
MIPRC Universities & Colleges Passenger Rail Survey: Winona, MN Results and Analysis

The Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission's supplemental survey of students, faculty and staff at three Minnesota colleges and universities near the Winona station stop along Amtrak's *Empire Builder* passenger route suggests there is a small but dedicated group who rides trains regularly to and from school; and a wider group open to taking the train, who would likely do so with some relatively simple "prodding" by the participating schools and Amtrak. (*Participating schools in this supplemental survey are Minnesota State College-Southeast, St. Mary's University of Minnesota and Winona State University.*)

Eleven percent of respondents said the train is their primary travel mode to/from school and their permanent residence, and 41 percent of respondents say they have taken the train to travel to/from school. Of respondents who said they have taken the train, and who answered a subsequent question asking how often they have used Amtrak in the past 12 months, 63 percent have ridden once or twice during the past 12 months; another 9 percent have ridden 3-4 times, 10 percent have ridden five to nine times, and 17 percent have ridden more than 10 times during that same period.

Many who take the train depend on it to get to school: Among respondents who have taken the train, a third (34 percent) say the Amtrak service is either a "very important" (22 percent) or "extremely important" (12 percent) resource to be able to attend school. An additional 33.5 percent said passenger rail service is a "somewhat important" resource for them to be able to attend school.

Even among respondents who say they've never taken the train to/from school, the reasons reflect 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):

- 27 percent said there isn't an Amtrak station close to home.
- 38 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 (19 percent),
 - there is no direct route from near home to school (19 percent);
- Just over a quarter (26 percent) said they don't know the "logistics" of taking the train:
 - They don't know how or where to catch a train near their school (13 percent),
 - they don't know how to buy a ticket (14 percent);

This suggests firstly that most respondents are open to the idea of taking the train, if service were faster and/or more convenient; secondly, that a marketing/education campaign is strongly recommended to "teach" students how to take the train (more about this below).

More than half of respondents (55 percent) said they would be more likely to take the train if more frequent service was available; 25 percent would be "much more likely" and 30 percent would be "somewhat more likely."

Also encouraging is the response to the question, "How important do you consider passenger rail service to the United States' transportation future?" Almost two-thirds of respondents (62 percent) said either "very important" (28 percent) or "important" (34 percent). Only nine percent said "not very important" (7 percent) or "not at all important" (2 percent).

Why are they taking the train?

Of those who have taken the train to/from school, almost half said they chose passenger rail service because they don't have a car (49 percent) and/or "taking the train is convenient and comfortable compared to flying or driving" (49 percent), while 36 percent indicated "taking the train was cheaper than other modes of transportation."

Also, 14 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 (52 percent) indicated that their friend/family member had taken the train because they don't have a car, while almost two-fifths of them (37 percent) indicated their friend/family member had taken the train because it was cheaper than other modes and 46 percent indicated that taking the train was more convenient and comfortable compared to flying or driving.

Low-hanging Fruit

The survey results strongly suggest that specific, achievable steps – particularly via targeted marketing and public education campaigns – will boost student ridership.

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, “More/better discounts for ticket purchase” (35 percent). The next three were:

- If there was a station close to my permanent residence (33 percent).
- Better arrival/departure times (27 percent)
- More frequent service (25 percent);

These responses suggest a latent passenger pool exists in Winona (and by extension, much of southeast Minnesota and parts of neighboring western Wisconsin) for a second daily Twin Cities-Chicago train. They also suggest that passenger rail ridership could be boosted if Amtrak's existing student fare discount, and any fare specials, are marketed extensively. The availability of passenger rail service should also help the schools market themselves to prospective students.

This is doubly important since almost two-thirds of the Winona schools' survey respondents said they were likely to take a train in the future: 33 percent are either “Very likely” (18 percent) or “extremely likely” (15 percent), while another 32 percent are “somewhat likely” to take a train in the future. Just over a third (35 percent) 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” (11 percent).

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

The survey also strongly suggests that work must be done 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?” 91 percent responded that they are either “not at all aware” (56 percent) or only “somewhat aware” (35 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” (25 percent) or “not at all” (28 percent) versus just 19 percent who said either “quite a bit” (12.5 percent) or “very much” (6.5 percent) may seem discouraging. But the other 28 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.

Moreover, just over a quarter of respondents (26 percent) indicated willingness to be an advocate for passenger rail.

About this survey

This survey was conducted between November 2016 and February 2017 at three four-year schools located in Winona: Minnesota State College-Southeast, St. Mary’s University of Minnesota and Winona State University. The city of Winona is a daily stop for one daily Amtrak train each way, the long-distance *Empire Builder* route between Chicago and Seattle/Portland.

A total of 664 respondents from these schools participated in this survey.

Almost three-quarters (74 percent) reported as students; of them, almost all (94 percent) reported they were full-time students. Eleven percent of respondents reported as faculty, and 15 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.

This survey supplements the MIPRC Universities & Colleges Passenger Rail Survey conducted between November 2015 and February 2016 at 30 participating schools across nine Midwestern states. In the Minnesota portion of this earlier survey a total of 2,381 respondents from three Minnesota four-year schools located near Amtrak stations participated: Concordia University St. Paul; Minnesota State University-Moorhead; and St. Cloud State University. More information about this survey can be found on the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission’s website, at <http://miprc.org/News/miprc-survey-finds-good-news-growth-potential-for-passenger-rail>.

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