

The Travelers of the Modern Day: Are Commuter Students a Priority at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago's Largest University?



By Ashley Maldonado

There is a force which carries the weight of the population attending the University of Illinois Chicago: commuter students voyaging from their homes to get an education. The University of Illinois at Chicago has long been considered accessible and reliable for many residing in and outside of the city. Although this may be true for many students, there is a clear distinction between living on campus and traveling to it daily and the varying experiences that come with it. Resilient college students make the time and effort to take themselves to school. Commuter students make up 85% of students enrolled and actively attending UIC, Chicago's biggest university. Many students live far from campus and due to financial reasons, cannot dorm there or live

near it. While some drive and park on campus, many take multiple public transportation methods, such as the CTA bus, train, and metra.

In an effort to recognize the discrepancy between on-campus and off-campus students, the university has a webpage dedicated to commuters, providing information on events and programs. The school has created a space solely for commuter students called The Commuter Student Resource Center. The CSRC offers free lockers and consists of multiple study rooms, lounges and a kitchen facility with fridges and microwaves. This center allows students access once they have swiped their UI card, confirming their status as commuters. Austin Kim, a commuter student and current senior at UIC, says the resource center is the school's recognition of its commuter student base.

Despite starting at UIC as a non-transfer, Kim struggled to assimilate to the culture of student life in the first two years of his academic career and believes the school has gotten better at promoting it in his last two years. Another commuter student, Genesis Abad, who is a junior at UIC, also had trouble locating opportunities for commuters on campus. The resource center is tucked away on the second floor of Student Center East, past the school's cafeteria and attached behind the Wellness Center. "I find that once I was able to find the commuter resources they became a lot more accessible. However, trying to find their center was difficult." he states. While Abad says he has had a good experience with the Commuter and Off-Campus Life team, he believes the best way he found a sense of community as a commuter was through joining clubs, such as the UIC Speech Team. Alfia Sohail, a junior, states that the

resources for commuters were not the best in her experience when she began as a freshman.



The daily commute affects students' time spent on campus as well. Kim, who is a part of the Korean American Student Association (KASA), spends two to three hours on campus outside of attending his classes. He has found it difficult to find opportunities provided by UIC to socialize with other students and participate in other activities. "Commuters usually have to catch a train by a certain time so many just leave after, especially if using the metra (outside Chicago immediate suburbs) rather than CTA. I'm one of these types too to leave early. The university should brainstorm some incentives for commuters to stay on campus as well. In Student Center East, so many places close early or have limited time," he states. His commute is around an hour and fifteen minutes. Kim believes the school could offer a lot more for their commuter student base, especially since they make up the majority of the student population. "I think UIC should offer school discounts by partnering with Amtrak or the CTA. Especially the

metra/Amtrak since so many students use it, and we have to buy it at full price. I think most UIC students are your average income households, so every dollar counts honestly (on top of balancing other school costs).” Kim says. Currently, commuter students must pay a price of \$187 for a CTA pass for one semester and full price for Amtrak passes. While the school sets the price for the CTA pass, it is a lot more expensive when compared to the City Colleges of Chicago, which has the same pass for \$70. In addition, the CTA Pass does not cover costs of Pace buses, which leave commuter students living in suburbs left to pay full price each time. The Board of UIC could partner with Pace to offer students a more affordable price while they are students.

While students recognize the school’s CSRC, Abad says the integration among commuter students and on-campus students needs to be improved. “UIC needs to implement better areas where we can integrate the commuter students and the on-campus students. The way that our common areas and student spaces are situated right now doesn't allow us to truly take advantage of being on campus. All of the spaces feel so segregated and away from each other. (The commuter center is in a little nook.) I think by possibly rearranging the spaces that are available to us, can allow us commuters to feel properly a part of campus.” Abad states. There are many areas dedicated to on-campus students, while the CSRC commuter center is the only space offered for commuter students. This further alienates commuter students from interacting with on-campus students. Kim suggests that the university invest in creating and hosting on-campus events, with their heavy reliance on organizations and clubs hosting them becoming an obstacle due to their small and limited budget. While the

effort by the school is there, it seems the university does not actively meet the needs of students by not directly hearing students' feedback.



Sohail, whose commute is an hour and thirty minutes to and from school, also believes that an impediment to the development of her social life at UIC resides in prioritizing her trip back home. “It was hard to socialize in the very beginning because in order to save time I would leave the campus right away so I have enough time to work on homework once I get home. By sophomore year I started to get a hang of the workload and I was able to get the schedule I wanted which made it a lot easier for me to socialize with others and make connections. I still wouldn't say that I'm able to socialize because it's still very hard as a commuter. Basically as a commuter you have no on-campus life.” Sohail believes that her social life at school is difficult to form when she has to go home before it gets dark out. She believes her experience could be better if more security is implemented. “We as students pay thousands of dollars to have a

secured campus is the bare minimum UIC can do for us. Especially for commuters, security is very much needed because there are barely any CCTV cameras outside the buildings.” The lack of security is a driving force in Sohail remaining on campus past daylight hours.

The major concerns of commuter students may not be heard. Although a lot of money is distributed to the school, commuter spaces and more security may not be a priority for them. In the past, students in general have had difficulty getting the school’s attention through authoritative figures, such as the President and Chancellor. This has led student bodies to protest in order to gain traction and support of other students whilst garnering attention for their voices to be heard. While it is disheartening to hear that students do not feel connected to the school or their higher ups, it is crucial for the school to create a space where concerns and suggested improvements can be heard and talked about. In the meantime, students should continue networking with each other to present changes to UIC’s Board, such as the President or the University Relations via in person meetings or email.

As UIC continues to be the city’s largest and most accessible university, it is crucial for positive changes to occur for the benefit of current and future students coming from all across Illinois. Maintaining a rich student culture where any kind of student can adapt and feel safe will aid in the success of the school and the growing population of its college applicants.

