

A Transportation Success Story

In September 2002, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) provided about 40,000 rides per month to its students. In September 2004, that number jumped to 120,000. This staggering increase in ridership required months of work between GVSU and the Grand Rapids, MI, public transportation system and a complete communication campaign geared at students and the community.

The success shows in the high number of students taking the bus and the rider satisfaction surveys conducted by the university: 90 percent rate the service as good or excellent.

"We knew increasing transportation options for our students was critical," said Lisa Haynes, director of operations for the university's Pew Campus and its Regional Center. "We have a residential campus 14 miles from our growing downtown campus. They are very connected and dependent on each other, and many students take classes on both campuses.

"Offering free and frequent transportation options for our students makes our institution stronger," Haynes said. "Transit provides many other benefits, both economically and environmentally, which we have worked to communi-

cate to our students."

Financially, it also made sense for the university to expand bus service each year to help limit its investment in new parking structures.

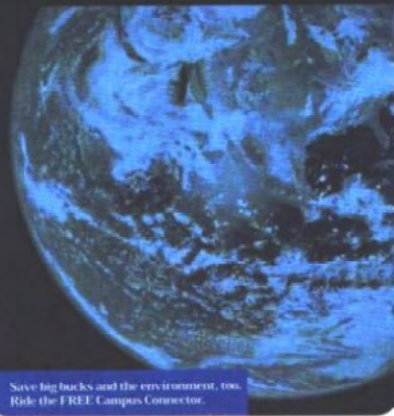
GVSU Growing Pains and Solutions

Similar to the dramatic growth in bus ridership, GVSU as an institution has known phenomenal growth since it was established in 1960. Each decade, enrollment jumped dramatically, and it currently serves nearly 23,000 students.

The main campus in Allendale, MI, is nestled in a small community 14 miles west of Grand Rapids. Bus service between Allendale and Grand Rapids had been offered on a limited basis since the late 1980s. The expansion of several university departments into Grand Rapids, the state's second largest city, eventually led to a complete downtown campus in fall 2000. (The Pew Campus now includes four academic buildings and two student housing facilities.)

Although more than 2,000 parking spaces, including a new parking structure, were added, the need for broader transportation services became more apparent as the university expanded into the already crowded and thriving Grand Rapids

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city limits.

With the opening of the Pew Campus, the university doubled bus service by contracting with "The Rapid," the buses of the Interurban Transit Partnership (ITP).

The Rapid now serves GVSU's Campus Connector and runs between the Pew Campus and Allendale every 15 minutes from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Thursday and from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Sunday service runs from noon until 8 p.m.

The contract between the ITP and the university also allows its stu-

dents to ride any city bus free of charge. GVSU also contracted with the ITP to provide an off-campus apartment shuttle service to surrounding apartment complexes populated with students.

"Each time we conduct satisfaction surveys, students are asked how GVSU can expand the bus service to better serve them," said Haynes. "We knew part of creating a growing transit culture would require listening carefully to our students."

Communicating the Bus Benefits

Surveys were just one part of an entire campaign conducted by GVSU. The administration felt confident that if it implemented an effective communication campaign, everyone would see the benefits of taking the bus. Initiated in 2000, the campaign included fliers, a poster series, news releases to the student and Grand Rapids-area press, and forums on parking problems and solutions.

In promotional pieces and information meetings, GVSU staff gave several reasons for students to consider traveling by bus: The service is free, it saves students money on gas, and it helps the environment. The shuttle also means no traffic stress to and from Grand Rapids (about a 30-minute drive from Allendale). Due to the limited parking in many places, the walking distance from the bus stop to the classroom or other student destination is often shorter than if students parked their cars and walked.

Working with Public Transportation

GVSU is the 19th university in the United States to develop a relationship with a public transit authority. University officials view the situation as more than a business relationship; they consider it a partnership. ITP has called the arrangement "fabulous."

The university contracts annually with ITP and is billed monthly at about \$49 per bus per hour. The cost is billed to the university's transportation budget.

Tim Schad, GVSU vice president for finance and administra-

tion, is impressed by the economic and environmental impact the transit program has had on the university community.

"In the 2004-2005 school year, we saved the students almost \$2.4 million in car operating costs and more than 230,000 gallons of gas - the same amount as in 19 of the large gas tankers you see driving on the highway."

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