

The Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission's survey of students, faculty and staff at 30 colleges and universities along Amtrak passenger routes across nine states suggests good overall news for passenger rail service as it currently exists, and for its growth potential.

The survey identifies a small but dedicated group who ride trains regularly to and from school, and a wider group open to taking the train, who would do so with some relatively simple "prodding" by the participating schools and Amtrak. Results suggest that student ridership can be significantly increased with focused marketing of Amtrak service and schedules, cooperation between Amtrak and schools to get such information into students' hands (whether literally or digitally) and, in some cases, to make transportation to and from campus and the train station easier. The survey also suggests that ridership could increase substantially region-wide if more frequent service were available.

The survey identifies strong support for passenger rail as an integral piece of the national transportation future, and even finds strong willingness to advocate on behalf of passenger rail. But the survey also shows that neither students nor – by inference – the general public are aware of the roles played by states and the federal government in funding Amtrak and in determining passenger rail routes and service frequencies. Thus we strongly recommend that a public education campaign be considered to clarify this point.

The MIPRC Universities & Colleges Passenger Rail Survey was conducted between November 2015 and February 2016.

Why are they taking the train?

Almost a quarter (23 percent) of respondents said they have taken the train to travel to/from school. Of respondents who said they have taken the train, 62 percent had ridden once or twice during the past 12 months; another 21 percent had ridden 3-4 times during that same period; and 17 percent had taken the train five or more times in the past year.

Although just five percent of regional respondents said the train is their primary travel mode to/from school and their permanent residence, a total of 10.5 percent said they take some form of public transportation (Amtrak, light rail/transit, commuter rail or intercity or local bus service) as their primary mode of travel to/from their school and permanent residence.

More than a third of those who take the train depend on it to get to school: Among respondents who have taken the train, 36 percent say passenger rail is a "very important" (22 percent) or "extremely important" (14 percent) resource to be able to attend their college/university. An additionally 29 percent said passenger rail service is a "somewhat important" resource for them to be able to attend school.

Asked "Why did you decide to use passenger rail service to/from your college/university," and to mark all applicable answers,

- 49 percent said the train was cheaper than other modes of transportation;
- 57 percent said it's convenient and comfortable compared to driving or flying;
- 32 percent said they don't have a car.

Interestingly, "for environmental reasons" drew just an 11 percent response, which may suggest that the environmental and carbon reduction aspects of passenger rail aren't well known to the student population. Even

if cost, convenience and comfort are primary reasons for people choosing this transportation mode, and the environmental benefits seem to “come along for the ride,” we recommend that passenger rail’s environmental benefits be included as part of any education campaign to this audience.

Growth potential

Even among respondents who say they’ve never taken the train to/from school, their reasons reflect a perceived lack of convenience rather than indifference or hostility. Asked “Why haven’t you used passenger rail (Amtrak) as a mode of transportation to and/or from your college/university,” and to mark all applicable answers,

- 48 percent said the Amtrak route available from near home to school is inconvenient because either
 - it would take a lot more time than other travel modes (25 percent),
 - there is no direct route from near their home to school (23 percent);
- 35 percent said there isn’t an Amtrak station close to home.
- 24 percent said they “don’t know where/how to catch a train near my school.”

Only 14 percent indicated “a train ticket is too expensive”; just 7 percent said “I cannot rely on Amtrak trains to run on time.”

The fact that 24 percent say they don’t know where or how to catch a train near their schools signals a significant opportunity to boost passenger rail ridership, and for schools to market themselves to prospective students as conveniently located near comfortable, reliable passenger rail service.

Also, a small but significant number (15 percent) of those who said they had never taken the train to/from school indicated that a friend or family member had taken the train in the past 12 months to visit them at school. More than half (51 percent) indicated their friend/family member had taken the train because taking the train was cheaper than other modes of transportation, while half (50 percent) said it was more convenient and comfortable compared to flying or driving.

A significant minority of both those who had taken the train and those who hadn’t (but a friend or family member had) indicated they took the train because they don’t have a car (39 percent of friends/family and 32 percent of those who had taken the train themselves).

Most consider passenger rail as important to our transportation future

Also encouraging is the response to the question – asked of all respondents – “How important do you consider passenger rail service to the United States’ transportation future?” Almost seven in 10 respondents (68 percent) said either “very important” (35 percent) or “important” (33 percent).

Just seven percent said “not very important” (6 percent) or “not at all important” (1.5 percent).

This latent support for passenger rail can be tapped. Survey respondents were asked, “Would you be interested in helping advocate for an improved passenger rail system in our region/country?” Of those who responded to this question, 31 percent (5,959 of 19,170) not only said “yes,” but also provided an e-mail address.

We recommend that thought be given and decisions made as to how best engage this receptive audience to advocate for passenger rail at local, state and federal levels.

Low-hanging fruit

Those who responded that they have never taken Amtrak to/from their school were asked a multiple-response follow-up question: “Which of the following might motivate you to use Amtrak to travel to/from your school in the future?” The top answer was, “If there was a station close to my permanent residence” (44 percent). Other top choices included:

- “More/better discounts for ticket purchase” (35 percent);
- “Information provided by my college/university on how to take the train” (29 percent).
- “Transportation provided by my college/university to get to the closest Amtrak station” (28 percent).

These responses strongly suggest that if Amtrak and the colleges and universities along current routes were to concentrate marketing passenger rail service to students, and explore options for transporting students to/from the nearest Amtrak station, passenger rail ridership could be boosted substantially. Also, the availability of passenger rail service should also help the schools market themselves to prospective students.

This is doubly important since about two-thirds of all survey respondents said they were likely to take a train in the future [30 percent are either “very likely” (18 percent) or “extremely likely” (12 percent), while 37 percent are “somewhat likely” to take a train in the future]. One-third of respondents to the question, “How likely are you to use Amtrak for travel in the future?” said “not very likely” (24 percent) or “not at all likely” (9 percent).

Also, a majority of respondents (56 percent) said they would be more likely to take the train if more frequent service was available; 22 percent would be “much more likely,” and 34 percent would be “somewhat more likely.”

Who sets schedules, service levels? Public doesn't know

The survey also reveals there is work to do to educate students – and almost certainly the general public, too – about the role of the states and Congress in funding passenger rail service, including frequencies of service and setting routes.

Asked, “How aware are you of the role that state and federal governments play in funding passenger rail, including increasing the number of trains and route options?” 88 percent responded that they are “not at all aware” (51 percent) or only “somewhat aware” (37 percent).

Should they stay or should they go?

Student respondents were asked an additional question: “How much will access to public transportation effect your decision to stay in the Midwest after graduating?”

That 53 percent said either “not very much” (28 percent) or “not at all” (25 percent) versus just 20 percent who said either “quite a bit” (13 percent) or “very much” (7 percent) may seem discouraging. But the other 27 percent of respondents to this question said “somewhat.”

These data also suggest that as passenger rail service levels are improved, so too will the percentages of students who will take the quality of public transportation into consideration when deciding whether to stay in the region upon graduation or move elsewhere.

Who took this survey?

A total of 19,194 people responded from 30 four-year schools located near Amtrak stations in Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio and Wisconsin. Participating schools by state included:

Illinois: Blackburn College, Governors State University, Illinois Wesleyan University, Knox College, Quincy University, Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, Trinity Christian College, University of Illinois-Chicago, University of Illinois-Springfield, Wheaton College.

Indiana: Purdue University.

Kansas: Bethel College, University of Kansas.

Michigan: Eastern Michigan University, Kalamazoo College, Lawrence Technical University, Spring Arbor University, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Wayne State University, Western Michigan University.

Minnesota: Concordia University St. Paul, Minnesota State University-Moorhead, St. Cloud State University.

Missouri: Fontbonne University, Truman State University, University of Central Missouri.

North Dakota: North Dakota State University.

Ohio: Cincinnati Christian University.

Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Viterbo University.

Three-quarters (75 percent) reported as students; of them, almost all (90 percent) reported they were full-time students. Ten percent of respondents reported as faculty, and 15.5 percent as staff.

Not all respondents answered all questions, and those taking the survey were selectively directed to some questions based on whether they had ever taken Amtrak to travel to or from their college/university. Some questions allowed multiple answers.

The Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC) is a nine-state interstate compact that promotes, coordinates and supports regional improvements to passenger rail service.

Eight long-distances Amtrak routes serve the Midwest, all originating out of the nation's largest rail hub, Chicago. Altogether, these routes have 80 station stops across the Midwest, many of them in rural communities not served by other forms of intercity transportation. In addition, nine intercity passenger rail routes in the Midwest are financed primarily by the states:

1. Seven daily roundtrips between Chicago and Milwaukee via the *Hiawatha* service (financed primarily by the states of Illinois and Wisconsin);
2. Four daily roundtrips between Chicago and St. Louis via the *Lincoln* service (financed primarily by the state of Illinois);
3. Three roundtrips daily between Chicago and Detroit/Pontiac via the *Wolverine* service (financed primarily by the state of Michigan);
4. Two daily roundtrips between St. Louis and Kansas City via the *Missouri River Runner* (financed primarily by the state of Missouri);
5. Two daily roundtrips between Chicago and Carbondale via the *Illini and Saluki* services, both of which are financed primarily by the state of Illinois;

6. Two daily roundtrips via the *Carl Sandburg* and *Illinois Zephyr* services between Chicago and Quincy (both of which are financed primarily by the state of Illinois);
7. One round-trip daily between Chicago and Port Huron, MI via the *Bluewater* service (financed primarily by the state of Michigan);
8. One round-trip daily between Chicago and Grand Rapids, MI via the *Pere Marquette* service (financed primarily by the state of Michigan);
9. Four days a week roundtrip service between Chicago and Indianapolis via the *Hoosier State* service, which is primarily financed by the state of Indiana and local communities.

But wait, there's more!

Respondents across all 30 participating schools who said they had taken Amtrak recently were invited to take a second survey about their most recent trip. A total of 1,597 did so. Highlights among their answers include:

1. 55 percent say it is “very easy” or “extremely easy” to get between school and an Amtrak station, and 47 percent say their ticket was either “very” or “extremely” affordable. Furthermore, 71 percent say they enjoyed their experience or enjoyed it a lot.
2. But schedules are a concern; just 34 percent say they had “very convenient” or “extremely convenient” departure/arrival times. Moreover, 49 percent say their train arrived at destination later than scheduled (45 percent say their train arrived on time).
3. WiFi service is a critical service amenity: 70 percent say onboard WiFi availability is “very” or “extremely” important, and 60 percent have used it during their rides.
4. 74 percent say they have never used a discount code or card when purchasing tickets, despite Amtrak’s “Student Advantage Card” being among available discount programs.