



I MILLENNIALS ON THE MOVE

A survey of changing transportation trends
and how they can help Wisconsin thrive

WISPIRG
Foundation

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and how they can help Wisconsin thrive



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I CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
INTRODUCTION: TO HELP OUR COMMUNITIES THRIVE, WISCONSIN NEEDS TO ATTRACT YOUNG PEOPLE	3
MILLENNIALS ON THE MOVE: TODAY'S YOUNG ADULTS ARE SEEKING OUT MULTIMODAL LIFESTYLES	5
SURVEYING THE TRANSPORTATION PREFERENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN WISCONSIN.....	9
TRANSPORTATION TRENDS ARE CHANGING ACROSS THE AGING SPECTRUM.....	11
WISCONSIN COMMUNITIES LEADING THE WAY TOWARDS A MULTIMODAL FUTURE	13
CHANGING TRANSPORTATION TRENDS SHOULD MEAN 21ST CENTURY BUDGET PRIORITIES.....	15
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17
APPENDIX	18
NOTES	24

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CAR CULTURE no longer represents the “American Dream” for young Americans. Many young people today prefer car-light, multimodal lifestyles that allow them to get around efficiently, multitask while commuting, and feel connected to their communities. Millennials are drawn to the high quality of life in places that offer extensive and safe walking and biking options, as well as clean, fast, and efficient public transportation networks.¹ Moreover, this preference for multimodal lifestyles appears to be influencing young people’s decisions about where to live and work.²

State and federal policy makers have done little to understand the changing transportation preferences of today’s youth,³ or to ensure that today’s transportation investments will meet tomorrow’s evolving needs. The WISPIRG Foundation set out to learn more about how young people today get around, and how they want to get around now and in the future. To do so, we surveyed 612 college students on twenty-four campuses statewide during the 2017-18 school year. (The survey sample was not scientifically selected.)

Our study’s results show that Wisconsin’s current policy priorities will fail to create the multimodal transportation system young adults want. A large majority of survey participants told us that the availability of multimodal transportation options – or the lack thereof – may factor into their decisions about where to live and work in the future.



Credit: WISPIRG Foundation Staff

The key findings of our survey are:

- 75 percent of students surveyed said it was either “very important” or “somewhat important” for them to live in a place with non-driving transportation options after graduation.
- 55 percent of students surveyed said they would either be “somewhat more likely” or “much more likely” to stay in Wisconsin after graduation if they could live in a place where trips for work, recreation, and errands did not require a car.

Given Wisconsin’s historic emphasis on expanding highway capacity, often at the expense of investment in non-driving modes

that appeal to young Americans, such as public transportation, biking infrastructure, and walkable communities,⁴ the findings of our survey suggest that Wisconsin's current transportation system and spending priorities could undermine our ability to attract and retain young people.

Investing in a 21st century, multimodal transportation system could help attract young people to Wisconsin and retain talented young people already in the state.

Without a new approach to transportation policy, all Wisconsinites, not only young adults, will miss out on the benefits offered by multimodal communities.

In order to make Wisconsin a more attractive place for young people, and to create a clean and effective transportation system that better serves all Wisconsinites, policymakers at the state and federal level should:

- **Drastically increase funding for multimodal transportation options:** To meet 21st century transportation needs and create more vibrant, livable communities, policymakers should invest in and encourage the use of non-driving transportation alternatives, from public transit, to walking and biking infrastructure, to intercity bus and rail networks.
- **Realign our transportation spending priorities:** Decisionmakers should reorient transportation funding away from new or wider highways and toward repair of existing roads and bridges, and towards multimodal options like transit, walking and biking.
- **Study the evolving transportation preferences of young people:** Governments should invest in data collection and research to track and react to

ongoing shifts in how young people – and people of all ages – travel.

- **Encourage the creation of multimodal communities** by restoring the state's Complete Streets law. Complete Streets policies encourage communities to incorporate walking, biking and transit options into roadway design or reconstruction projects, whenever possible.
- **Support the formation of Regional Transportation Authorities (RTAs):** RTAs, which need legislative approval in Wisconsin, allow cities and counties to raise revenue in support of coordinated, high-quality, regional transportation systems.

Policymakers need to recognize that the transportation paradigm is shifting. Today's young people will be the primary users of Wisconsin's transportation system for decades to come – and they are leading the shift to more multimodal lifestyles. **Ambitious investments in a multimodal transportation network will help ensure that our state becomes more attractive to the talented young people that our communities need to thrive in the 21st century.**

By leaning into these changing habits and shaping our transportation system accordingly, we also stand to improve quality of life for Wisconsinites across the age spectrum, and reap the widespread public health, environmental, and climate benefits that result from reduced driving. By contrast, sinking taxpayer dollars into wasteful, unnecessary highway projects risks squandering this opportunity and driving young people away.

Will Wisconsin create a transportation system for the future, or continue building for the past?

Introduction

To help our communities thrive, Wisconsin needs to attract young people

IN ORDER FOR our communities to thrive, Wisconsin needs more young people to choose to move to and stay in the Badger State.

With a world-class public university system and high concentration of higher education institutions, Wisconsin attracts young people from all over the country and the world. This represents a tremendous opportunity for promising young people to become attached to Wisconsin and to life in the Badger State. But the opportunity is lost if young graduates do not decide that they want to live in Wisconsin after graduation.

Over the past few years, elected officials and business leaders have expressed concern that Wisconsin was experiencing a “brain drain,” or the loss of young, college-educated Wisconsinites from the state.⁵ More recent analysis finds that the problem is not so much “brain drain” as it is the “lack of brain gain.”⁶ In other words, Wisconsin struggles less with retaining young people who grew up here, and more with attracting young talent from outside the Badger State. According to University of Wisconsin-Madison data, 78 percent of the University’s alumni who are from Wisconsin and graduated with a bachelor’s degree between 2007 and 2017 have stayed here, but only 11 percent of students who came to UW Madison from Minnesota and 11 percent of students from other places ended up staying after graduation.⁷

The issue of attracting young people to Wisconsin was front and center in 2017 and 2018, after the electronics manufacturing



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company Foxconn announced it would open a high-tech manufacturing plant in south-east Wisconsin. Then-Governor Scott Walker unveiled a strategy to address Wisconsin’s workforce shortage, including plans to increase job training, remove barriers to work, and attract young talent to the state.⁸

As a part of this strategy, the state legislature funded a \$1 million Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) advertising campaign marketing Wisconsin to young professionals in Chicago, including on subway trains and buses there, and proposed extending the campaign to Minneapolis and Detroit for another \$4.3 million.⁹ The ads touted high quality of life in Wisconsin, juxtaposing images of young people enjoying happy hour, family time and outdoor recreation with commuters on crowded subway trains or stuck in traffic on Chicago’s highways.¹⁰



CATCH THE TRAIN  CATCH SOME AIR?

Wisconsin. It's more **you**.
InWisconsin.com



An ad developed for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, aimed at attracting young professionals to Wisconsin.

Credit: WEDC, via Wall Street Journal

“One of the things I like about [Chicago] is that I don’t have to have a car. I don’t want to sit in my car. That sounds terrible.”

– Patrick Grimaldi, a 26 year-old Chicago lawyer who saw a WEDC ad on his commute.¹⁶

But getting young people to move to Wisconsin doesn’t just come down to marketing. Communities that are effective at attracting young people are good at providing the lifestyle and amenities that Millennials want – and benefit, in turn, from the energy that young people bring.

Young people are putting a higher premium on place-based lifestyle considerations than ever before, leading them to gravitate towards more walkable, bikeable, and transit-friendly communities.¹¹ Businesses and universities across the country have begun catering to this trend – and state and local

leaders would be wise to do so, too. Large employers are now following Millennials to urban areas that offer amenities associated with cities, such as walkable central districts, easy access to retail and leisure opportunities, and transit options.¹² Meanwhile, many college campuses are seeking to appeal to young people by improving the vibrancy of campus life through improved walkability, introducing shuttle buses, encouraging biking, and limiting the number of cars on campus.¹³

Without adequate investments in public transit and non-driving modes, Wisconsin’s cities and towns have difficulty competing with the attractive, multimodal lifestyles offered by cities in neighboring states. The Walker administration’s ad campaign effectively highlighted some aspects of what makes life in Wisconsin appealing. But it missed the mark by juxtaposing livability with public transportation, rather than understanding that public transit represents high quality of life for many young people today.

Perhaps it’s no surprise, then, that many of WEDC’s ads were met with derision from young Chicagoans.¹⁴ The posters and boards that suggested Wisconsin’s short average commute time was preferable to commuting on Chicago’s subway system clearly didn’t resonate with the target audience. In response to the ads on Chicago trains, Thai, a 31-year-old bank employee who recently moved to Chicago from Milwaukee, told a local newspaper that, “Milwaukee’s great, but the public transportation isn’t so great. I actually prefer riding the el to driving, not having to sit in traffic. The CTA works perfectly for me.”¹⁵

By creating towns and cities that offer the lifestyle Millennials want to live, including by investing in the transit, bike, and pedestrian infrastructure they want to use, Wisconsin could fast-track its effort to attract and keep young people in the Badger State.

Millennials on the Move

Today's young adults are seeking out multimodal lifestyles

MILLENNIALS, defined as the generation born between 1982 and 2000, are currently the largest and most diverse generation.¹⁷ They grew up in times of technological change and economic instability, and came of age in an era when “connectedness” – to technology, information, people, places, goods, and services – has become an essential part of everyday life. Given these circumstances, perhaps it should not be surprising that, on the whole, Millennials display markedly different characteristics and preferences than previous generations.

One of the Millennial generation’s distinguishing characteristics is that young people today value different lifestyle considerations, such as the availability of more and better transportation options, more highly than did young people of older generations. In 2014, the Rockefeller Foundation conducted a survey of people between 18 and 34 years old in 10 major U.S. cities, and found that two-thirds, or 66 percent, of respondents said access to high-quality transportation was one of their *top three* criteria for deciding where to live. 80 percent said they would like to live in a place where they wouldn’t need to rely on a car to get around, and almost half said they would seriously consider giving up their car if they had a range of transportation options available.¹⁸

Young people want to live in communities with urban characteristics and amenities

In a world where connectedness is taken for granted, it’s not hard to see why Millennials would want to live in places that have the infrastructure to efficiently get them where



Credit: Creative Commons

they need to go – without necessarily needing to own a car. Indeed, growing evidence suggests that young people choose where they want to live largely based on the lifestyle and amenities in those communities, and that they gravitate towards more walkable, bikeable, and transit-friendly places.¹⁹ In fact, most Millennials surveyed by the Rockefeller Foundation said they would actually consider moving to another city if it had more and better transportation options.²⁰

The implications of these lifestyle preferences are playing out in real-time: Young adults today are moving to urban areas at

higher rates than previous generations did, and, as noted above, many high-profile businesses are following suit.²¹ In fact, the business real estate consulting firm Cushman & Wakefield lists “location strategy” as a top priority for companies looking to hire and retain Millennials.²² The firm advises clients to consider “hard-to-quantify ‘quality of life’ data” when trying to locate in a market that will help attract educated young people, such as the “presence of a large educational institution, vibrant cultural scene in movies and music, and a thriving downtown area with a mix of uses and demographic diversity.”²³

This doesn’t mean that young people are only drawn to cities, but that they want to live in communities that offer the benefits of cities – compact, mixed-use development that provides close proximity to shops, work, and social opportunities, and is conducive to walking and public transit use.²⁴

According to a study of the Millennial generation’s consumer preferences by the analytics group Nielsen, “the concept of ‘urban burbs’ is becoming more popular in redevelopment as suburban communities make changes to create more urban environments with walkable downtown areas and everyday necessities within close reach.”²⁵ In Cushman & Wakefield’s assessment of “location strategies” that can help businesses recruit young talent, the real estate firm notes that even in non-urban areas, the presence of city-like amenities like public transit, mixed-use development, and walkability, can attract young workers and help non-urban business districts thrive.²⁶ The Milwaukee suburb of Wauwatosa, for example, has worked to make its downtown “village” more pedestrian- and bike-friendly, and has brought new coffee shops, dining and retail to the area.²⁷ Wauwatosa’s mayor Kathy Ehley calls her city “a hot spot for urban living.”²⁸

RECRUITING TALENT

Archie Black, CEO of the software firm SPS Commerce in Minneapolis, is aware that location, and, specifically, proximity to transit, is crucial for recruiting Millennials. When asked to reflect on SPS Commerce’s decision to relocate to downtown Minneapolis back in 2004, he said that leaving downtown would now be “unthinkable:” “Here’s the difference between my generation and the 20-somethings: when I was a 20-something I took the bus because I couldn’t afford parking. The 20-somethings now take the bus because they want to take the bus.”²⁹

Young Americans are driving less – if they can afford to

Data from the past two decades show that young people are in fact driving less, if they have the means to live in places that facilitate car-light lifestyles. The National Association of Realtors has found that Millennials value walkable communities, short commutes and proximity to public transportation over living in detached single-family homes – which has made downtown districts and communities with urban characteristics highly desirable in recent years, particularly to young people.³⁰ As city life with multimodal options has become more attractive, however, cost of living in the most desirable urban areas has increased, too, putting life there out of reach for some.³¹

An analysis by the State Smart Transportation Initiative found that Americans between the ages 26 and 33 with high incomes (defined as those with household earnings of \$100,000 per year or more) have started driving significantly less since 2001, compared to the population average. Young adults with high incomes drove over 70

percent more than the average American in 2001, but only about 30 percent more than the average American by 2017 – a drop of over 40 percent.³²

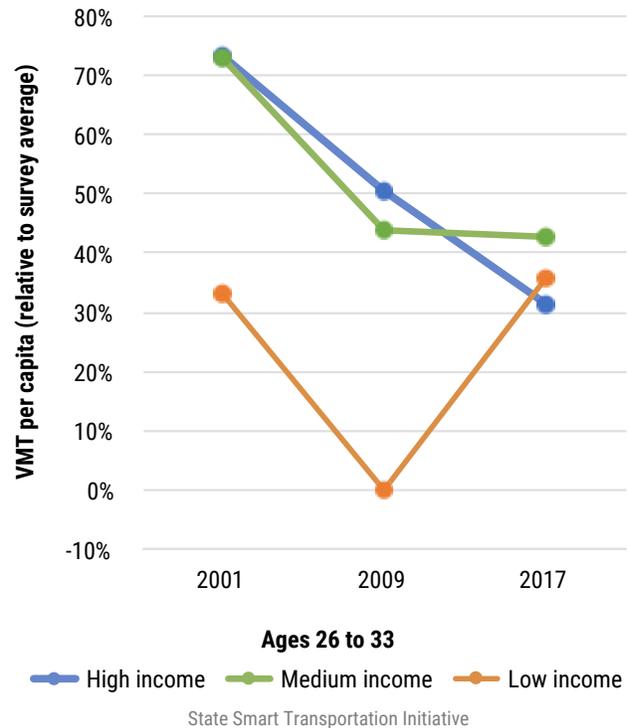
However, low-income Americans (with household earnings below \$50,000 per year) of the same age group did not experience this relative drop in driving. Rather, compared to the average American, they drove less in 2009 than they did in 2001, but were driving more again by 2017. SSTI suggests that this group was especially hard hit by the Great Recession and was driving less in 2009 due to job losses, only to return to their initial level of driving once the economy recovered.

This is in stark contrast to their high-income counterparts, for whom the relative decrease in driving continued after the economic recovery. In fact, by 2017, high-income young Americans were driving approximately the same amount, if not less than, their low-income peers for the first time. This suggests that young people who have the means to relocate are indeed moving to places with better access to transit, bike, and pedestrian infrastructure, and shorter travel distances overall, but that those options are not available to all.³³ (See Figure 1, courtesy of SSTI.)

Economic considerations, new technology and convenience make Millennials less car-focused than previous generations

Many factors work together to make Millennials less car-focused than previous generations of Americans. Millennials carry more student loan debt than their predecessors, and may be wary of taking on additional car loans. According to AAA, the average cost of owning a new car in the U.S. was over \$8,800 per year in 2018, due to the costs of maintenance, repair, depreciation, and fuel.³⁴ That does not even include fees or parking-related expenses. A survey by the transportation data company Arity found that 51

FIGURE 1: RELATIVE VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED PER CAPITA BY INCOME FOR THOSE AGES 26 TO 33, 2001 TO 2017.



Whereas low-income young adults saw a rebound of driving after the economic recovery, their high-income counterparts continue to drive less.

Reproduced with permission from SSTI.



Credit: Paul Krueger via Flickr (CC BY 2.0)



Credit: public domain

percent of Millennials “do not believe owning a car is worth the investment.”³⁵

Furthermore, new technologies and services, often linked to smartphone apps, are facilitating young people’s car-free or car-light lifestyles. Real-time bus tracking and route-mapping on smartphones have made navigating public transportation more convenient, and some transit systems are providing wifi on buses and trains.³⁶



Pedestrian mall.

Credit: Creative Commons

Young adults are the most likely riders of public transportation.³⁷ The American Public Transit Association (APTA) found that public transportation options are considered the best for multitasking, socializing, working, using the internet, and helping people connect to their communities.³⁸ Millennials in that same APTA study listed saving money, convenience, and exercise as the top factors that influenced their transportation choices.³⁹ They also expressed a desire to fully leverage the benefits that transit can offer through more reliable and trackable systems, and on-board wifi or 3G/4G technology.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the adoption of bikesharing services in almost all major American cities has encouraged people to take multimodal trips without having to rely on cars. A majority of bikesharing members in D.C., New York City and Chicago reported using bikesharing at least occasionally as part of a longer transit trip.⁴¹

Finally, carsharing platforms like ZipCar and ride-hailing apps like Lyft and Uber are increasingly providing Millennials the mobility benefits of access to a car without the burden of owning one. Millennials use ride-sharing apps like Uber and Lyft 20 percent more than older generations.⁴²

Millennials are not only less car-focused than previous generations, but actually prefer car-light lifestyles – and are willing to act on that preference. For Baby Boomers, driving a car represented freedom and spontaneity. But today, especially for younger people, owning a car is increasingly seen as a burden, due to big expenses and parking hassles. Being able to get around without a car, on the other hand, signifies greater quality of life. If Wisconsin wants to become more attractive to young people, we must create communities with high-quality, multi-modal transportation systems.

Surveying the transportation preferences of young people in Wisconsin

“Getting to work is way easier on the bus. I like being able to read, and not having to worry about finding parking or paying for parking.”

– Julia, age 24, medical researcher in Madison

“I was fortunate enough to have had the option of driving a car back to school, since it is by far the easiest way to get there. However, I’d really prefer not to... I know the car will just sit in a parking lot for four months.”

– Liam, student at Lawrence University in Appleton, discussing his drive back to Appleton from Illinois after winter break

“The bus system is easy and convenient, and biking is usually one of the highlights of my day. In my experience, there is no better way to get around the city.”

– Marina, student at UW Madison, originally from Hudson, WI

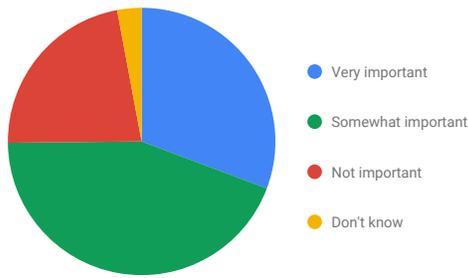
TO BETTER UNDERSTAND the transportation preferences of young people in Wisconsin and how these preferences might influence decisions about where young people choose to locate after graduation, the WISPIRG Foundation conducted a survey of over 600 college students across 24 Wisconsin college campuses. This study is an updated version of a similar survey that the WISPIRG Foundation administered and released in 2014, with data from the 2013-2014 school year.⁴³ Our new report evaluates data collected in the 2017-2018 school year.

The results of this survey echoed those of our 2014 study, suggesting that current Wisconsin students want to see a multimodal transportation future for our state, and that the availability of multimodal transportation options may factor into their decisions about where to live after graduation.

Students who completed the survey demonstrated a strong desire to have access to transit and transportation options other than driving, to reduce costs associated with driving, and to be able to multitask on their commute. **Students expressed these preferences for multimodal transportation options despite the fact that 85 percent of survey respondents said that they plan to own a car after graduation.** Survey results were similar for on-campus residents and for commuter students, and for part-time and for full-time students.

The key findings of our survey are listed below, and the full set of results can be found in the Appendix.

After graduation, is it important to you to live in a place where there are other options for getting around besides driving?



Availability of multimodal transportation options affects choice of place:

- 75 percent of students surveyed said it was either “very important” or “somewhat important” to them to live in a place with non-driving transportation options after graduation.
- 55 percent of students surveyed said they would be either “somewhat more likely” or “much more likely” to stay in Wisconsin after graduation if they could live in a place where trips for work, recreation, and errands did not require a car. 31 percent said this would not be a factor, and 14 percent said they did not know.

Young people value non-driving alternatives:

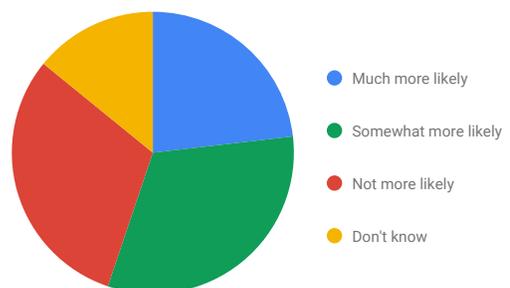
- 85 percent of respondents said it was either “very important” or “somewhat important” to them to avoid or reduce costs associated with having a car, such as maintenance, repair, gas, insurance, and parking. Of those, the majority said it was “very important.”
- 63 percent of respondents said it was important to them to engage in other activities (like working/ doing homework, reading, using social media, using their smartphone for fun etc.) while traveling.
- 68 percent of respondents said that their primary use of alternate transportation systems (including ride-hailing apps, carsharing programs, and bikesharing programs) was recreational or social.

- The top three reasons students gave for why non-driving alternatives were important to them were: They’re better for the environment (59 percent of respondents), they save money on transportation (58 percent), and they avoid parking fees and difficulty (46 percent).

How young Wisconsinites choose to get around and why:

- Of respondents who commute to school (55 percent of respondents), 62 percent drive in a car by themselves, 17 percent walk, 10 percent bike, 7 percent take public transportation, and 4 percent carpool. Of respondents who live on campus (45 percent), 92 percent walk, 3 percent bike, 2 percent take public transportation, and 2 percent drive themselves to get to class.
- Among commuter students who drive or get a ride to school, 51 percent said the reason they don’t use public transportation is because there is no service where they live. 31 percent said it would take too long to use transit, and 10 percent said there are no buses scheduled for the times they need to travel. Several students added that they live in neighboring cities or counties, and that there is no service connecting them to campus.
- 71 percent of students said that they would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to use public transportation to get to school if it were more convenient. Of those, a majority said they would be “very likely” to use it.

How much more likely would you be to stay in Wisconsin after graduation if you could live in a place where trips for work, recreation, and errands didn't require a car?



Transportation trends are changing across the aging spectrum

MILLENNIALS' transportation preferences have diverged from the historic norm. However, although Millennials are on the forefront of changing transportation trends, they are not alone in rethinking the way they get around. Across age groups, Americans are dissatisfied with the current transportation system, and are changing their behavior.

A 2018 survey by the transportation data and risk assessment group Arity found that almost half of Americans do not enjoy most of the time they spend in their cars, and that 52 percent would rather spend that time doing "more productive tasks." While the vast majority of Americans still own and rely on cars, the Arity survey found that almost a third of respondents across age groups do not believe car ownership is worth the investment.⁴⁴

Americans value multimodal options, short commutes, and walkable communities

These shifting attitudes are having real-time impacts. In 2017, the average American drove less than they did during the recession in 2009.⁴⁵ This trend is being led by high- and middle-income Americans. In 2009, people in high-income households (defined as those earning over \$100,000 per year) drove 27 percent more than the average American, but by 2017, they were driving only about 17 percent more than the average American. Over the same period of time, medium-income Americans also drove relatively less, while Americans in low-income households (defined as those earning less than \$50,000 year) drove relatively more.

As discussed previously, this development is most pronounced among Millennials, but holds true across age groups. According to



Happy bus riders in Madison.

Credit: WISPIRG Foundation Staff

the State Smart Transportation Initiative, this trend suggests that Americans with greater means are choosing to live in places that require less driving or offer other transportation options.⁴⁶ That notion is further supported by the National Association of Realtors' 2017 Community & Transportation Preferences Survey, which found that six in ten Americans across age groups would be willing to spend more money on a house if it was in a walkable community.⁴⁷

The value of multimodality to the average American is indeed changing. The National Association of Realtors also found that, in 2017, for the first time ever, a majority of respondents said they would prefer to live in a walkable community with a short com-

mute, even if it meant living in an attached home.⁴⁸ Unsurprisingly, this preference was strongest among Millennials (both with and without children,) but also true for a majority of respondents overall.⁴⁹

Furthermore, more Americans of all ages are waiting longer to get driver's licenses, or choosing not to get them altogether. In 2014, only 24 percent of 16-year-olds and 60 percent of 18-year-olds had driver's licenses, as compared to 46 percent and 80 percent, respectively, in 1983. Over the same period, licensure rates have fallen 13 percent for people in their twenties, 8 percent for people in their thirties, and 3 percent for people in their forties. Only people aged fifty or older are more likely to have a driver's license now than they did in 1983.⁵⁰

With new technologies that enable ride-hailing, bikesharing, and carsharing, and easy ways to interact with bus systems and schedules, Americans have more convenient options for getting around than ever

before. It is worth noting that young people aren't the only ones taking advantage of new technologies: In 2017, members of Generation X accounted for 32 percent of ridehailing use by services like Uber and Lyft, and Baby Boomers accounted for 35 percent.⁵¹ As a result of these and other factors, having a driver's license is no longer seen as the "ticket to freedom" that it used to be.

Changing demographics place new demands on our transportation system

Finally, demographic changes are putting new and different demands on our transportation system. As life expectancy increases, more and more seniors are outliving their ability to drive. In states like Wisconsin, where the population is rapidly aging, this could mean a dramatic decline in older Americans' quality of life: Without access to non-driving transportation infrastructure, many seniors will no longer be independently mobile and risk being stranded in their homes, rather than engaged in their communities. Projections show that seniors (people ages 65 and older) will compose more than 20 percent of Wisconsin's population by 2025, and almost 24 percent by 2040.⁵²

From the very young to the very old, important changes in transportation and driving behavior are happening across the age spectrum in Wisconsin. Transportation systems that allow people to drive less create more attractive places to live for people of all ages, and for people of all levels of physical ability. State and local leaders should take advantage of these trends to create communities where access to clean, effective and affordable multimodal transportation keeps up with evolving 21st century demands and ensures high quality of life for everyone.



Pedestrian mall.

Credit: Creative Commons

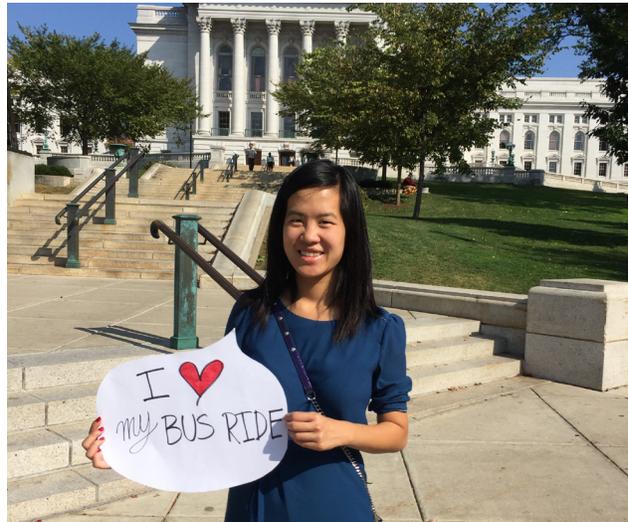
Wisconsin communities leading the way towards a multimodal future

MANY WISCONSIN COUNTIES, cities, and towns – including those highlighted below – are already working hard to create attractive communities that integrate multimodal, 21st century transportation options.

City of Eau Claire

Nick Meyer, a local publisher and business owner, calls Eau Claire “a Midwestern community in a rebirth.”⁵³ After a major loss of manufacturing jobs in the 1990s left behind blighted properties, local leaders launched a large-scale campaign to diversify the city’s economy and to revitalize the downtown area by bringing parks, housing, businesses, cultural offerings and gastronomy to the heart of Eau Claire.⁵⁴ The city also invested in bike trails, walking infrastructure, and a transit system that connects the more than 10,000 undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire to downtown, encouraging students to take advantage of the city’s offerings.⁵⁵

The result of this more than decade-long effort is an attractive downtown with mixed-use development that offers “the entire spectrum for today’s lifestyle of urban living,” according to the nonprofit Downtown Eau Claire development board, with “arts, biking, culture, dining, entertainment, parks, a farmers market, music, and shopping.”⁵⁶ New stores, coffee shops, craft breweries, music venues and hotels have opened,⁵⁷ tech companies and other employers have chosen to locate downtown,⁵⁸ and an already vibrant local arts scene was given a further boost by the now nationally known music festival *Eaux Claires* that has attracted thousands of people since 2015 – and that’s just one of Eau Claire’s six outdoor music festivals.⁵⁹ The



Multimodal transportation options are popular in Madison.

Credit: WISPIRG Foundation Staff

city also hopes to break ground in 2020 on a new transit center, which will be housed in a mixed-use building downtown.⁶⁰

It should come as no surprise, then, that Eau Claire has been particularly effective at drawing in young people, and that the city today serves as a model for other college towns faced with similar challenges in the wake of deindustrialization. Eau Claire has grown remarkably in recent years, with a 3 percent growth rate between 2010 and 2017 that is second in Wisconsin only to the Madison area.⁶¹ But Eau Claire’s growth is even more impressive with young people aged between 20 and 34: Over the same period, this segment of the population grew by more than 6 percent, according to U.S. Census data. Today, young people between 20 and 34 years old make up nearly a third of the city of Eau Claire’s population of about 68,000.⁶²

City of La Crosse and La Crosse County

The median age in the city of La Crosse, home to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, is 28.3 years, versus the state's median age of 39.⁶³ The city and county actively promote multimodal transportation options for residents and visitors.

In La Crosse County, almost 7 percent of residents either bike or walk to work, with rates almost as high as 40 percent in some neighborhoods.⁶⁴ In order to better accommodate that lifestyle, La Crosse County installed its first neighborhood greenway (also known as a "bike boulevard") in 2017, and also made plans to connect the North Side of La Crosse to neighboring Onalaska for cyclists and pedestrians by reconstructing Exit 3 of Interstate 90.⁶⁵

Additionally, La Crosse's Municipal Transit Utility (MTU) bus system takes residents on over one million rides per year. In 2017, high ridership prompted MTU to consider expansions and innovations to the system, including an Automatic Vehicle Location real-time bus tracking system, new routes, new buses, and discount passes. La Crosse's Mayor Tim Kabat rides the bus to work himself, and believes the city could double its bus ridership.⁶⁶

Furthermore, La Crosse's Scenic Mississippi River Transit (SMRT) system, a relatively new regional system that connects La Crosse to Viroqua and Prairie du Chien, saw a 60 percent increase in ridership between its creation in 2013 and 2017. 60 percent of SMRT riders use it to commute to work. Again, high ridership has justified possible expansion of the SMRT system into other neighboring cities like Tomah and Arcadia.⁶⁷

City of Madison

With its network of protected bike paths and lanes, Madison is one of the top five bike friendly cities in the country, according to the League of American Bicyclists.⁶⁸ Additionally, local officials have made efforts to improve pedestrian safety, including the creation of high-visibility crosswalks, installation of sound signals, and a history of "Complete Streets" planning, which incorporates walk-

ing, biking, and transit into street design.⁶⁹ More than 13 percent of Madisonians walk or bike to work, compared to 11 percent in Minneapolis and 8 percent in Chicago.⁷⁰

Madison's transit system is also extraordinarily popular: Transit ridership on Madison Metro Transit increased steadily from 1989 until 2014, when it hit an all-time high.⁷¹ Wisconsin's transit systems are heavily dependent on state funds, however, and inadequate investment from state government has left Madison Metro with limited resources to keep up with this growing demand.⁷²

To address overcrowding on buses, shorten travel times, and reduce congestion by decreasing the number of cars on the road, Madison Metro has proposed improving the local transit system by developing a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor along the city's Isthmus, a narrow stretch of land that includes Madison's downtown area.⁷³ Planners believe this BRT system will increase transit ridership, as has been the trend nationally, including in cities like Seattle and Houston.⁷⁴

Madison is considered a great place for young people to live, and, in fact, Millennials made up 26.8 percent of the city's population in 2015 – the fifth highest percentage of Millennials in any U.S. city.⁷⁵ This is despite the fact that Midwestern cities tend to have a lower share of Millennials compared to cities nationwide.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Madison is the fastest growing city in Wisconsin; its population grew by 8.1 percent between 2010 and 2016,⁷⁷ compared to only 0.2 percent growth statewide during that same time⁷⁸ and no growth at all in Milwaukee, the state's largest city.⁷⁹

Statewide

Other counties in the Badger State with particularly high rates of bike and pedestrian commuting include Ashland County in northern Wisconsin (almost 9 percent of commutes), Dunn County in western Wisconsin (almost 8 percent), Portage County north of Madison (7.5 percent), and Grant County in southwestern Wisconsin (almost 7.5 percent).⁸⁰

Changing transportation trends should mean 21st century budget priorities

DESPITE MAJOR SHIFTS in travel behavior that have been apparent for more than a decade, the state of Wisconsin continues to spend money on transportation as though nothing has changed – prioritizing big highway expansion projects over urgent local needs like repairing existing roads and providing better multimodal transportation options for Wisconsinites.

From 1998 to 2013, a period during which state leaders aggressively expanded major highways across Wisconsin, spending on big-ticket highway projects increased by 50 percent, while investment in road maintenance, transit systems, and bike and pedestrian projects stagnated.⁸¹ Widening highways has cost Wisconsin taxpayers billions of dollars, and has driven the state deep into debt – without effectively addressing the problems, like perceived congestion, that these expansion projects were intended to solve. Study after study has shown that adding lanes to highways only draws new drivers to the road, actually resulting in conditions equally or more congested than before.⁸² Meanwhile, these costly projects divert much-needed resources from more pressing transportation needs.

Today, Wisconsin is left with an over-built highway system that has saddled future generations with debt – at the same time as young Wisconsinites are moving away from car-centered lifestyles. Meanwhile, local roads are in disrepair.⁸³ And instead of investing in the extensive, interconnected transit, biking and pedestrian networks that are crucial to creating vibrant, 21st century communities, Wisconsin’s public transportation systems and walking and biking infrastructure are dramatically underfunded.



Credit: CC0/public domain

State leaders’ recent transportation spending decisions could mark a turning point. In 2017, then-Governor Scott Walker scrapped a \$1 billion plan to expand 3.5 miles of Interstate 94 in Milwaukee. In the fall of 2018, Walker also pointed to changing transportation preferences in justifying his deprioritization of major highway projects, saying “I don’t know that we need bigger and better and broader [highways] right now when we have a changing transportation system.”⁸⁴

Policymakers need to recognize that the transportation paradigm is shifting. Major changes are afoot in transportation behavior among Wisconsinites – led by young people, but also among other age groups. If Wisconsin wants to thrive in the 21st century, we must make smarter transportation investments. Quality of life in our communities, our collective prosperity, and our air and environment all stand to benefit from reimagining our transportation system for the future, rather than doubling down on infrastructure of the past.

THE CO-BENEFITS OF MULTIMODAL COMMUNITIES

Young people want to live more multimodal lives. By leaning into these changing habits and shaping our transportation system accordingly, we have the opportunity to make Wisconsin more attractive to young people, *while also* reaping a wide range of other benefits, including improving quality of life for all Wisconsinites, using taxpayer dollars more responsibly, improving public health and protecting the environment.

- **Public health:** Reducing exposure to vehicle-related particle pollution can help reduce rates of childhood asthma, while active transportation like walking and biking can help reduce the risks of cardiovascular disease.⁸⁵
- **Fiscal responsibility:** Highway expansions cost billions of taxpayer dollars, but study after study has shown that they do not effectively reduce congestion.⁸⁶ Prioritizing high-quality multimodal options within and between communities would put taxpayer dollars towards solutions that reduce the need for single-occupancy car travel and, combined with smart-pricing measures that discourage driving alone, at busy times, or in busy locations, could more effectively relieve congestion.⁸⁷
- **Climate:** Transportation is the largest source of global warming pollution, and personal car travel accounts for a significant portion of greenhouse gas emissions from this sector.⁸⁸ Whereas expanding our highway system draws more cars to the road,⁸⁹ investing in multimodal transportation options creates good alternatives to driving that can help reduce global warming pollution – particularly when combined with the creation of denser, more energy-efficient communities.⁹⁰
- **Healthy aging:** Projections show that seniors (people ages 65 and older) will compose more than 20 percent of Wisconsin’s population by 2025, and almost 24 percent by 2040.⁹¹ Investing in accessible non-driving transportation infrastructure can help keep more seniors independently mobile and engaged in their communities.⁹²
- **Accessibility:** A robust multimodal transportation system would provide better alternatives and improve quality of life for people who cannot or do not drive, due to disability, age, lack of licensure, or choice.⁹³
- **Societal equity:** Low-income communities and communities of color are often located near or bisected by highways, disproportionately exposing their residents to adverse health effects of particle pollution from car and truck traffic. These communities also disproportionately rely on public transportation for access to jobs, healthcare, and other needs, and therefore stand to benefit from greater mobility and connectivity afforded by multimodal options.⁹⁴
- **Safety:** Traffic-related incidents are responsible for the loss 5,700 lives in the Midwest each year.⁹⁵ Reducing car traffic and connecting communities with safer pedestrian and transit infrastructure can reduce the risk of car-related injuries and deaths.⁹⁶

Conclusion and recommendations

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY, car culture no longer represents the “American Dream.” Instead, Millennials prefer multimodal lifestyles that allow them to get around efficiently, multitask, and feel connected to their communities.

Not only do young people today prefer these lifestyles, they are moving to the places where public transportation, walkable and bikeable neighborhoods, and services like Lyft, BublR Bikes and ZipCar allow them to live without having to own a car. Indeed, economist Joseph Cortright finds that, today, “many young adults, particularly the well-educated, seem to be putting a higher priority on quality of life factors than economic ones.”⁹⁷

For Wisconsin to thrive in the 21st century, we must create communities where multimodal transportation options allow everyone to live car-free or car-light lifestyles. And this won't only attract and benefit young people: We all stand to enjoy the greater quality of life that comes from clean, healthy, connected, walkable and bikeable neighborhoods, towns and cities.

Creating a modern and effective transportation system starts with rethinking our spending priorities. Wisconsin's leaders should stop wasting resources on highway expansions that are unlikely to meet tomorrow's transportation needs. Instead, we ought to focus on maintaining existing roads and bridges. And we should ambitiously build for the future by dramatically scaling up investment in multimodal infrastructure that shapes the commutes and communities that young people and others find so attractive.

In order to make Wisconsin a more attractive place to young people, and to create a

clean and effective transportation system that better serves all Wisconsinites, policymakers at all levels of government should:

- **Drastically increase funding for multimodal transportation options:** To meet 21st century transportation needs and create more vibrant, livable communities, policymakers should invest in and encourage the use of non-driving transportation alternatives, from public transit, to walking and biking infrastructure, to intercity bus and rail networks.
- **Realign our transportation spending priorities:** Decisionmakers should reorient transportation funding away from new or wider highways and toward repair of existing roads and bridges, and towards multimodal options like transit, walking and biking.
- **Study the evolving transportation preferences of young people:** Governments should invest in data collection and research to track and react to ongoing shifts in how young people – and people of all ages – travel.
- **Encourage the creation of multimodal communities** by restoring the state's Complete Streets law. Complete Streets policies encourage communities to incorporate walking and biking options into roadway design or reconstruction projects, whenever possible.
- **Support the formation of Regional Transportation Authorities (RTAs):** RTAs, which need legislative approval in Wisconsin, allow cities and counties to raise revenue in support of coordinated, high-quality, regional transportation systems.

I APPENDIX

THIS STUDY IS an updated version of a similar survey that the WISPIRG Foundation administered and released in 2014, with data from the 2013-2014 school year. This report evaluates data collected in the 2017-2018 school year.

Survey responses were collected from 612 college students at 24 different campuses in Wisconsin, including 15 University of Wisconsin campuses, six technical colleges, and three private universities. Schools included both two-year and four-year campuses. Students were asked 18 questions pertaining to their academic status (part-time vs. full-time and commuter vs. on-campus residential student), their current mode of travel, and their transportation preferences. The results indicated that roughly 94 percent of respondents were full-time students and 55 percent identified as commuter students.

The survey was not conducted with a scientifically selected sample. Surveys were collected in-person on campuses and via an online link. The online survey was distributed through faculty who forwarded the link to their student mailing lists.

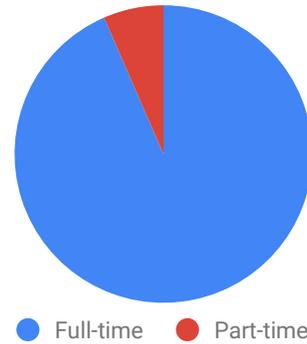
While conducted using the same methodology, results from the 2014 and 2018 versions of the survey should not necessarily be viewed side by side. The 2018 sample is larger, including more students and more schools (612 vs. 540 students, and 24 vs. 17 schools). More importantly, the profiles of the samples are different: The 2014 sample was made up of approximately 80 percent full-time students and 75 percent commuter students, whereas the 2018 sample was made up of approximately 94 percent full-time students and 55 percent commuter students.

1. What college or university do you attend?

UW-Milwaukee	5	0.8%
UW-Marathon	8	1.3%
UW-Whitewater	16	2.6%
UW-Eau Claire	65	10.7%
UW-Oshkosh	9	1.5%
UW-Madison	105	17.2%
UW-Parkside	37	6.1%
UW-Platteville	2	0.3%
UW-Stevens Point	32	5.2%
UW-La Crosse	72	11.8%
UW-Stout	6	1.0%
UW-Green Bay	8	1.3%
UW-Waukesha	58	9.5%
UW-Richland	38	6.2%
Lawrence University	31	5.1%
Milwaukee School of Engineering	12	2.0%
Carthage College	10	1.6%
Chippewa Valley Technical College	2	0.3%
MATC	1	0.2%
Beloit College	7	1.1%
NWTC	5	0.8%
Northeast Wisconsin Technical College	2	0.3%
Fox Valley Technical College	10	1.6%
Not Specified	63	10.3%
UW-Marinette	6	1.0%

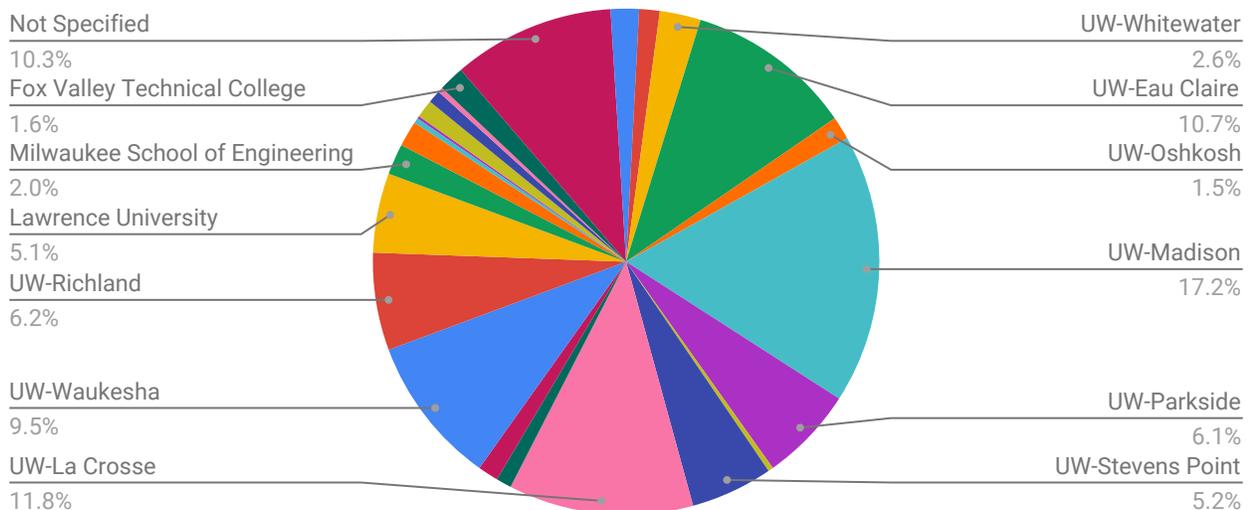
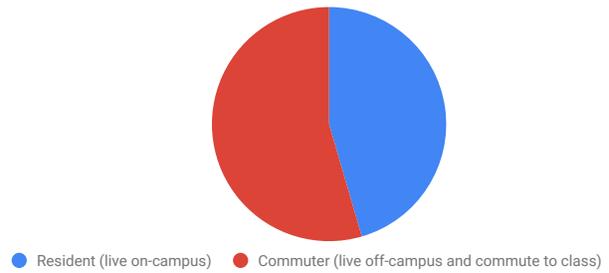
2. Do you go to school full-time or part-time?

Full-time	572	93.5%
Part-time	40	6.5%



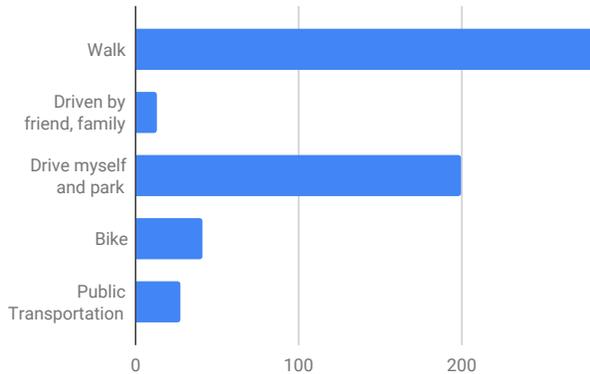
3. What type of student are you?

Resident (live on-campus)	277	45.5%
Commuter (live off-campus and commute to class)	332	54.5%



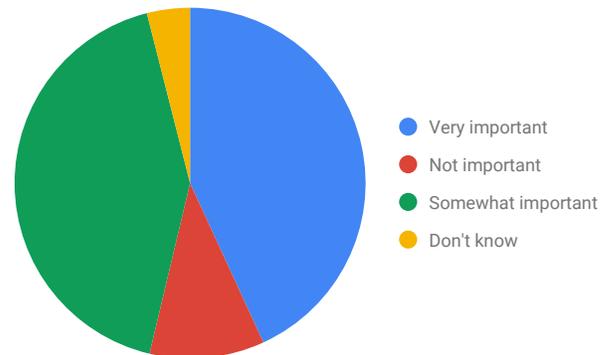
4. How do you get to class most often?

Walk	281	50.1%
Driven by friend, family member, etc.	13	2.3%
Drive myself and park	199	35.5%
Bike	41	7.3%
Public Transportation	27	4.8%



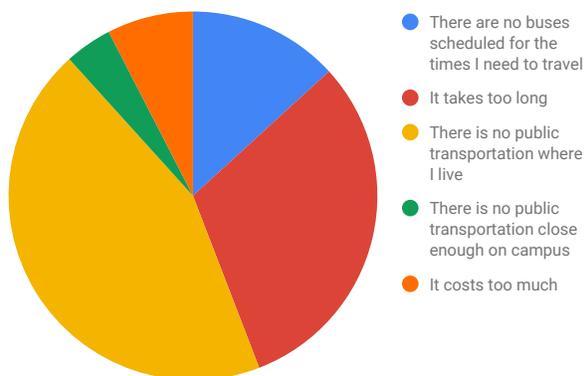
6. How important to you is it to avoid or reduce costs associated with having a car, such as maintenance, repair, gas, insurance, and parking?

Very important	261	43.1%
Not important	64	10.6%
Somewhat important	256	42.3%
Don't know	24	4.0%



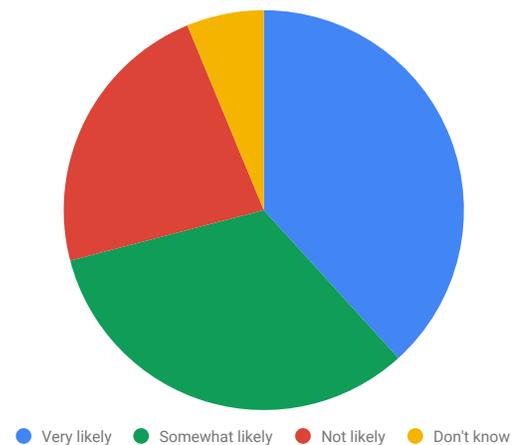
5. If you drive or get a ride to school, what is the reason you don't take public transportation?

There are no buses scheduled for the times I need to travel	35	13.2%
It takes too long	82	30.9%
There is no public transportation where I live	117	44.2%
There is no public transportation close enough on campus	11	4.2%
It costs too much	20	7.5%



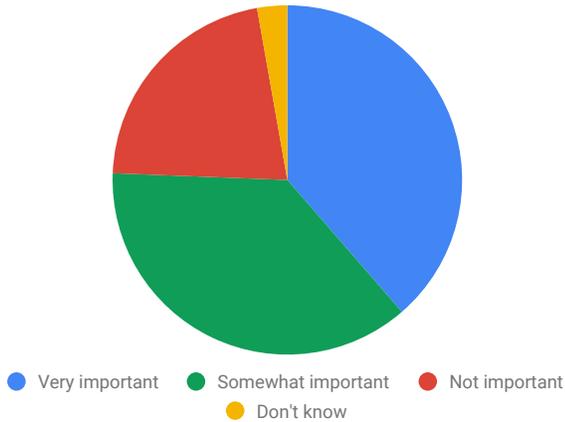
7. If public transportation were more convenient, how likely would you be to use public transportation to get to school?

Very likely	233	38.3%
Somewhat likely	199	32.7%
Not likely	139	22.8%
Don't know	38	6.2%



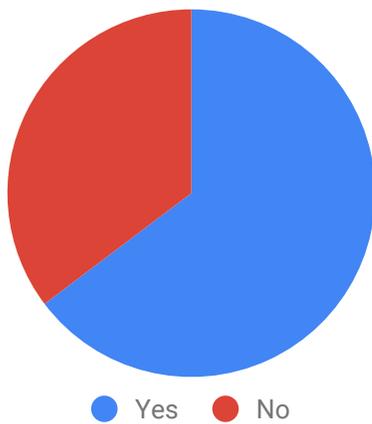
8. How important is it for you to have transportation options other than an automobile to get around?

Very important	236	38.6%
Somewhat important	226	37.0%
Not important	132	21.6%
Don't know	17	2.8%



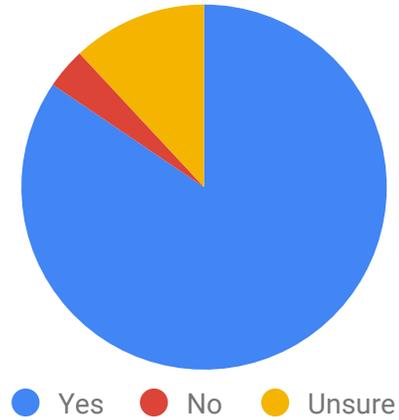
9. Do you currently own a car?

Yes	396	64.7%
No	216	35.3%



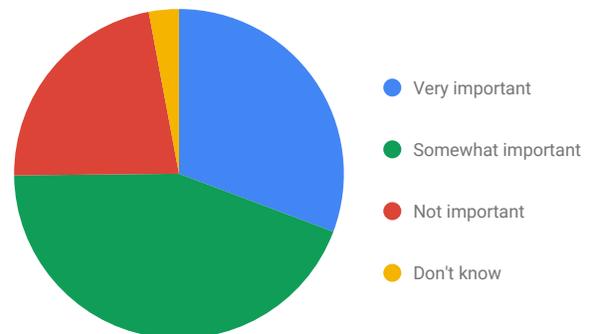
10. Do you plan to own a car after you graduate?

Yes	517	84.5%
No	22	3.6%
Unsure	73	11.9%



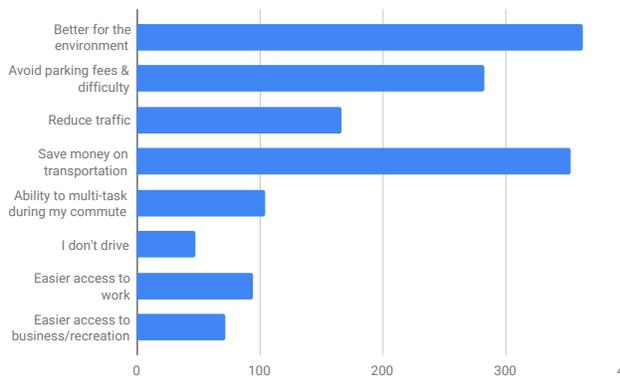
11. After graduation, is it important to you to live in a place where there are other options for getting around besides driving?

Very important	188	30.7%
Somewhat important	270	44.1%
Not important	136	22.2%
Don't know	18	2.9%



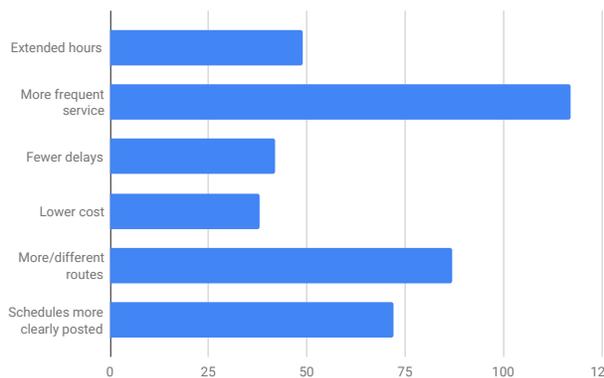
12. Why are non-driving alternatives important to you? (pick up to two)

Better for the environment	363	59.3%
Avoid parking fees & difficulty	283	46.2%
Reduce traffic	166	27.1%
Save money on transportation	353	57.7%
Ability to multi-task during my commute	104	17.0%
I don't drive	48	7.8%
Easier access to work	94	15.4%
Easier access to business/recreation	72	11.8%



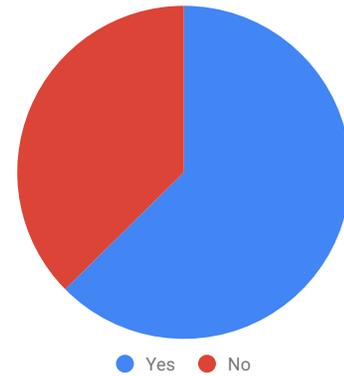
13. If you do take public transportation to get to school, how do you think it could be improved?

Extended hours	49
More frequent service	117
Fewer delays	42
Lower cost	38
More/different routes	87
Schedules more clearly posted	72



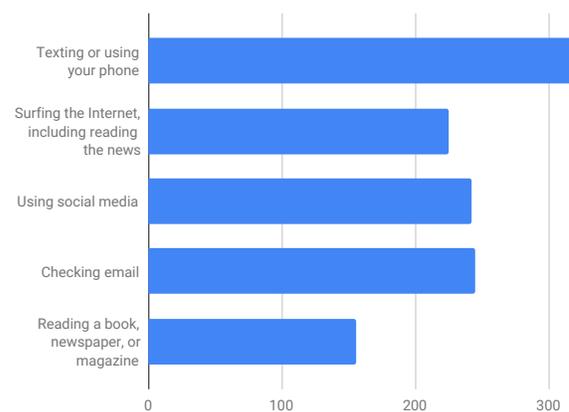
14. During the time you spend traveling, is it important to you to engage in other activities (like working/doing homework, reading, using social media, using your smartphone for fun etc.)?

Yes	377	62.6%
No	225	37.4%



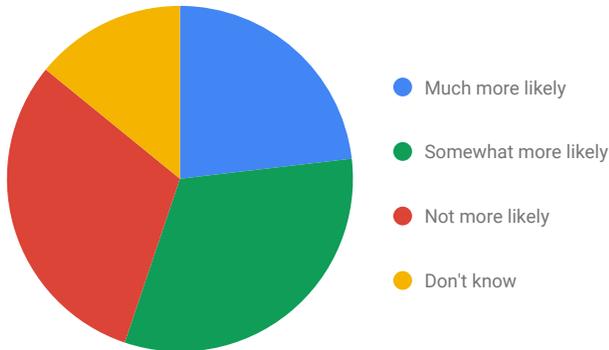
15. If yes, what activities do you engage in while traveling?

Texting or using your phone	317	51.8%
Surfing the Internet, including reading the news	225	36.8%
Using social media	242	39.5%
Checking email	245	40.0%
Reading a book, newspaper, or magazine	156	25.5%



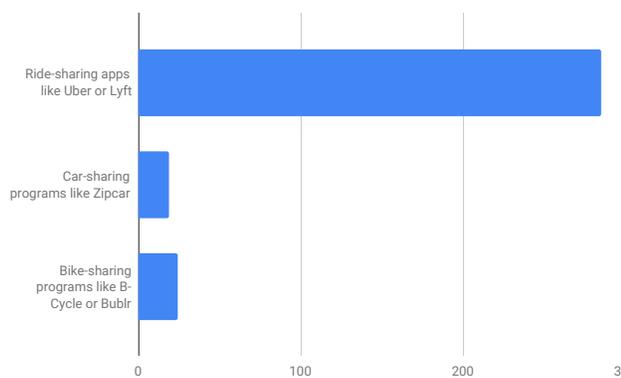
16. How much more likely would you be to stay in Wisconsin after graduation if you could live in a place where trips for work, recreation, and errands didn't require a car?

Much more likely	141	23.2%
Somewhat more likely	195	32.0%
Not more likely	187	30.7%
Don't know	86	14.1%



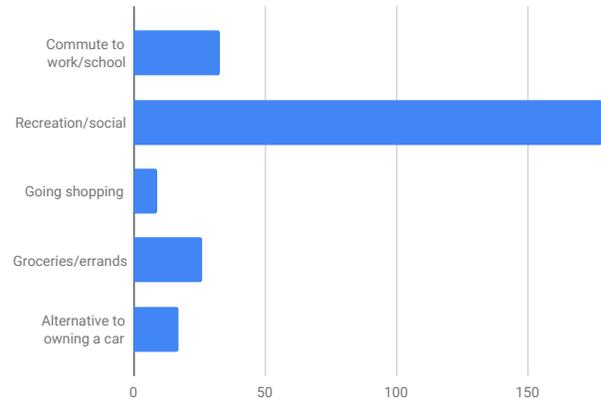
17. Do you use any of the following transportation systems?

Ride-sharing apps like Uber or Lyft	285	46.6%
Car-sharing programs like Zipcar	19	3.1%
Bike-sharing programs like B-Cycle or Bublr	24	3.9%



18. If yes, what is your primary use of these systems?

Commute to work/school	33	12.5%
Recreation/social	178	67.7%
Going shopping	9	3.4%
Groceries/errands	26	9.9%
Alternative to owning a car	17	6.5%



NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Rockefeller Foundation, Transportation for America and Global Strategy Group, *Rockefeller Millennials Survey*, April 2014; and The Nielsen Company, *Millennials – Breaking the Myths*, February 2014, pages 15-17.
- 2 Rockefeller Foundation, Transportation for America and Global Strategy Group, *Rockefeller Millennials Survey*, April 2014.
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- 4 Tom Van Heeke and Jeff Inglis, Frontier Group, and Bruce Speight, WISPIRG Foundation, *Fork in the Road: Will Wisconsin Waste Money on Unneeded Highway Expansion or Invest in 21st Century Transportation Priorities?* 2014.
- 5 Duey Stroebel, “Stemming Wisconsin’s Brain Drain,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 2, 2015.
- 6 Tessa Conroy, Matthew Kures and Steven Deller, “Wisconsin’s Lack Of ‘Brain Gain’ And The Future Of Its Workforce,” *WisCONTEXT*, January 11, 2017.
- 7 University of Wisconsin-Madison Academic Planning and Institutional Research (APIR), *Bachelor’s Alumni Residency*, Current Residency Distribution by Academic Year of Graduation, 2006/7-2016/17. Retrieved on January 22, 2019 at https://dataviz.wisc.edu/views/BachelorsAlumniintheUSA_0/BachelorsAlumniResidency?%3Aembed=y&%3AshowShareOptions=true&%3Adisplay_count=no&%3AshowVizHome=no.
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- 10 Many of the ads developed for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation by Nelson Schmidt Inc. can be seen at <https://www.nelsonschmidt.com/our-work/wedc-tmh-in-wisconsin-more-you-campaign/>.
- 11 See, for example, Rockefeller Foundation, Transportation for America and Global Strategy Group, *Rockefeller Millennials Survey*, April 2014.
- 12 See, for example, Cushman & Wakefield, *Facing the Millennial Wave*, 2015, pages 7-9; and Lee Schafer, “For Millennials, Ideal Jobs Are All About Location,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 12, 2015.
- 13 Tom Van Heeke, Elise Sullivan and Phineas Baxandall, Frontier Group, *A New Course*, February 2014.
- 14 John Greenfield, “Chicagoans to Wisconsin: Thanks but No Thanks – We’ll Take the Train,” *Chicago Reader*, February 21, 2018.

- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Shayndi Raice, "Wisconsin, Facing a Worker Shortage, Pitches Its Benefits," *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2018.
- 17 U.S. Census Bureau, *Millennials Outnumber Baby Boomers and Are Far More Diverse* (press release), June 25, 2015, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>.
- 18 Rockefeller Foundation, Transportation for America and Global Strategy Group, *Rockefeller Millennials Survey*, April 2014.
- 19 Ibid. See also The Nielsen Company, *Millennials – Breaking the Myths*, 2014, pages 15-17.
- 20 Rockefeller Foundation, Transportation for America and Global Strategy Group, *Rockefeller Millennials Survey*, April 2014.
- 21 The Nielsen Company, *Millennials – Breaking the Myths*, 2014, pages 15-17.
- 22 Cushman & Wakefield, *Facing the Millennial Wave*, 2015, page 9.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Urban Land Institute, *Americans' Views on Their Communities, Housing, And Transportation*, March 2013, page 19. Note that this survey categorizes young adults as "Generation Y," which includes people born between 1979 and 1995, and thus overlaps with some but not all of the Millennial generation (people born between 1982 and 2000).
- 25 The Nielsen Company, *Millennials – Breaking the Myths*, 2014, page 16.
- 26 Cushman & Wakefield, *Facing the Millennial Wave*, 2015, page 9.
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- 31 See, for example, Mike Maciag, "The Widening Cost-of-Living Gap," *Governing*, February 2018.
- 32 Chris McCahill, State Smart Transportation Initiative, *Millennials Are Driving More, but Only Those Making the Least Money* (blog post), April 16, 2018, <https://www.ssti.us/2018/04/millennials-are-driving-more-but-only-those-making-the-least-money/>.
- 33 Ibid.
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- 35 Arity, *Be Patient, Change Is Gonna Come* (blog post), November 8, 2018, <https://www.arity.com/move/patient-change-gonna-come/>.
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- 38 American Public Transportation Association, *Millennials & Mobility: Understanding the Millennial Mindset*, October 2013.
- 39 Ibid.
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- 43 Our 2014 survey data and report, *Driving Wisconsin's "Brain Drain?" How Outdated Transportation Policies Undermine Wisconsin's Ability to Attract and Retain Young Talent for Tomorrow's Economic Prosperity*, are available at <https://wispirg.org/reports/wip/driving-wisconsins-brain-drain>.

- 44 Arity, *Be Patient, Change Is Gonna Come* (blog post), November 8, 2018, <https://www.arity.com/move/patient-change-gonna-come/>.
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