

TELECOMM



*Avoiding gridlock,
finding parking,
and having room
to breathe.*

TELECOMMUTING

and SPACE
USE

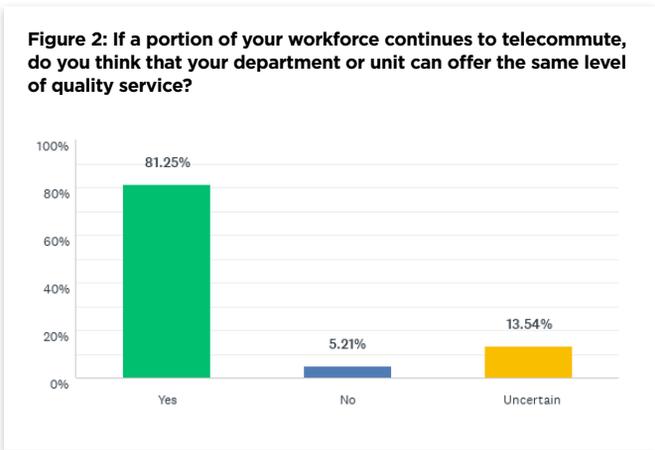
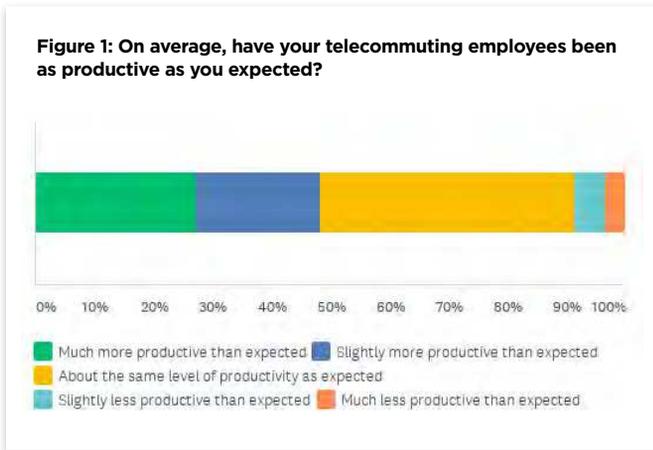
at UCLA

By David J. Karwaski

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES (UCLA) sits within the Los Angeles Basin, one of the most traffic congested areas in the U.S., that unfortunately has some of the worst air quality—if not the worst—of any metropolitan area in the country. Given these conditions, UCLA has long had a large, successful transportation demand management (TDM) program, aka sustainable transportation program, that reduces drive-alone commute trips to campus via public transit pass subsidies, vanpool partnerships, carpool discounts, and a robust bicycling program. Heading into March 2020, UCLA had an employee drive-alone rate of just 48 percent compared to 75 percent in L.A. County as a whole.

As COVID-19 took hold in spring 2020, UCLA closed its campus to all but essential employees and its world-renowned medical center, which continued to operate throughout the pandemic, as expected. Beyond that, however, nearly 80 percent of campus employees (excluding medical center staff) were sent home and asked to telecommute for the foreseeable future. As the pandemic wore on, anecdotal evidence

suggested that this grand telecommuting experiment was working; managers were reporting positive results regarding employee productivity and quality of work (see Figure 1). A committee was formed to assess the state of telecommuting on campus, and to seek how to lock in, or continue, the benefits of telecommuting that seemed to be existent during the mass telecommuting period.



At the same time, it had become apparent that—contrary to published research that suggested public transit was not a significant source of coronavirus transmission—many bus riders who were part of the essential workforce were no longer traveling via public transit. In fact, many were driving to and from campus on a daily basis. As expected, modes of travel that involve close proximity to other people experienced dramatic declines in participation during the pandemic. As society recovers and campus activity returns to previous levels, survey data indicates strong and continued reticence for many of these previous sustainable transportation commuters to get back on the bus or into a vanpool, which worries parking administrators.

The Parking

The COVID pandemic has changed many things, including how people choose to commute to campus. This is problematic because UCLA’s tightly managed 22,000 parking space system is not only set up to provide parking for employees and commuting students, but also for visitors with medical appointments and those attending campus happenings such as conferences, sporting events, and theatrical performances. If the drive alone rate moves from 48 percent to nearly 70 percent due to the pandemic causing hesitation to use shared transportation modes, the impact would be a tsunami of parking demand at UCLA. The demand would result in the chaos that every parking operator fears, namely, too many cars searching for parking and not enough capacity to serve them. There would not be nearly enough available parking for commuting students who need to drive, nor enough parking capacity to serve both hospital and campus visitors.

Parking at the university is extremely limited. Each year, during a typical fall quarter, the system often runs at nearly 95 percent capacity during the day. Moreover, to continue to reduce the drive-alone rate and consequent traffic generation as well as greenhouse gas production, additional parking space is not

expected to be added or increased other than for limited, specific needs only. Survey results found approximately 15 percent of previous bus riders and 24 percent of carpoolers plan to drive to campus alone in the fall, leaving nearly 2,500 drive-alone commuters needing parking (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).

Returning to Campus

As conditions around the pandemic improve, vaccines take hold, and coronavirus cases reduce in number, UCLA has started to plan for a return to campus in fall 2021. The potential for future parking supply problems when the campus reopens was obvious, so UCLA Transportation began to look more closely at how to solidify and maintain telecommuting as a commute mode and part of the suite of sustainable transportation options at UCLA. If public transit ridership and vanpool and carpool participation remain at depressed levels this coming fall, then telecommuting has the potential to absorb some of those previous sustainable transportation commuters, thus helping to reduce daily parking demand on campus.

Pre-COVID-19 telecommuting practices mirrored those at many other campuses and workplaces—telecommuting was possible and enabled by some managers, but was not prevalent, with fewer than 4 percent of employees at UCLA telecommuting as part of their work week. UCLA Transportation engaged with the campus human resources department to collaborate on several policy and practice updates which better aligned telecommuting guidelines to fit current day needs. The collaboration proved fruitful for both departments, leading to a new online telecommuting resource that provides information, tools, and support for supervisors and their employees. Given the advent of new, robust technology tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and the Google suite of applications, collaboration and meetings via video conferencing became a common everyday event for many, enabling the workforce to continue productively while working remotely.



Figure 3: Telecommuting was the only viable work option for many employees after the campus closure in March 2020. Eventually this ‘compulsory telecommuting’ will end. At that point, would you want to (select one):

Return to the campus five days per week, driving each day to get there	(1) 2%
Return to the campus five days per week, getting there by any mode other than driving	(1) 2%
Return to the campus five days per week, with a mix of some days driving, some days using another mode	(0) 0%
Return to the campus for several days per week and telecommute the other days, driving on the days you commute to campus	(19) 44%
Return to the campus for several days per week and telecommute the other days, getting there by any mode other than driving	(9) 21%
Remain a telecommuter five days per week	(13) 30%

Telecommuting gains at UCLA—retained at a reasonable increase from the historic rate of approximately 3 percent to a modest 20 percent participation—would help mitigate the expected swing back to commuters driving alone to campus this fall. Furthermore, UCLA commuter survey results clearly indicate that employees want to continue to telecommute in some form, with the preponderance of them preferring a hybrid schedule which splits the workweek between telecommuting and working in the office (see Figure 3). Similar results have been seen elsewhere; telecommuting being favored by employees as it enables flexibility. The high quality work-life balance that the campus community covets is more readily achieved when there is flexibility for employees to engage in aging parent care, childcare needs, and other commitments.

Positioned Well

With the rollout of the Bruin ePermit online parking management system in 2019, UCLA Transportation positioned itself well to meet the needs of this new telecommute option. Through

Bruin ePermit, employees and campus visitors can conveniently purchase daily parking online via payroll deduction. The advantages of moving the parking permit system online have been plentiful. Permit holders can now opt out of their monthly single-occupancy parking permit and simply purchase a discounted daily parking permit when they need to be on campus—thus, supporting telecommuting or other sustainable options. For UCLA Transportation, the online system ushered in a new era of multi-modal commuting. With trends indicating a greater shift toward telecommuting and other sustainable choices, Bruin ePermit was launched at just the right moment.

Once it was clear that telecommuting would play a key role in reopening the campus safely by fall quarter 2021, some concerns about how to best implement hybrid telecommuting and in-person work became apparent. First, the university understood that there may be a significant influx in parking demand with many commuters still skittish about ride-sharing and public transit use due to the pandemic. If most employees telecommuted Monday and/or Friday, the demand for parking Tuesday through

Figure 4: How Public Transit Users Plan to Commute Post-COVID

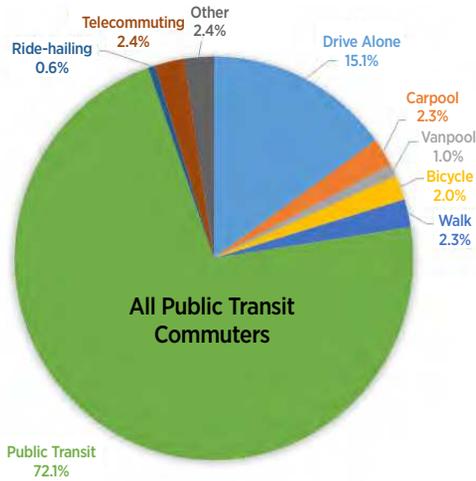
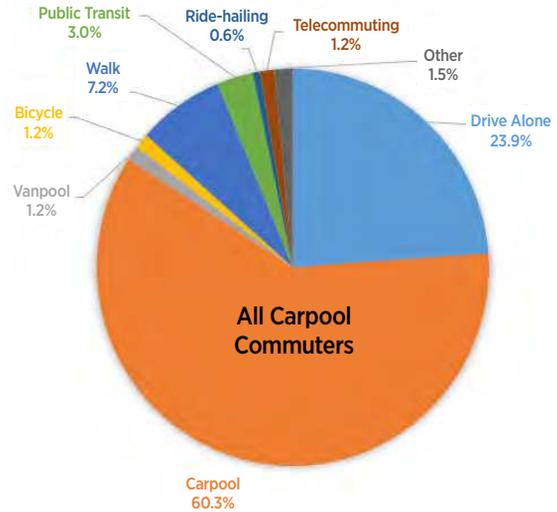


Figure 5: How Carpoolers Plan to Commute Post-COVID



Thursday would quickly reach capacity, especially for commuting students as employees are guaranteed a parking space.

Secondly, if most employees are off campus Monday and Friday, but on campus Tuesday through Thursday, this would plainly challenge physical distancing measures for those days everyone was on campus.

Telecommuting practices will need to incorporate methods to smooth aggregate telecommute schedules so that each day has a reasonable number of employees split between telecommuting and working onsite. As many employees may want to schedule their telecommute days around the weekend this could result in telecommute bunching on Mondays and Fridays. To support “smooth schedule telecommuting” supervisors and managers should be encouraged to schedule their employees’ workdays in a manner that spreads their off-campus days with days in the office, thereby reducing parking demand and lowering overall campus density throughout the week. Implementing a smoothed schedule telecommuting approach, the campus will be able to balance institutional needs with employee workplace flexibility. Plus, fewer employees on campus each day, will enable better overall physical distancing on campus as students return for in-person instruction.

Surveying

In June 2020, after a majority of the UCLA workforce telecommuted for two months, a survey was deployed to garner information on how well telecommuting worked for department heads. The survey was populated with such questions as, “Are your employees productive?” or “Was the quality of work and output impacted?” The results were remarkably positive, with more than

90 percent of those surveyed suggesting that employees were as productive or more productive than pre-COVID-19 conditions (see Figure 1). Fewer than 5 percent of respondents indicated that employees were less productive than expected. Furthermore, when asked if their unit or department could still offer the same level of quality service if a portion of their workforce continued to telecommute, more than 80 percent of respondents said yes. Only 5 percent anticipated quality impacts (see Figure 2). With additional training resources, more experience in managing remotely, and a broader support from campus leadership, the mainstreaming of telecommuting is expected to enable better results in the future.

UCLA’s telecommuting experience during the pandemic has undoubtedly been a successful one. To return more than 80,000 people back to campus in a staggered and responsible way will take a collective effort from leadership and employees alike. Both parking and office space management in a post-pandemic world will inevitably require forethought and adaptability.

Good things can derive from bad situations. UCLA Transportation will continue to support telework as part of its sustainable transportation program long after the pandemic ends, and perhaps other institutions or municipal workforces would benefit from an approach similar to the one UCLA is taking with telecommuting. ♦



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