

The Value of Commute Club

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UVA Parking and Transportation

Introduction

Commute Club originated as an idea submission for the 2022 Hoos Making an Impact award sponsored by the Staff Senate and the Office of the President. The award was for improving a process at UVA that would increase staff success and focus on sustainability. Ethan Heil and Patrick Clark submitted Commute Club as a program to improve the quality of employees' daily commute to UVA. The program will significantly increase and expand the offering of financial incentives and other rewards to employees that choose to use alternative modes of transportation other than single-occupancy vehicles (SOVs) for their commute. A SOV is a trip to a destination that has only one occupant: the driver. It is the primary commute mode for most UVA employees¹ and has many negative consequences for individual drivers, the UVA community, and the greater Charlottesville area. Commute Club seeks to alleviate those consequences by changing employee commuting behavior.

Transportation Demand Management (TDM) is the use of strategies to inform and encourage travelers to maximize the efficiency of our transportation systems leading to improved mobility, reduced congestion, and lower vehicle emissions.

–Association for Commuter Transportation

An easy way to conceptualize Commute Club is as a program akin to Hoos Well but for more sustainable commuting instead of general health and wellness. Commute Club will encourage behavior change in the employee to their and the community's benefit by leveraging proven Transportation Demand Management strategies, including cash incentives, gamification, providing guaranteed rides home and daily parking options, rideshare matching, and education and outreach. The program will be administered by Parking and Transportation (P&T) via Luum, a commute management software platform. On the platform, users will log their daily commutes, track and claim rewards, learn more about P&T's alternative transportation offerings, find carpool and vanpool matches, and connect to other resources. The platform is accessible via mobile app or web browser. All Academic, Medical Center, and UPG full-time and part-time employees, except for student-employees, that work on or near Grounds are eligible to participate.

Commute Club does not produce its own revenue but will generate significant cost savings for both P&T and UVA at-large with the long-term success of the program playing a pivotal role in the University's continued growth. Combined with also enhancing the employee experience and improving the overall livability of the region, Commute Club will prove to be a worthwhile investment by the University. A comprehensive overview of the various program aspects is provided below to demonstrate why this is the case.

¹ 76% of UVA faculty and staff report that their primary commute mode is single-occupancy vehicle in P&T's 2023 Mode Split Survey.

Program Aspects

Parking Supply & Demand

A core function of P&T is to manage the University's parking supply, which is made up of a combination of surface lots and parking garages. As UVA continues to grow, so will its need to accommodate more employees commuting to Grounds. The most frequently offered solution is to build more parking, but is that the best option? Surface lots are a poor use of UVA's limited land resources, and while parking garages are more efficient, they are expensive to build and maintain. The current projected construction cost of the North Grounds garage is \$36.8 million while providing parking for 1,050 vehicles. That is a \$35k capital cost per parking space and it doesn't account for the garage's operational and maintenance costs. Commute Club's premise is that significantly less money could be spent incentivizing commuters to opt out of bringing a SOV to Grounds altogether instead of UVA providing a spot for them to park it.

Looking to the future, the need for additional parking can be mitigated by focusing financial resources and energy on decreasing the parking demand instead of increasing the supply. Educating, encouraging, and rewarding employees who use alternative modes will lead to fewer SOVs on Grounds and less pressure placed on the existing parking supply. By freeing up that space, P&T can better accommodate the influx of new commuters as UVA continues to grow.

Sustainability

While Scope 3 emissions are not included in UVA's carbon neutrality and fossil fuel free goals,² transportation is a major factor in the region's carbon footprint. Albemarle County's 2018 GHG Emission Inventory reports that 52% of the area's greenhouse gas emissions are related to transportation.³ UVA can reduce that percentage by incentivizing its SOV-commuting employees to use other modes that either have a significantly lower greenhouse gas emission rate per person (carpool/vanpool/transit) or produce none naturally (walk/bike). Luum will help users understand their commute's climate impact by tracking the pounds of CO₂ emissions avoided per alternative commute. The platform will also track performance across the entire user population and display it via leader's board to support friendly competition amongst users within the app to see who can have the smallest carbon footprint.

Traffic Congestion

Most UVA commuters can relate to the frustration of trying to navigate the triangle of University/Main Street, Emmet Street, and Jefferson Park Avenue during rush hour. Traffic congestion is often a problem where single-occupancy vehicles are the most common mode of commuting because they are an inefficient use of roadway infrastructure. For example, three commuters each using their personal vehicle take up the same amount of road space as a 50-passenger transit bus. If those three commuters instead rode the bus or consolidated from three vehicles to one to form a carpool, the result would be significantly less road space taken up per commuter. Get enough commuters to buy into using alternative transportation and traffic congestion decreases for everyone. Commute Club helps get that buy in by making alternative commuting more approachable and financially rewarding. The Luum platform has ridematching

² UVA Sustainability Climate Action <https://sustainability.virginia.edu/climate-action>

³ Albemarle County 2018 Greenhouse Gas Emission Inventory Report
<https://www.albemarle.org/home/showpublisheddocument/10553/637659234201630000>

tools to help connect employees interested in forming carpools and vanpools to one another, offers specific, in-depth transit resources so employees will know how to best leverage the available services, and will offer daily financial rewards for ridesharing or taking the bus.

Permit Pricing

Under-costed parking can inflate the true parking demand. When employee parking is subsidized and made relatively cheap, or free in the case of staff members at UVA Health parking in commuter lots, many employees will be uninterested in exploring an alternative mode. Charging closer to the actual cost will motivate some employees to seek other commuting options. Having a robust alternative transportation program in place helps enable P&T to justify the appropriate rate increases while providing a more financially viable option for some employees. When employees push back on the change, P&T can point to Commute Club as the solution if the employee doesn't want to pay the increased rate. The parking demand will adjust, freeing up parking which will allow other employees to get off parking waitlists, and the additional permit revenue from the increased rates can help sustain and grow Commute Club into the future.

Data

Currently, there is no mechanism or process for P&T to collect alternative commuting data other than employee surveys. P&T conducts a mode split sample survey every three years to try and understand employee behavior, but with Commute Club, Luum will capture that data by requiring employees to report their commute mode if they want to earn the rewards offered. This is done via what Luum calls the Commute Calendar. Users can log into the platform each day and report on the Calendar what mode they used. While still not as complete a data tool as P&T would like given the reliance on user self-reporting, the additional source is a significant step in the right direction. Having the two separate data sources will refine P&T's understanding of commuter behavior while overcoming the pitfalls that can result from relying solely on survey results like subjectivity and cognitive bias.

Employee Wellbeing and Retention

With an average daily commute time of roughly 53 minutes, employees that can't telecommute spend a lot of time getting to and from work, which can have an adverse effect on employee health and job satisfaction.⁴⁵ Commute Club will counteract some of those effects by encouraging employees get out from behind the wheel of their SOV and engage in healthier and more rewarding commuting practices. Both public (bus) and active transportation (walk/bike) get people moving more which is a boon for mental and physical health. Plus, employees alternative commuting get more time back in their day to relax or engage in other activities since they don't have to focus on driving themselves. In addition to the health benefits, Commute Club will increase job satisfaction by helping employees save money on their commute. The use of alternative transportation will qualify employees for daily financial rewards while simultaneously saving them money on SOV expenses such as gas, parking, and vehicle maintenance.

Equity

Housing and transportation costs are a major source of inequity in communities around the country. Because lower-income workers generally cannot afford to live near where they work due to

⁴ Unites States Census Data <https://data.census.gov/table?q=Commuting&y=2022>

⁵ How Commuting Affects Subjective Wellbeing <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11116-019-09983-9>

housing costs, they must commute farther for their jobs, and, as a result, they incur higher transportation costs. In 2022, transportation-related expenses made up 15% of average household spending but jumps to 30% for the lowest-income households with much of the expense comprised of vehicle ownership and its operational/maintenance costs.⁶ Transportation costs are not the only burden on low-income workers as additional time and energy spent commuting means less they can dedicate to family, self-improvement, and achieving a healthy work-life balance. Commute Club doesn't fix the problem of high transportation costs but combats it by relieving some of the financial pressure with rewards and supporting alternative commuting options that restore some of the time and energy that employees expend driving themselves. While all eligible employees can earn the same dollar amount in rewards, it will undoubtedly be more impactful for lower-income earners.

Communication and Feedback

The Luum platform has robust communication tools that will give P&T both greater reach and more precision in its communication. The best time to engage an employee regarding alternative commuting is as soon as they start working at UVA before they think their only option is to buy an annual parking permit. All new employees will receive an automated email from Luum shortly after being hired, introducing Commute Club, highlighting the various commute options, and explaining how they can get started. Also, employee participation in Luum will allow P&T to drill down into user behavior and identify what modes they regularly use. From there, P&T can create subsections of the user population and send targeted news, updates, and information to those for whom it is most applicable. In addition to the outbound communication tools, the platform has a built-in feedback feature that users can utilize to directly communicate what is and is not working for them. The ease of use and quick access should result in P&T receiving more timely feedback, thus helping the department be more agile in addressing problems and improving its offerings.

Education

Commute Club is not just a tool for employees to log their commutes and get rewards, but it is also designed to educate as well. While most employees will rarely visit the main P&T website unless looking for something specific, the design of Luum encourages daily engagement and with that comes the opportunity to expose employees to new and different ideas that they wouldn't otherwise explore. On the platform, employees will find in-depth breakdowns of all the alternative transportation offerings, real-world examples of how they can take advantage of them, and access to additional resources. It will explain the negative consequences of single-occupancy vehicle use and the value add of each alternative commute option. Employees that are not compelled to change their behavior for the rewards alone may be more inclined once they have greater understanding of how their commute impacts themselves and the community. Armed with a greater understanding, the hope is that employees will also begin to see P&T as less an antagonist and more of as a positive force for good and an essential function to theirs and UVA's success.

⁶ The Household Cost of Transportation: Is it Affordable? <https://www.bts.dot.gov/data-spotlight/household-cost-transportation-it-affordable>