership data before and after adding this kind of technology. They had increases of between 4 and 14 percent in ridership.

That increase removed thousands of cars from campus and reduced carbon emissions by more than 650 tons.

A recent survey by a Lock Haven University professor indicates that many college students spend more than two hours a day using Facebook and sending SMS messages. These platforms allow

students to get information about their friends quickly and easily. There's no reason transit information can't be shared as easily.

For campuses without GPS hardware on their shuttles, providing access to route and schedule information on mobile phones is another way to make taking the bus easier. For instance, BlackBoard Mobile provides schedule information through smart phone applications for college campuses.

The lesson here is that technology is not going anywhere. What



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real-time passenger information and mobile access to routes and schedules are doing is giving riders the information they want in the format that they want it. Leveraging technology for these interactions with your riders can help get more people on the bus and will complement your TDM program.

### **Transportation Demand Management**

TDM creates policies that will reduce the use of single occupancy vehicles.

Getting people to consider alternatives to their single-occupancy vehicles is difficult. As Glenn Kurtz, vice president of alternative transportation at Lanier Parking, blogged, “It seems when you have a car, you drive it, even if other options are available. It is like having a big piece of chocolate cake placed in front of you after every meal. You just eat it.”

Stanford University and Grand Valley State University (GVSU), among others, excel at getting people to swear off that chocolate cake by providing multiple commuting options and commitment to their plans. They provide numerous options for folks to consider, from transit to support for biking to carpooling software to cash back for giving up parking passes. Not all of these options will lead directly to transit changes, but they will help make your campus greener and force your constituents to think creatively about their commutes.

The second way Stanford and GVSU have been successful is by their commitment—especially at the highest levels of their organizations—to their TDM programs. This commitment can be seen not only in the magnitude of their marketing programs, but also in synergy with local businesses and transit to help market the programs.

The results are significant. Stanford has seen a considerable drop in their employees who drive alone, from 72 percent to 52 percent. GVSU’s more bus-centric TDM program has seen growth in campus bus ridership from 45,000 in 1996 to 2.6 million in 2010.

Though these TDM programs encourage many commute modes, getting people to start biking, walking, or carpooling will make it more likely they will use the bus when their preferred mode of transport is unavailable.

If you want to have a successful transit program, you can’t just stick buses out there and expect riders to hop on. TDM programs take resources and commitment, but they will get more people on the bus (or walking or riding two wheels).

### **Engagement**

The final piece of the puzzle is engagement with your riders. Once your riders benefit from technology and TDM, you need to get them and other stakeholders to interact with transit and spread the word. That’s where engagement comes in.

The simple fact is that a pleasant transit experience will help attract more riders. Ensuring that buses and shelters are clean and well-maintained is a good first step. If potential riders feel that buses or shelters aren’t well maintained, they won’t expect to be well taken care of. Technology and TDM programs show that you are committed to transit and that transit is not just something for those who can’t afford a car or parking permit.

If you treat your system like an asset, you can attract those choice riders who may have written you off. How do you reach them, though? One way that is becoming more prevalent every day is social media.

### **Social Media**

Most campus transit riders are students. And students and younger riders are getting information in places such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Flickr. None of these is a cure-all, but each represents another way that you can engage your riders.

TheTransitWire.com keeps a handy list of transit agencies using social media. See what you can learn. If you make it easier for choice riders to connect with you and connect with each other, you will remove one of transit’s barriers to entry, especially for choice riders.

Some of you are thinking that social media would become overloaded with complaints or you wouldn’t be able to keep up with the social media responsibilities.

Josh Cantor, the director of transportation and parking at George Mason University, referenced this during a C-PARK listserv conversation about social media: “The reality is that people are saying negative things about parking on some message board or forum. You might as well take it on and present the facts rather than let myths and false stories perpetuate.”

As for the ongoing social media responsibilities, consider the thousands of experts on these tools walking around your campus who come rather cheap: work-study students or interns.

I hope these three tools—technology, TDM, and engagement—will allow you to leverage your existing transportation resources more effectively. **P**



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