

## Free MetroCards and College Retention: New Findings from The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs & CUNY

### Background

Community colleges disproportionately enroll low-income and working-class families, many of whom come from households earning under \$50,000 a year. However, attending community college is still not cheap for these families, particularly in a large city where the cost of living is high. Each year, many students from the City University of New York (CUNY) struggle to cover non-tuition expenses like MetroCards or transit passes, textbooks, technology, or childcare, and could drop out without a degree.

### About the Study

This study examined the experiences of community college students enrolled at two CUNY community colleges—Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and Queensborough Community College (QCC). Treatment students were randomly assigned to receive free monthly MetroCards from November 2023 to June 2024, which treatment students were reminded monthly to collect from their campuses. The experiences of treatment and control students were collected via surveys. In addition, academic data was obtained from CUNY's Institutional Research.

### Key Findings

The survey results underscore the crucial role of public transportation, with most respondents reporting the use of public transportation for school. An overwhelming 90% considered public transportation somewhat unaffordable or unaffordable. Most treatment students expressed appreciation for receiving free MetroCards.

In terms of academic outcomes, no significant differences were found between students randomly assigned to treatment and students randomly assigned to control. However, a *different pattern* of results emerged when control students were compared to treatment students who picked up their MetroCards at least once.

Specifically, we found that there were significant differences in the following outcomes after accounting for covariates such as race, gender, age, pre-cumulative credits, and pre-cumulative GPA: 1) continued enrollment in Spring 2024, and 2) continued enrollment in Fall 2024 or graduation in Summer 2024. Analyses also showed a general positive relationship between the number of MetroCards picked up

and academic outcomes after controlling for race, gender, age, pre-cumulative credits, and pre-cumulative GPA.

## METROCARD AND STUDENT SUCCESS

After controlling for key demographic and pre-academic variables, students who picked up their MetroCard at least once have a significantly higher likelihood of:



**Continued enrollment in Spring 2024**



**Continued enrollment in Fall 2024 or graduation in Summer 2024**

## What Students Said

Study participants' open-ended responses to the survey illustrated the importance of MetroCards at times.

### Some Students in the Treatment Study Said:

"...it has significantly helped me save money any time that I need to go anywhere. It has relieved me from the stress of having to put money aside to pay for a monthly MetroCard which I may not have been able to afford. Given how easy it has helped me get to places, I believe it has helped me with my academic performance."

"Yes, I'm a student, so I cannot spend more money than I have. I have others bills in my life. And having a free MetroCard helps to save money for my others bills. It's so difficult to maintain studying and work. This is so helpful."

"This study has been very helpful for me in saving money on transportation to and from school as well as for other obligations I have. With the money I've saved, I've been able to buy more food and be less worried if I have enough money for something. Thank you!"



Without the worry of how to afford transportation, they could focus on their academics and fully participate in campus life. This highlights the importance of addressing non-academic needs, such as transportation, of low-income students living in a large and expensive city, which then have implications for persistence in college.

However, we also found that treatment students did not pick up their MetroCards every month. In addition, not all treatment students randomly assigned to receive free MetroCards actually picked up their MetroCards. An open-ended question was inserted into the survey to ask students why they did not pick up the MetroCards. Though the response rate was not high, the few reasons provided included already having a MetroCard, pick-up schedule conflicted with their class schedule or heavy workload schedule, and having dropped out due to depression. Thus, further research will be needed to dive deeper into when and which students might need the MetroCards.

## Policy Implications

The findings from this study emphasize the need for local, state, and [federal policymakers](#) to support students' access to transit and other reliable transportation options that help them get to class and work. The findings are also reinforced by results from a national survey focused on college students' basic needs. According to [The Hope Survey for Student Basic Needs](#), **1 in 8 students reported missing class or work due to transportation problems during the academic term.**

Other research has also shown that more than a third of all students in the United States attend a community college, and [99% of those community college students commute](#). Despite these numbers, public transit often fails to meet these students' needs. **More than 40% of community colleges across the country do not have a transit stop within walking distance**, but an additional 25% of community colleges *could* become accessible simply by extending existing public transit lines. Adding more transit accessibility would benefit hundreds of thousands of students nationwide and make entire communities more connected and economically vibrant.

Transportation costs [are rising](#), particularly after the pandemic. As a result, students are increasingly squeezed by the demands of their school, work, and family responsibilities. Federal policymakers can help by securing funding to expand student access to public transportation. The bipartisan [PATH to College Act](#) would encourage local public transit agencies and higher education institutions to collaborate to design transit solutions that meet students' needs. Expanding and aligning public transit infrastructure with students' schedules could dramatically improve college

persistence—because **finding transportation to get to class should never be the reason a student can't graduate.**

For colleges that are not transit accessible (like rural-serving colleges), and for students whose schedules or living arrangements simply require them to have a car, **the U.S. Department of Education can also remove regulatory barriers that prevent students from using their financial aid to purchase a vehicle.**

Students' own words from this study reinforced what the national survey data shows: **giving students funding for transportation relieved stress, allowing them to focus on their studies and participate fully in campus life.**

Addressing non-academic barriers like transportation isn't just about convenience—it's about "getting students on the road" to success and graduation.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to The Kresge Foundation and Heckscher Foundation for Children for funding this study; to CUNY's Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics for assisting us in conducting the study and the Borough of Manhattan Community College and Queensborough Community College for their support at the study locations; and to Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab for her role at the inception of this project.