



EMPLOYER PROFILE

UMD COLLEGE PARK COMMUTER PROGRAMS: MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Pictured Above: Bike rack facilities at UMD College Park

The University of Maryland's (UMD) flagship campus in College Park, Maryland, finds itself in a period of rapid growth and transition. Its faculty, students, and staff hail from all over the region and each have their own way of getting to work. UMD Department of Transportation Services' Assistant Director of Sustainability Initiatives Marta Woldu says recognizing and supporting UMD community members' diverse array of transportation modes, while encouraging more economical and sustainable forms of transportation through incentives, benefits, and informational resources is central to her team's work. "You have to meet people where they are and offer programs that different people can try and respond to," says Woldu. "Our goal is to help them get out of their cars. There's no one way to do that."

UMD's commitment to reducing traffic, shedding its reliance on parking, and improving their campus commute is hardly a one-size-fits-all approach, with many simple options in which students and staff can participate. Benefits, incentives, amenities, and challenges work together to draw participation from as many UMD students and staff as possible.

UMD allows staff to take a pre-tax deduction and put it toward their transit commute. This is a classic, low-cost approach that many employers use to enable their staff to affordably use transit. Woldu says that while peak pandemic periods did see a reduction in pre-tax deductions for transit, her team "knew the long-term benefit of the program." Now the pre-tax transit deductions are climbing back up. While many employees had (and continue to have) the ability to work from home, UMD also depends on staff whose jobs physically require them to be on-campus. Providing this transit benefit is part of a holistic approach to manage parking and transportation demand while supporting a diverse staff.

Taking uncertainty out of the equation can be transformative for commuters who drive. UMD promotes two programs to address the perceived uncertainty of leaving your car at home for the workday: Guaranteed Ride Home and Rainy Day Bike Rewards. Available to employees in the Washington-Baltimore area, Guaranteed Ride Home allows commuters who take alternative modes to work at least twice a week to use a guaranteed ride if an emergency or when they are unexpectedly required to work later than their alternative commute would usually allow.

Unique to UMD, Woldu's team also offers Rainy Day Bike Rewards, allowing bike commuters to earn days of free parking the more they bike to work. This provides a backup plan for bikers when they are uncomfortable biking or even unable to bike to work. Woldu admits that the Rainy Day Bike Rewards program is a little unorthodox, since her team's mission is to reduce the number of cars on the road and in parking lots at UMD. But the pandemic's shift to remote work meant many spots on campus weren't being used like they were in years prior, so UMD got creative before parking began filling back up when in-person classes resumed.



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Woldu says the program helps people who are more accustomed to driving take a leap of faith and bike to work. In the long run, she foresees that offering free parking through the program now will result in less car commutes in the future.

Another parking-related innovation that UMD has implemented to help faculty and staff ease into greener commute choices is offer parking permits in smaller increments, including daily passes and two-day and three-day per week permits. By alleviating the sunk cost of a parking permit, Woldu says the program, “...encourages [staff and faculty] to fit sustainable trips into their routine.” Combined with informational guides provided to commuters about their array of commute options, this flexibility allows current drivers to augment their commute with green transportation when it makes sense.

Commuter Choice Maryland asked Woldu what advice she might have for encouraging less stressful, greener commutes among employees. She indicated that UMD strives to understand their campus community’s preferences so they can prepare for the future of transportation at UMD while relieving congestion and better serving their students and staff. Right now, her team is getting ready to review the results of a campus transportation survey that will help them to tailor their programs even further. “It’s important that we understand where our staff and students are coming from, and their travel choices, including the mode split among those traveling to campus,” says Woldu.

Consider getting in touch with one of Commuter Choice Maryland’s Employer Transportation Coordinators to better understand what you can do to help your employees take control of their work commute and find smart transportation solutions that work for them.

Pictured Below: Bike Commuter Parking offered to UMD faculty, staff, and students who bike to campus

