

## Introduction

Each graduate of the ImpACT! Leadership Program must complete a group project that advances the awareness of TDM. Like many of those in our program cohort, our project changed completely with COVID-19. Back in May, we interviewed a number of TDM professionals from public and private institutions to learn how they are responding to the challenges facing their institution amidst this pandemic, while simultaneously searching for more innovative ways to advance TDM efforts. This report contains interviews with a group of university TDM professionals from across the country (though a strong showing from the Pac-12) and the Kendall Square Association in Cambridge, MA, who is working to with public transit agencies and private employers to “flatten the peak.” Read on to learn more.

## A Conversation with Universities Preparing for Fall Semester

This first interview with universities covers their initial response to Covid-19, return to campus planning, and mode adaptation and promotion for students, faculty, and staff when we return to campus. Through our interview process we uncovered **four major takeaways** that we will share with you today.

Many thanks to our interviewees for taking the time to collaborate, share, and advance our TDM efforts nationwide:

- Jessica Alba, Stanford University
- Michael Briggs, Vanderbilt University
- Jenny Cadigan and Brett Dodson, Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU)
- David Donovan, University of Southern California (USC)
- Anne Eskridge, University of Washington (UW)
- JC Porter, Arizona State University (ASU)
- Dave Sorrell, UC Berkeley

## Four Takeaways

### 1. Commute teams are essential employees.

If there is one thing this virus has taught us, it's that *viruses don't travel, people do*. Mobility is essential and, therefore, so are our commute teams. When Covid-19 hit, these commute teams sprang into action. One of the university teams immediately began circulating campus and helping with parking enforcement and campus safety. Other universities, especially those with hospitals and a large contingency of essential workers, immediately implemented workplace safety protocols to protect staff and maintain trust. While many of us are lucky enough to work from home, these commute teams were busy protecting shuttle drivers, installing plexiglass shields, issuing parking refunds, moving to cashless payments, increasing vehicle cleaning services, and (re)balancing budgets (especially in those cases where parking revenue pays for transit pass subsidies and other incentives).

Now these commute leaders are transitioning from reactive to proactive measures as they plan the return to campus mobility - both getting to and around campus. One sentiment was clear during the Zoom interview: though universities are under high stress right now, they are still hopeful, collaborative, and enjoying the challenge that comes with finding new ways to serve their campus commuters.

## **2. University campuses weren't built for social distancing.**

Due to this environmental factor, a phased return to campus will be necessary. One university described how faculty, staff and students will likely return in three phases. It is assumed that roughly 20 percent of employees will return once the (first) shelter in place order is lifted, with the expectation that around 50 percent will return in the second phase. In the third phase, the university is expecting a campus population of 70-90% depending on telework and remote learning guidelines, which are still under development. The timing of phases two and three are unknown at this point. What is known is that parking charges will return this summer. This will generate a little revenue, but also propel the shift towards a preference for daily parking fees. More on this later.

A few of the universities immediately suspended parking charges when shelter in place went into effect. One university that is both a medical campus and hospital with many essential employees, responded swiftly and equitably by offering free Lyft rides to employees without access to a vehicle. They, too, plan to phase back in parking charges as more employees return to work. All interviewees recognize the benefit of this large-scale proof of concept for telework. They also recognize the need for a formal telework policy as we continue to practice social distancing on campus and when commuting. Teleworking must continue at a large scale.

As one interviewee put it, first it was all about "how to turn the lights off, and now we're trying to turn the lights back on." Universities are not alone in this stopping and starting. When Covid-19 hit, we saw a reversal of many TDM policies at many organizations as we stopped encouraging shared modes and lifted parking charges. Now as we focus on turning the lights back on, it is clear much planning has gone into the phasing of policies and people - so that we can keep employees safe while still managing parking demand and encouraging sustainable commutes.

Down in the warmer climates, one university is planning a blended delivery model for campus in the fall - some virtual and some in-person. A group of staff and students will continue virtual learning, while others will be on campus. Thousands of miles away this is also true as another commute team coordinates their return to the office around class schedules - since conference rooms will become part-time classrooms.

Creativity filled the (virtual) room during this call. It's not just about getting to campus, but also about getting around campus. In addition to a phased return, these universities are getting creative with new mobility options for intra-campus movement. Shared bike fleets, campus rideshare services, and reclaimed campus streets each make room for socially distanced

transportation when students, staff, and faculty return to campus. Here's to hoping these policy changes stick as we continue to lean heavily on biking and walking for a more sustainable future.

### **3. Now is the time to switch to daily parking charges.**

For the universities on the call, it is clear that Covid-19 has reshaped and escalated the conversation about annual permits and daily parking charges. Interviewees acknowledged that this might be one of the few positive outcomes for TDM - the switch to a pay-as-you-go parking model. As universities plan to push telecommuting for both staff and students, they recognize the need for a daily choice model that allows for flexibility. This way commuters only pay for the days that they park and are encouraged to use a combination of commute options - rather than falling into the habit of always driving due to the *sunk cost effect*. With many universities encouraging telecommuting - likely until there is a vaccine - there is an immediate need for the flexibility of a pay as you go model.

Some universities on the call are already part way through their campus transition to daily parking or are planning to launch daily parking this fall. Two universities already have a pay as you go parking experience for staff and faculty that is currently getting heavy usage - further testament to employees' desire for flexibility.

### **4. Messaging will rely heavily on intrinsic motivators.**

Rather than promoting shared rides, university commute teams said they would focus messaging on personal safety and choice. Awareness is key, so students and faculty know their options and can choose accordingly. A few universities plan to promote low-density shared rides (think two people max in a carpool) whereas others stated outright that they won't promote shared rides of any kind for the time being. There was a focus on the promotion of telecommuting and active modes - and many see this as an opportunity to increase telecommuters, bikers, and walkers. Given that students tend to be younger and live closer to campus than staff, they are more likely to opt for active modes like biking and walking.

While focused on active modes, some universities also plan to encourage two-person carpools as a solution for those who live further than 5 miles from campus and don't yet feel safe in high density shared modes. The CDC's initial recommendation to incentivize driving alone for public health reasons received backlash from the TDM community. The CDC has since [updated its recommendations](#), stating that employers should offer "incentives to use forms of transportation that minimize close contact with others (e.g., biking, walking, driving or riding by car either alone or with household members)." Further, those employees who are non-essential—and utilize public transportation— "should be allowed to shift hours in order to commute during less busy times."

One interviewee noted that while he opposed the CDC's initial recommendations for practical reasons, he also opposes a widespread reliance on SOV commutes, "to defend communities of color, low-income individuals and households, and those who are transit dependent and

without cars of their own. To recommend switching to cars if a household does not have one makes no sense.” We couldn’t agree more.

Another member on the call stated their intentions plainly, “We are not going to encourage any one mode over the other. Instead we are going to present all the options and let employees make their own choices.” That said, many employees will likely still choose their commutes based on intrinsic motivations. At universities with hospitals, many vanpools are still active and heavily used. These vanpools are transporting hospital and essential workers who don’t have any other way to get to work. While they may be taking an extra risk while being in the vanpool, they enjoy the camaraderie. It seems there is hope that shared modes bounce back sooner rather than later.

### **Bringing it all together**

So there you have it - a look inside the university TDM community during this unprecedented time. Thank you again to our interviewees - both for your time and your continued efforts to keep your commuters safe. We are grateful to have these motivated, creative, and collaborative TDM experts on the frontlines of our return to campus planning. You’ve given us hope that we can still advance TDM initiatives and have a lasting impact on the way we commute.

If you are looking for more resources, you can access ACT’s Employer Guide for Return to the Workplace Commute Planning [here](#).

## **A Conversation with the Kendall Square Association as they seek to flatten the peak through public and private partnerships**

In the second interview, Alana Olsen Westwater, Vice President of Strategy and Operations for the Kendall Square Association (KSA) in Cambridge, MA, shared some post COVID-19 strategies utilizing their existing partnerships with major employers in their area, transit agency (MBTA) and the city of Cambridge for lasting infrastructure improvements. With the power of partnership, Alana and the KSA are creating positive change that will last well beyond this pandemic.

Kendall Square is the center of Cambridge's innovation economy and serves as a biotech and technology hub for 65,000 employees of companies which include Biogen, IBM, Google, Twitter and Apple. In her current role, Alana manages the transportation demand management (TDM) for the Kendall Square Association bringing together various partners including employers, MBTA and the city to improve congestion in a dense area that was once full of large factory

buildings and parking lots. It is no secret that the commuters in the greater Boston area experience some of the worst congestion in the country.

Yet, these strong public and private partnerships in combination with an eye for big picture infrastructure, Alana and her partners have been able to help shift commute behaviors of Kendall Square commuters. Today, two thirds of commuters use alternative modes with 41% using transit. And while the percent of single occupancy vehicle drivers is already low (34%), they established a goal to further reduce that to 30%. In a recent blog, Alana stated, “You can’t find the cure for cancer while sitting in traffic.” Alana attributes this work to the diverse partnerships to not only run programs successfully, but to plan and build the infrastructure needed to support a multi-modal area. KSA recently met with 19 major employers to pilot more TDM-related projects to further their goals. Then COVID-19 hit.

## Adjusting to the New Normal

Like many places across the country, most employees started telecommuting. Carpooling and vanpooling programs paused. Transit ridership drastically decreased. While congestion vastly improved, many TDM programs were left with a bit of uncertainty on how to move forward. Alana attended an ACT webinar and shared how KSA assessed the immediate challenges but also looked at the opportunities. She met with her staff and team to do some scenario planning and developed a phased approach with an initial focus on promoting safety. She also acknowledged that in this “new normal,” employees will want to drive alone and feel safe so parking would be a huge issue. Not every employee in Kendall Square has access to parking or to a vehicle. What’s more, KSA needs to be mindful of childcare and senior care, not knowing when people would come back to work with daycare and schools closed.

## Flattening the Peak Strategy

Alana described their overall strategy with KSA as “Flattening the Peak,” a nice play off “flattening the curve.” This strategy looks to flatten the peak travel times by working with employers while simultaneously working with employers to offer flexible start and ends times for their employees. In partnership with the MBTA, the KSA hopes to spread transit service evenly throughout the day, rather than continuing the American model that has peak frequencies during commuter hours. Doing this will provide more reliable transit service throughout the day and allow for less crowding on buses and trains so we can remain socially distanced. KSA is working with their various partners to creatively influence programs, policies and infrastructure investments to keep commuter behaviors from changing despite the challenges. This will help promote equity, public health, and flexibility as we slowly resume our commuting.

As most of the Kendall Square commuters were using transit before Covid-19, the KSA decided to focus on safety assurance for riders. Alana and her team began conversations with employers to potentially shift employee start and end times. They also talked to MBTA about

creating more flexible train/bus schedules that have consistent frequency throughout the day instead of just during peak commute hours. This would help commuters who rely on transit avoid crowded buses and trains. On this new schedule a Kendall Square employee could come to work at 11am instead of just coming during morning peak time allowing for social distancing on transit. It is helpful that employers plan to transition back to the workplace in phases with split shifts to reduce the impact in the office and on transit.

They also discussed developing dedicated bus lanes in Cambridge. It is clear that equity is the driving force behind their partnership strategy for Alana and the KSA. Since many transit riders are from underserved communities, these dedicated lanes would help get people to their jobs more efficiently, even if there is an uptick in single occupancy car trips as this pandemic continues.

Finally, Alana talked about offering private shuttles for employers as an alternative. These shuttles could be deemed as a safer option than riding a crowded train or bus and would have the advantages of familiarity among employees within the same employer (similar to how a vanpool runs).

## Moving Forward

As many TDM professionals prepare for commuters' returns to the workplace, a few things are certain. Safety in the form of physical distancing and cleanliness must be addressed and continued for the foreseeable future. TDM strategies should aim for coordinated, system-level responses and infrastructure changes, and of course, public and private partnerships. In a "new normal," TDM programs will have a greater chance of resiliency with systems that will support these efforts. Alana and the KSA have an array of impressive ideas and a track record to back it up. We are excited to see how the Flatten the Peak strategy works in this post COVID-19 environment.

### Interviews and reporting by ImpACT! Leadership Class of 2020:

Kelly (Hostetler) Koster, [Luum](#)

Lloyd Nadal, [Solano Transportation Authority](#)

*[ImpACT! Leadership](#) is ACT's leadership development program for early to mid-career Transportation Demand Management (TDM) professionals that brings together a cross-section of participants from around the country, representing public and private organizations. ImpACT! offers in-depth learning opportunities that provides a strong foundation for individual growth, helps professionals build a network of peers for continuous support, and prepares participants for leadership in their professions and ACT.*

