Advocates push for transit connections to Georgia's two-year colleges

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Transportation challenges can get in way of graduating, students say

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"There's a trope that I have used and heard," said Abigail Sellers, the public policy project's co-founder. "Our students are one flat tire away from dropping out."

Advocates who want to ensure more students graduate from college are zeroing in on transportation as one barrier to success. Nearly half of Georgia's students enrolled in 29 campuses in 2019-2020 were attending two-year public colleges spent an average of $1,800 on transportation, according to a national report by the College Board.

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The Civic Mapping Initiative is charting the proximity of community colleges to public transit across the state. Sellers said they wanted to learn more about how "higher ed institutions are actually connected to the community that they're in, compared to a large part of succeeding in college. But they couldn't find any statewide data. Most surveys that detailed transit access to campuses were from 2010 or 2011 and focused on urban areas."

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Sellers, however, is focused on the remaining 14% of campuses across the state. Many of the state's two-year colleges are located far out of urban areas. Some are the locations where she said there's potential to connect campuses to the state's rural transit hubs by adding another stop.

The 14%, these 20 campuses, that represent a good opportunity for the state to invest in twinning its workforce and enhancing higher education attainment goals," she said.

These include one in the outskirts of metro Atlanta, including in Cherokee, Douglas and Forsyth counties. The map also projects the potential for transit connections to campuses in Lithonia, Rome, Statesboro, Tifton and Valdosta.

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The researchers pinpointed main campuses as well as branch and satellite sites for colleges within the Technical College System of Georgia and several within the University System of Georgia.

Mark Pheny, the Technical College System's assistant commissioner of external affairs and facilities, said the agency plans to share the map with its leaders. Colleges may be able to partner with local transit providers to expand routes.

"Add one more stop that can be closer, that can be a game changer for folks," he said.

The expansion of online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic has helped students who can't easily get to campus. The number of course offerings offered by the state's technical colleges has grown by nearly 200% in recent years, he said.

Many students are balancing school with work and family, and that when they do need to be on campus, finding a way there can be a struggle.

"Access to our campuses and ability to get there is really important," said Pheny.

About the Author

Vanessa McCray

As the Digital education reporter, Vanessa McCray writes about Georgia's colleges and universities.

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