Chittenden County
Bus Commuter Ridership Pilot Project

Photo by Devon White

Submitted by:
Jack Hanson and Richard Watts
June 2020
Project Overview:

Increasing public transit use can reduce demand for single occupancy vehicles (SOVs), lessen carbon emissions, improve transportation cost equity and reduce traffic congestion. Due to the real and perceived costs of using transit, demand for fixed-route transit often increases when coupled with workplace parking restrictions (e.g. limits on permits, higher costs, remote parking requiring longer walks or other transfers) and incentives.

The GMT Route 116 Bus Ridership Pilot Project in 2018-2019 used outreach, education, and incentives to connect potential transit users with incentives to increase bus ridership on the Route 116 corridor between Hinesburg and Burlington.

Building off of that project, the Chittenden County Bus Commuter Ridership Pilot Project aimed to increase ridership in the County, specifically targeting commuters living and working in towns served by the county’s bus provider, Green Mountain Transit.

As in the GMT Route 116 Bus Ridership Pilot Project, the employer most heavily targeted was the University of Vermont (UVM) -- the second largest employer in the State, and one that charges for parking while offering a large variety of incentives for transportation other than the SOV.

Along with Richard Watts and Jack Hanson, UVM student interns Brianna Jassett and Abbie Dillon helped lead this program, with additional support from other UVM student interns.

Project Timeline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial project administration/development, including surveying</td>
<td>June-July 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach Planning</td>
<td>August 2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>UVM Employee Outreach and Enrollment</td>
<td>September-November 2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant follow-up and retention, including surveying</td>
<td>October 2019-April 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>UVM Employee Outreach -- Round 2</td>
<td>January-February 2019</td>
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Research and Strategy Development:

We began our work by researching existing transportation offerings and programs available in Chittenden County. Given that our study was meant to build off of the GMT Route 116 Bus Ridership Pilot Project, we also interviewed all of the participants in that project to understand their motivations to join the program, and their experience to date.

Using the results of our research, including the surveys we conducted, we developed an incentive package and marketing strategy for UVM employees, as well as a strategy for outreach to employees throughout the county. Our strategy included mass marketing, targeted outreach, individualized outreach, and incentives, all detailed below.

Outreach Methods Used:

Mass emails with short surveys
Our initial outreach was in the form of an email to all UVM employees who lived in a town with bus service to Burlington. We sent several such emails over the course of the program. Below is the text of our first email blast.

“Hi all,

Did you know a parking pass at UVM pulls hundreds of dollars out of your paycheck? That's not including gas money, insurance, and any other expenses associated with driving into work every day.

But there's good news!

UVM is offering a number of benefits and incentives to help you to save money, cut your carbon footprint, and have a more enjoyable commute each day.
I want to learn more about this opportunity
In collaboration with Center for Research on Vermont, CATMA, UVM Transportation & Parking Services, and the CCRPC, we'll be offering a number of one-time only benefits ---beyond the hundreds of dollars that will no longer be deducted from your salary--- for anyone who is willing to trade in their parking pass and commute mostly by bus, walking, biking, carpooling, or some combination (you can still drive sometimes!).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>County-wide outreach</th>
<th>February-March 2020</th>
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<td>Creation of final report</td>
<td>May-June 2020</td>
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This is part of a research project that began last year and is being expanded further this academic year.

If you're receiving this email, you live along a bus route that runs daily between your hometown and UVM campus. As a UVM employee, that bus is free for you to ride. Have you ever tried taking it? If more of us ride the bus or find other alternatives, we can alleviate traffic and parking congestion, reduce air pollution and accidents, and cut carbon emissions.

Learn more today!
Thanks so much!

Sincerely,
Jack Hanson
Energy Fellow, Center for Research on Vermont

After each email blast, we fielded direct responses and also downloaded a report of all of those who clicked on any of the links provided in the email. We also analyzed the results of the short survey which the emails linked to. We then did targeted outreach to those who filled out the survey or clicked on the link to it.

All but three of the program participants said that they had heard about our program through these email blasts.

**Phone Calling**

Over 150 individuals were called. Over 60 of them were reached by phone and over 75 of them received voicemails. The remaining were either wrong numbers or lines that did not allow us to leave a voicemail. At least 16 of the 30 eventual participants were called during this process.

The phone conversations with 60 different individuals, including multiple calls with many of them, served as essential data to inform the project. While the calls were not recorded, notes were recorded on the general concerns or questions raised by the potential participants. This helped us understand what barriers there were to joining the program, and how some of those barriers could -- or couldn't -- be overcome.

Callers relied initially on a script, but over time gained the skills to deviate from the script. There were separate scripts created. One was for calls to UVM employees who had clicked a link in our email blasts and/or filled out our survey. The other script is for calls to employers throughout the county. The county-wide outreach phone calling was aimed at business owners rather than employees. In many cases, initial calls or emails had to be placed in order to get the correct phone number for the business owner.

The two call scripts are listed below.

**UVM CALL SCRIPT:**
Hi, is this _____?

Great, my name is ____ and I’m ____ with the Center for Research on Vermont. I’m calling to follow up about our incentive program for people interested in turning in their parking permit. Did you see any of the emails from Jack Hanson about this?

(IF NO: explain program)

IF YES: Great. I wanted to see if that was something you were still considering, and help answer any questions you might have.

Info to offer:
--For full time employees
--$75 City Market Gift Card
--No more paycheck deductions for parking
--18 single day passes for a 6 month trade in (Same color as your permit).
--Guaranteed ride home program where UVM will cover your cab fare if you miss the last bus
--You can get your permit back at the end of the turn-in period if you choose.
--If it’s not working out you can back out, but we’d need to sort out the single-days so that you weren’t getting extra (don’t mention this one unless you need to)

Do you think this is something that might work for you?

(If they agree, or are strongly considering, offer to send them the intent letter)

Are there any other questions I can answer?

Thanks so much for your time! I’ll follow up with an email now.

COUNTY-WIDE EMPLOYERS CALL SCRIPT:

Hi, my name is _____________ and I intern at the Center for Research on Vermont. I’m part of a small team working on an incentive program to help get workers in Chittenden County get out of their cars and commute to work via bus, bike, or foot.

I’m reaching out to see how we can collaborate with your business to help some of your employees change their commute behavior and reduce their emissions.
We are offering anyone who joins the program a $75 gift card. In addition, we would love to work with you to create additional incentives, or point employees to existing offerings that you provide for employees to commute sustainably.

To join our program, employees who currently drive to work must commit to instead take public transportation, bike, carpool, walk, or some combination of those for the next six months.

Is this something you’d be interested in helping promote at your business?

(Talk through the program and any concerns they have.)

Thanks so much for your time, and I look forward to working with you! I will send you a followup email now!

Front Porch Forum posts

For the county-wide program, the following Front Porch Forum posting was used in multiple Front Porch Forum neighborhoods in Chittenden County:

Subject: Green up your commute to work!

Hi my name is Brianna Jasset, I am a student intern for the Center for Research on Vermont. I'm part of a small team working on an incentive program to help get workers in Chittenden County out of their cars and commute to work via bus, bike, or foot. I’m reaching out to see how we can connect with workers and businesses in the area and help them change their commute behavior and reduce their emissions.

We are offering anyone who joins the program a $75 gift card. In addition, we would love to work with you and your employer to create additional personalized incentives that work best for you both!

To join our program, employees who currently drive to work must commit to instead take public transportation, bike, carpool, walk, or some combination of those for the next six months.

Please let us know if this is something you are interested in. We’d love to work with you to help reduce your carbon footprint.

Click the link below to see what we have done at UVM!

Please email Brianna Jasset if you have any questions or comments!
Best,
Brianna Jasset
bjasset@uvm.edu

Posters

A UVM-specific poster was used on UVM campus. County-wide program posters were distributed at employers and at prominent visibility locations throughout the county.

Below are examples of the posters used. The top poster was used on UVM campus only; the bottom poster was used county-wide.

TIRED OF PAYING SO MUCH FOR UVM PARKING??

SWITCH TO THE BUS/CARPOOILING/BIKING AND GET A $75 CITY MARKET GIFT CARD WHEN YOU TURN IN YOUR PERMIT FOR 6 MONTHS!

Other incentives include:
- 18 free one-day parking permits
- A guaranteed ride home if you miss the last bus of the day
- Free bus service

Questions: Contact Abbie Dillon
Phone: (856)-281-4491
Email: aedillon@uvm.edu
For UVM outreach, postcards were placed on car windshields and in employees on-campus mailboxes. Below is the front and back of this postcard.

Postcards
TIRED OF PAYING FOR PARKING?

TRY THE BUS!

The bus is free and it drops right on campus

Plus

A $75 City Market gift card when you turn in your permit for 6 months.

- Free Bus Service
- 18 Free One-Day Permits
- Free Guaranteed Ride Home*

*If you miss the last bus home

RIDE THE BUS | SAVE MONEY

HOW MUCH DO YOU PAY FOR PARKING?

Parking can cost you anywhere between $120 and $768 a year*

The cost of your permit is calculated as a percent of your salary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salary</th>
<th>Brown Permit</th>
<th>White Permit</th>
<th>Green Permit</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$30-45,000</td>
<td>$120</td>
<td>$180</td>
<td>$240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$45-60,000</td>
<td>$168</td>
<td>$252</td>
<td>$336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60-75,000</td>
<td>$216</td>
<td>$324</td>
<td>$432</td>
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<tr>
<td>$75-90,000</td>
<td>$264</td>
<td>$396</td>
<td>$528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$90-150,000</td>
<td>$384</td>
<td>$576</td>
<td>$768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Estimated yearly costs are calculated using the median of each salary range.

COST OF THE BUS? IT'S FREE!

Social Media:

Through the Sustainable Transportation Vermont Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts, we posted about the program multiple times, including using paid advertisements. The social media postings included graphics from the posters and postcards above. We also posted videos
promoting the program, including photos and quotes from participants and video interviews with participants.

An example of a paid Facebook post can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/ybuly97h. We spent $15 on this post, and it reached 2,571 Chittenden County residents between the ages of 18 and 54.

**Word of mouth:**

The program also spread through word of mouth. For example, some of the early participants in the program recruited coworkers in their office to join as well. We did not offer rewards for referrals. We did, however, encourage those we interacted with (participants and otherwise) to spread the word to anyone who they think may be interested.

**Incentives Used:**

A driving idea behind this program was to make commuters aware of incentives already available through their employer, the state, or other entities such as Chittenden Area Transportation Management Association -- a partner in this project. In addition to providing this education, our goal was also to offer individualized guidance and advice as to how to utilize non-SOV transportation options to meet the would-be participant’s commuting needs while maximizing convenience and cost-effectiveness.

At UVM, the primary focus of our study, there are a suite of commuter benefits available to incentivize commute methods other than the SOV: https://www.uvm.edu/transportation/employee-commuter-benefits-programs.

At UVM, the ability to park on campus requires a parking permit, which, as noted in the postcard above, costs between $120 and $768 per year. The fact that those joining the program could avoid these costs by turning in their permit was an additional driver for participation. As with the commuter benefits, it was important for our program to remind UVM employees about these costs, as they are administered via small paycheck deductions, making it easy for folks to forget about them or lose track of their magnitude.

In collaboration with UVM’s Transportation and Parking Services (TPS), an additional incentive was offered to UVM employees who participated in this program: 18 free single-day parking passes. These offered flexibility for participants; they could still drive to work up to three days each month and park on campus for free. TPS covered the costs of these passes.

Other employers outside of UVM offered little to no incentives for their employees to commute by methods other than the SOV. However, many that we reached out to were interested in exploring those options.
The only incentives our program offered were a $50 gift card upon joining the program, and a $25 gift card after 1 month of participation. We found that this incentive was a helpful push over the edge for those who were considering changing their commuting habits. It also worked well as one of several incentives (e.g. at UVM, where we presented our incentive alongside the suite of incentives offered by the University). Based on our conversations with participants as well as non-participants, we believe that this incentive on its own would not change behavior for a significant number of people. The key to the success of this program was the combination of the gift card incentive with other offerings and with individualized transportation guidance and encouragement.

The Impact of COVID-19:

The emergence of COVID-19 and resulting economic shutdown had a dramatic impact on our work. While the UVM component of our program ended in early February, the outreach to employers other than UVM was still in its early phases, having begun in January.

The outreach strategy was to target business owners and managers by phone and email to try to work with them to implement the program in their workplace, while simultaneously advertising directly to employees through Front Porch Forum, social media, posters, and other mass outreach methods.

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, 1 non-UVM employee had signed up as a participant. 2 of our participants, who were still working on UVM campus during the first couple weeks of the economic shutdown, dropped out of the program in order to avoid the potential health risks of taking the bus. The other participants had no issue remaining in the program given that they were telecommuting and therefore no longer had any reason to drive to work.

Once the shutdown came into effect, we were forced to suspend our outreach and promotion to new participants. Based on our success at UVM, our solid outreach plan, and our initial success at one of the largest employers in the state, GlobalFoundaries, we were expecting to get as many as dozens of new participants, but this opportunity was lost as businesses shut their doors due to COVID-19.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Most participants were persuaded to change their commuting behaviors based on multiple factors. Many of them had already been considering making the switch prior to our outreach. Most, but not all, of the participants had tried alternative forms of commuting at least once, though they still mostly drove alone to work. For the UVM participants, the free bus pass was a very important selling point, as it provided an obvious cost savings compared to driving their car. Being reminded of the paycheck deductions and understanding the potential savings in parking costs also helped nudge them. For many, being coached through how to navigate transportation challenges was essential. The gift card was cited as an important nudge, something to put folks over the top.
The majority of our participants responded to a deadline which we imposed. For the UVM trade-in program during the fall semester, we imposed a late November deadline to join the program. The majority of participants joined within a week of that deadline, after being reminded of it. The deadline created a sense of urgency that was effective in getting people who were on the fence to act.

All of our forms of outreach were effective and important, with each playing different roles. The one that was most useful in terms of converting people from considering to actually joining was phone conversations. In terms of reaching the most people per dollar spent, the Facebook ads were most effective. In terms of catching people’s attention and getting them to consider, emails were most effective. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the posters and the postcards. They were not often cited as the initial mechanism by which people heard of the program, but they do seemed to have served as a reminder for folks. They also reached an audience not reached by the email blast, social media, or front porch forum postings. The front porch forum postings were generating some responses, but this strategy was cut short soon after it started as COVID forced us to end our program, only resulting in one participant actually joining.

Because of how it leveraged off of and built up existing programs, and because of the additional outreach, communication, and persuasion methods used, this was a very cost-effective transportation demand management program. We encourage further use of these methods, particularly for organizations that are cost-constrained. This program has widespread applicability, though it is most effective in situations where would-be participants already have access to a number of transportation demand management incentives, and where transportation alternatives are available.
Appendix

UVM Statement of Intent Form

Statement of Intent Bus Research Project

I agree to trade in my parking permit for six months, starting on the date listed below and ending on -____,____ 2020.

In exchange, I will receive a $50 City Market gift card immediately, and an additional $25 City Market gift card after one month in the program. I will also receive 18 free day-use parking permits.

I understand that if circumstances change I can drop out of the program and get my permit back but will first need to ensure that I have not been overcompensated for the time period in which I participated.

I understand that there are a number of UVM programs in place that I can take advantage of currently including free bus service, guaranteed free ride home, free Carshare Vermont membership, and, depending on my office, flexible work hours.

I understand that this is a research project and I agree to be interviewed several times over the course of the six month period.

_________________________________________  ______________________
Name                                           Date

_________________________________________  ______________________
Signature                                       Date

Additional Information

Job Title: _______________________________________________________

Department: _____________________________________________________

Home Address: ___________________________________________________

Email: __________________________________________________________

Expected days on campus (generally) __________________________________

Questions: Contact Abbie Dillon aedillon@uvm.edu or jchanson@uvm.edu. Questions about parking are directed to Mary Provost mary.provost@uvm.edu
Non-UVM Statement of Intent Form

Statement of Intent Bus Research Project

By joining this program I commit to either taking public transportation, biking, carpooling, walking, or some combination of those, as my primary form of commuting. I affirm that I will drive to work alone no more than one day in any given week. I affirm that currently I drive to work as my primary form of commuting, and I will change behavior upon joining this program.

I agree to join this incentive program for six months, starting on the date listed below and ending on _____. ____2020.

In exchange, I will receive a $50 gift card immediately, and an additional $25 gift card after one month in the program. (Add employer offerings)

I understand that this is a research project and I agree to be interviewed several times over the course of the six month period.

____________________________________  ______________
Name                                      Date

____________________________________  ______________
Signature                                 Date

Supervisor Statement of Intent:

By signing below, I affirm that I am the supervisor of the above employee. I affirm that all of the above statements are true, and I commit to monitoring the employee’s commuting behavior to ensure proper participation in the program as stated above.

____________________________________  ______________
Name of Supervisor                        Date

____________________________________  ______________
Signature of Supervisor                    Date

Additional Information

Job Title: ___________________________ Business Name: ________________________________

Home Address: _________________________________________________________________

Email: ___________________________ Phone Number: ________________________________

Questions: Contact Abbie Dillon aedillon@uvm.edu and/or Brianna Jasset bjasset@uvm.edu
Participant Survey Results

Hometown:

![Hometown Pie Chart]

Employer:

![Employer Pie Chart]
How did you hear about our program?

Front Porch Forum: 1 - 3.3%
Co-Worker: 2 - 6.7%
Email(s): 27 - 90.0%

Since giving up your parking permit, what has been your primary method of commuting?

Drive Alone: 2 - 6.7%
Bike: 3 - 10.0%
Walk: 3 - 10.0%
Carpool: 5 - 16.7%
Bus: 17 - 56.7%
Once you complete the program, do you plan to get your parking permit back?