

A Rough Ride: No One Seems To Care How You Get There

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Consider a full-time student attending college and braving the hectic mass transit system of New York City, to commute to and from school, as a daily routine during a fifteen-week semester. At the current price of \$2.25 a ride, the cost of transportation is expensive for students, as much as about \$700 a year. Many self-sustaining full-time students do not have jobs. Not all students are self-sustaining, but we can narrow down the individuals who cannot afford this by looking at how they pay tuition to begin with. Those needing federal (Pell) and state (TAP) grants to attend school clearly lack financial stability. This group of unemployed, full-time students who receive need-based free tuition face a struggle paying for transportation.

The state gives grants to students who cannot afford tuition but ignores how they are to get to school. It is like giving someone water, sugar and lemons, and saying to them "make lemonade" but with no pitcher. If a student is approved for financial aid, this should signal the incapacity to afford transportation. But according to Melissa Sangster, a representative of the City Tech Financial Aid office, financial aid does not cover transportation. The C.O.P.E. office on campus does offer Metrocard assistance but you must be working a minimum of twenty hours a week to qualify, so this assistance would not help students who want to dedicate their time to education alone. In a 2008 student experience survey, performed by the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research, thirty-two percent of City Tech respondents reported an annual household income of less than \$20,000 a year, and eighteen percent report living in homes with income below \$10,000 a year ("Student Experience Survey" 10). In a school with over 16,000 students ("Facts 2012-2013"), if the respondents reflect the whole school population, that would mean a significant number of individuals live below or at the poverty level for a three-member

family as listed by Kathleen Sebelius, The U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services who published the 76th volume of the *Annual Update of the HHS Poverty Guidelines* (Sebelius fig. 1). Whatever money these individuals may have should go towards basic necessities such as food, but students may be sacrificing food in order to get home. About forty-eight percent of City Tech students do not live in Brooklyn, so their reliance on the MTA is evident (“Facts 2012-2013”). This is a problem that is real; it affects many students attending City Tech as well as the other twenty-three CUNY colleges. Six out of ten CUNY students receive need-based free-tuition, and nearly one billion dollars was spent on financial aid during 2012-13 to fund their education (“CUNY Value”). That means that about sixty percent of CUNY students need transportation assistance.

If you are living in a household below poverty level, should the money received go towards alleviating the need for basic necessities or to transportation? Dr. Myers, the author of *Exploring Psychology*, states “biologically speaking, life’s purpose is not happiness but survival and reproduction” (Myers 471). The expense of transportation conflicts with the needs for an individual’s survival.

I propose a solution, and here’s how it would work. In return for good grades, the state can award students who are full-time, unemployed and receiving need-based free tuition with a Metrocard that awards them a certain number of rides daily. The Metrocard should be available Monday through Saturday (except holidays), because some students have Saturday classes, and should be accepted on all MTA buses and trains (except express buses). This enables students to get to school and focus on their most important job: being in class and learning.

A Metrocard for CUNY students would alleviate the stress of getting to campus for those who cannot afford transportation. It would bring about a more positive outlook on school. Furthering your education should not be viewed as a financial sacrifice; however, problems in attempting to just get here increase the possibility for one to look at school as a series of problems. We cannot say with certainty that insufficient funds cause low grades, but there definitely is a correlation between struggling to survive and poor grades, so the proposal may help students do better in their college work.

In response to my proposal it could be said that Public Assistance offers financial assistance for those in need. But Public Assistance is a program that does not concern itself with the worries of education. In order to be eligible for Public Assistance you must comply with their requirements that are not school-related. If you have to attend an appointment during class hours, then you are expected to miss class and follow through with their requirements. This may cause you to lose time in the classroom. I know this because it has happened to me. The difference between the CUNY Metrocard and Public Assistance is that in return for good grades you are awarded transportation assistance. This approach supports educational values without forcing students to become distracted by non-school related requirements.

It could be said that young adults must learn to fend for themselves in a challenging world. But psychologically this approach would be a benefit to students, causing them to perform better as their work is rewarded. This is “immediate reinforcement” to produce good grades (Myers 239). In other words, we can condition students to produce good grades with the right incentives. As Myers explains, many people respond more readily to immediate gratification (immediate reward/immediate reinforcement) and less readily to working to achieve future reward (Myers 240). Good grades consistently reinforced by this Metrocard will yield better long-term development as well. Myers defines this as “continuous reinforcement: Reinforcing the desired response every time it occurs” and states that “Under such conditions, learning occurs rapidly, which makes continuous reinforcement preferable until a behavior is mastered” (Myers 240). Some might say that students might become dependent on the state to produce good grades. But if some students do become temporarily dependent on tangible rewards to achieve good grades, in the long run we can condition them to accept social acceptance as a form of reward by praising their academic accomplishments, through an academic achievements list. But long term, the solution appears to have no psychological dependency other than what we learn naturally as humans, that hard work brings rewards.

The CUNY Metrocard solution is practical and affordable; as the state already funds CUNY students’ tuition they should also fund this Metrocard. The funding would be automatic for all first semester CUNY freshmen receiving need-based free tuition and for it to continue another semester, they must meet a certain standard (3.0-3.5 GPA). New York State spends tax revenue and awards tax credits. The Barclays Center was built, in downtown Brooklyn, at the expense of taxpayers, money I believe could have been spent better by investing tax dollars in educating the youth of our city who will build its future. Funds used to support lavish stadiums should be channeled into education instead.

Additionally, the 2013 NYS budget gives tax credits for having a green building and using clean heating fuels. Instead of making these things mandatory for established companies, the state provides incentives. They also plan to award up to \$11 million in tax credits to companies as employment incentives and up to \$38 million in other “miscellaneous” deductions (Cuomo 21). I believe that these taxes should be collected and invested in the future of education as these companies already make a large profit. Many argue that NYS expenditures exceed its revenue, but with numerous questionable expenses, the need for financial reform that benefits New York’s college students is evident.

The solution should be implemented by New York State, since they run the MTA. According to Ben Fraimow, the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) Project Coordinator at City Tech, all the decisions made by the MTA go through Albany. I urge that petitions, letters and calls to the governor’s office and state legislators should be made. The MTA has a website where we can leave comments, to voice our opinions, but without significant numbers the message may not be heard. Calls to the governor’s office enable the state legislators to be aware of our concerns; as elected officials, their work should

always be in the best interest of those who elected them. The State of New York has apparently allowed the education of New York City to suffer, and maybe this is because they have no faith that those who are unable to afford schooling are capable of achieving academic success. At the moment you can liken New York to a delinquent teenager who makes decisions without thinking of the effects those decisions are going to have on his or her future. The creation of a CUNY Metrocard system would ensure that New York's future is bright.

Works Cited

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