

Volume 1, Number 1: July 2002

## UCLA Gets Taken for a Ride-Gladly

### The BruinGO free transit pass cuts car use

In its first year, BruinGO, a free transit-pass program for faculty, staff and students at the University of California, Los Angeles, dramatically reduced car trips to campus, cut demand for parking spaces and increased the number of bus trips taken by faculty, employees and students.

Over time, BruinGO could result in hundreds of thousands of dollars in parking construction costs avoided and (at \$1 saved per round trip) provide a significant new source of financial aid to students and a tax-free fringe benefit for staff and faculty.

These were among the results reported by ITS Los Angeles researchers Jeffrey Brown, Daniel Baldwin Hess and Donald Shoup in [BruinGO: an Evaluation](#), which they presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the Transportation Research Board.

BruinGO grew out of an earlier study in which ITS Los Angeles researchers examined university-based transit-pass programs at 35 campuses around the country. They found that free transit passes caused transit riding to rise and car trips and demand for campus parking spaces to fall. Those results were reported in "[Unlimited Access](#)," which was published in *Transportation*.

Based on those findings, UCLA Transportation Services proposed a pilot transit-pass program to help relieve the campus' parking space shortage and reverse a decline in transit use among faculty and staff.

From 1995-2000, the number of faculty and staff commuting to campus by bus fell some 16 percent. While no similar figures exist for students, a survey taken just before BruinGO began showed that 36 percent of the students that come to campus each day drive there alone. The year before BruinGO started, nearly 10,000 students had monthly parking permits (out of nearly 37,000 enrolled), and roughly 4,000 were on the waiting list. The campus has roughly 21,000 parking spaces.

#### "A Spectacular Bargain"

Starting in the fall of 2000, BruinGO gave UCLA's approximately 68,000 students, faculty and staff free rides on Santa Monica's Big Blue Bus, which carries the most people to campus. Each time a rider swipes his campus i.d. card through a reader on the bus, the university is charged 45 cents (5 cents less than the full fare). The 45 cents is paid out of revenues from the sale of parking permits purchased by students, staff, faculty and visitors.

ITS researchers compared travel behavior among UCLA staff, students and faculty before and after BruinGO and attempted to measure some of the program's costs and benefits.

After BruinGO started, faculty and staff made 73 percent more bus trips and students 51 percent more bus trips on a typical workday. The increases are noteworthy in the context of the overall decline in the use of buses and transit across the U.S. and among riders at UCLA, the researchers pointed out. (Surveys of transportation



ITS Los Angeles hosts a Web site with information about and links to more than 50 other campus programs, which serve an estimated 825,000 riders. It can be found [here](#)

[BruinGO: an Evaluation](#)

"[Unlimited Access](#)," which was published in *Transportation*

Institute of Transportation Studies Los Angeles page about [Unlimited Access](#) with information about and links to other campus programs around the U.S.

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patterns at other campuses in the region did not show similar rises in transit use during this period, leading researchers to credit BruinGO for the increase.)

Faculty and staff made 6 percent fewer car trips, and students cut their car trips by 11 percent. That means 1,864 fewer cars were driven to campus each day, and 1,380 fewer parking spaces were needed to accommodate them. (Because of turnover during the day, there is slightly more than one car per parking space.)

*Faculty and staff took 73 percent more bus trips and 6 percent fewer car trips; students took 51 percent more bus trips and cut car trips by 11 percent.*

Researchers estimated that UCLA would save roughly \$3.7 million a year if it didn't need to build spaces for those cars, based on university estimates of \$2,673 per space per year in a structure financed with a 27-year loan. The cost of BruinGO's administrative expenses and 1.5 million fares in the first year was \$810,000. "It is a spectacular bargain," Shoup said.

### **Out of Cars and Into Buses**

BruinGO also provided a new source of income and benefits for users. Researchers calculated the value of the free fares to be \$320,000 for students, faculty and staff (roughly half the face value of the fare, to account for the differing values for regular riders, who would have paid something to ride anyway, and new ones). To pay their share of the costs of the new parking that would have been needed without BruinGO, students would have been assessed \$623,000 in fees each year, faculty and staff \$938,000, and visitors \$1,998,000, the researchers found.

Staff and faculty reported that the free bus passes led them to walk more often, as people combined walking with riding the bus for their commutes to campus. The number who bicycled remained unchanged, and vanpooling rose slightly. The main reductions came among carpools, down 4 percent, and solo driving, which fell 3 percent. (There was no data to make "before" and "after" comparisons for students.) "The net result of these changes was a large shift from private vehicles to public transit for faculty/staff commuting to campus," the report noted.

Interestingly, in the short-term, BruinGO could encourage more car trips to campus, if monthly parking permits formerly held by BruinGO users are replaced by higher-turnover daily parking permits. However, in the long run, when compared with building more parking spaces, which would enable even more vehicles to travel to campus, BruinGO reduces vehicle trips.

Riders of the Big Blue Bus benefited because BruinGO attracted new riders, which generated new revenues. Already, the Big Blue Bus has added 11 percent more bus runs on the UCLA line.

Comments solicited from BruinGo users suggest that there are non-monetary benefits, too. Because the passes are good wherever the Big Blue Bus travels in its western Los Angeles services are, BruinGo riders can use them for work-related trips to off-campus sites during the work day, or for pleasure trips outside of regular working hours. Teachers can schedule field trips because everyone rides free.

Finally, researchers compared the costs and benefits predicted by a consultant hired by UCLA to assess a free transit-pass program versus the costs and benefits after one year of operation of BruinGO. Operating costs were 11 percent of what the consultant predicted, and BruinGO generated 375 percent more bus trips. These discrepancies were due to several incorrect theoretical assumptions, researchers found. Those missteps, the researchers argue, suggest the value of using pilot programs to test transit-pass systems.

They concluded: "BruinGO's high ridership and low cost provide a welcome departure from many transportation investments that attract fewer riders and cost

more than what the consultants predicted."



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***A reprise of links included in this article:***

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