

TRANSPORTATION

a barrier to higher education for low-income, first-generation college-goers

Many low-income, first-generation college-goers, both rural and urban, face difficulties getting to and from a college campus. Most are unable to access/afford a personal vehicle and must rely on public transit or friends and family members for rides. On average, rural students travel 52 miles round-trip to attend college¹, and urban students must juggle class schedules with public transit schedules. It is not uncommon for commute times to exceed one hour. The process is further complicated for the many low-income, first-generation students who work while attending college.

Faculty members cite seeing attendance issues when a car breaks down or a ride falls through. A change in which family member drives the family vehicle to work can result in a student dropping out.

Even when students can access a personal vehicle, they are often unprepared for dealing with the costs associated with transportation to and from campus: car payment, insurance, gas prices and a campus parking decal.²

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Why this Matters in Tennessee

Commuting rural Tennessee students often must travel long distances and times to get to a college campus. Public transit is not an option in these areas, therefore low-income, first-generation students must be able to access a personal vehicle or find a consistent ride if they aim to complete a degree program. Commutes to campuses by low-income, first-generation students in Tennessee's urban cities are often restricted by public transit routes and schedules, which are not always conducive to the time constraints of working college-goers. For example, in Nashville, it takes 76 minutes to travel from Cane Ridge High School to Nashville State Community College at Hickory Hollow using public transit.³

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Questions to Consider

- How can the state support higher education institutions that want to improve transit options for commuting students?
- What proven strategies could Tennessee implement to help alleviate transportation challenges for rural and urban students?
- Does state funding to higher education provide opportunities for institutions to assist students with transportation needs in order to help students persist and complete their degree programs?

¹ Randy Smith, president of the Rural Community College Alliance, qtd. in "Finding a Ride," Inside Higher Ed

² Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Straight from the Source, What Works for First-Generation College Students, page 35

³ Transit time calculated using Google Maps travel time estimates for a standard travel date and time.