

Transportation Camp Scholarship Essay Opportunity
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Using the Pandemic to Secure Transportation's Future

Despite the undeniably devastating effects of the pandemic on society and traditional living, this year has presented a crucial moment for the future of transportation networks. Coronavirus has granted DOTs an opportunity to implement broad systematic change, and has gifted transportation engineers circumstances which can be used to calibrate transit ridership models and their volatility to external factors.

From a transportation research perspective, the Coronavirus, and more specifically, the rate of service rebound as infection rates decrease and cities reopen, has completely shattered existing ridership models. Pre-existing models are not able to predict how individuals will evaluate the need for public transit against their own health and safety interests. Researchers can study the pandemic and develop new mode choice models. These new models may be able to simulate future events where ridership is in jeopardy due to a safety crisis. How will users respond to an increase in crime rate? What mode will people choose during a period of civil unrest? How will minorities' perception of enforcement agencies affect their preferred mode of transportation? In periods where apparent rider safety is in flux, ridership may be able to be anticipated and understood using the models developed during the current pandemic.

For Departments of Transportation and other bureaucratic agencies, the massive decrease in vehicular volume is an excellent opportunity for quick and minimal impact construction, as well as for trial implementations, such as new protected bike lanes or Open Streets. Instead of having to compete with drivers during a normal period, if changes are made while usage has not completely rebounded, drivers can grow accustomed to them in a more natural way, and may be guided into changing their current transportation tendencies. For example, if agencies use this window to develop Open Streets while traffic is low and make them enjoyable places for recreation, restaurants, and children, communities may resist efforts to remove Open Streets in the future, incorporating them into the culture of the neighborhood.

Finally, legislative bodies can use the current situation to create long-term programs for funding regional and interstate transit systems. Many agencies are currently struggling financially to maintain operations and have filed for emergency federal funding. Congress has produced a handful of bills meant to stimulate transit systems until the economy recovers. However, a systematic funding overhaul can create a long-term framework that may continue to support the growth of networks even after the pandemic. Congress can and absolutely should use this opportunity of transportation funding reform to support the growth of regional and national transit well after the pandemic subsides.

In the wake of the Coronavirus crisis, the future of America is all but certain. Instead of only reacting to the current developments in transportation, researchers, planning agencies, and the government should all capitalize on this unique chance to positively change the future of transportation.