



EMPLOYER PROFILE

EXPANDING CAMPUS WHILE REDUCING PARKING: THE UMD STORY

Pictured Above: UMD Vanpoolers. Vanpooling, along with cycling, transit, and telework, has been an effective tool in helping UMD reduce demand for parking on campus

The University of Maryland (UMD) is committed to addressing climate change. As one of the initial signatories of the 2007 American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment (now called the Carbon Commitment), the University developed a Climate Action Plan in 2009 with the goal of being a carbon neutral campus by the year 2050. At the same time, the flagship College Park campus has experienced dramatic growth, with ten new or significantly renovated buildings completed in the past decade. On a densely populated urban campus, options are limited for siting new buildings and as a result some existing parking lots were replaced with new buildings. The University's robust sustainability goals, combined with the campus' changing landscape, meant that the UMD Department of Transportation Services (DOTS) needed a strategy for reducing the number of people who drive alone to UMD. "While we know that parking is still a necessity on our campus, we've made it a priority to introduce alternative commute options to our community," says Anna McLaughlin, DOTS Assistant Director of Sustainability.

DOTS understood that no single initiative would motivate solo drivers to change their commute. It also had a head start in the form of Shuttle-UM, its existing network of shuttle services that connect the campus to the College Park Metrorail Station and many other off-campus transportation and activity hubs. In September 2017, DOTS launched its Smart Commute program, which incentivizes the University community to commute by using sustainable transportation, such as walking, cycling, ridesharing or taking transit. Under this program, DOTS implemented carpool initiatives, offering up to a 50 percent reduction in parking fees for employees who committed to carpooling every day. They offer pre-tax benefits for transit users, and implemented a bicycle incentive program, which provides secured, covered bike parking on campus and free shower facilities to people who bike to campus. They started offering carsharing on campus, which makes it easier for resident students to live car-free.

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-Anna McLaughlin

The single most successful initiative to reduce the number of cars on campus has been the Smart Commute parking cash-out program, in which UMD pays its employees up to \$450 a year not to park on campus. The program was piloted in 2018 with a small group of employees, and up to 80 percent of those employees have permanently given up their on-campus parking privileges. The program has since expanded to cover a wider range of employees and graduate students. Says McLaughlin, "It piques people's interest, when you offer them cash. Lots of people want to know how to participate."

Informing students and employees about these options has been a challenge, given the sheer size of the institution. "It's common with Transportation Demand Management programs that education is a key part of the challenge, and ours is no exception," says McLaughlin, "so there's a lot of education involved." At UMD, every department has a transportation coordinator, who acts as a liaison between DOTS and their department. DOTS has thrown carpool parties in the student union and works with the UMD human resources department to get information out to employees, including at the new employee transportation orientations held every other week. They also often gamify the effort—for instance, they recently ran a challenge for departmental transportation coordinators, with the transportation coordinator earning a prize for every employee they referred to a carpool, and rewards programs for commuters based on the frequency with which they avoid driving alone to campus.

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Assistant Director of Sustainability at UMD Transportation Services

With such a broad-scale effort, and so many options for commuters, administering the program can be a heavy lift. So, DOTs uses its Smart Commute digital platform, an implementation of the RideAmigos application (app). UMD students and employees can use the app to find carpool partners, learn about their transportation options, and track their commute choices to participate in commuter challenges and earn rewards. McLaughlin and her team can use the app to track program success and learn which options are best meeting the needs of UMD commuters. "The number of employees using the app has grown every year, and so has the number of people taking advantage of it to find carpool partners and log their trips," says McLaughlin. As a result of these efforts, UMD has made progress towards its sustainability goals as well, by reducing commute emissions.

McLaughlin is optimistic that Smart Commute's success will continue in the coming years. "There's a lot of great resources for commuters, both on-campus and in the metro area as a whole," she says. "We're particularly excited about the arrival of the Purple Line, which we think can have a transformative impact on helping people get to and from campus and reducing the number of cars on campus." The key, she says, is continuing Transportation Services' regular and frequent outreach on campus and being as engaging as possible. As McLaughlin puts it, "There's still a lot of work to do, but here on campus, we're talking about sustainable transportation a lot more than we were even three years ago."

Pictured at Right: UMD offers a variety of shuttle services for students and staff, connecting the College Park campus to the Metro and to destinations throughout Montgomery and Prince Georges' Counties.

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