Bike2Campus Points to Broader Possibilities for Campuses to Embrace Cycling

By Daniel Ronan

Student bike mechanics from the University of Oregon Bike Program work on the program's bicycle fleet in "the Barn," their on-campus facility. Photo: Briana Orr

This week, the inaugural Bike2Campus Week seeks to spur students' budding interest in bicycling to reach Chicago's many university and college campuses. A partnership between the Chicago Network of Sustainability in Higher Education, the Chicago Department of Transportation, and Divvy seeks to entice students with prizes, like a four-year Divvy membership for the top pedaler, and with friendly competition between schools.

The city's most populous campus, the University of Illinois at Chicago, also hopes to lead the pack by recording the highest percentage of students bicycling to class. A series of Earth Month campus events will showcase the benefits of biking, and coax students onto two wheels with free Divvy day passes. "We all came together to make something exciting, fun, and friendly, with a little bit of education so that everyone can participate," says Kate Yoshida from the university's sustainability office and coordinator of UIC's Bike2Campus effort.

A close look at the competition press release, however, reveals a mixed message: The partnership defines the event as "a five-day alternative transit challenge to get Chicagoland university and college students on their bicycles." Even

as the competition extolls the benefits of bicycles, it still classifies bicycling as “alternative” transportation. Conversations with other university transportation departments suggest refocusing the lens.

“We have banished the word ‘alternative’ from our vocabulary,” asserts Celeste Gilman of the University of Washington, since “80% of trips to campus are not drive alone trips.” Similarly, Briana Orr from the University of Oregon laments a recent restructuring of the campus transportation department, now called the “Parking and Transportation Department.” By putting parking first, she says, the title detracts from broader transportation management goals, especially on a campus known for scarce parking and abundant transportation choices. The Visit UIC webpage exhibits the same “parking first” mindset.

These bicyclists are part of a large majority of University of Washington students who get there without driving. Photo: University of Washington

It’s one thing to have a Bike2Campus Week event as a “carrot” incentive for students to try bicycling, and quite another to take a “stick” approach of making it harder for students and employees to drive to campus. Cindy Klein-Banai, an associate chancellor at UIC, points to larger initiatives, like a parking price study recently produced by urban planning graduate students and a new Multimodal Transportation Plan being developed with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, as steps in the right direction.

While these initiatives are welcome, moving the needle requires re-evaluating funding and budgets. Morgan Johnston from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign points to the truth of the matter: “The best support [for active transportation] comes from the people that have decision-making over the funding.” She underscores the need for a strong budgetary commitment by university administrators to making cultural shifts, not just piecemeal mode shifts. That commitment can ultimately pay for itself, says UW’s Gilman: “When less resources are needed to store vehicles, then more resources are available for the mission of the university.”

The University of Washington offers a model where changing the university’s own incentives created a broader cultural shift in how people travel to campus. In conjunction with the city of Seattle, UW set a cap on both parking spaces and vehicle trips to and from its campus. If these caps are not met, the city can withhold building permits for university construction projects. These binding caps on car use assuage university neighbors’ concerns about traffic caused by the university’s growth, and create a strong incentive for the university to get both students and employees to walk, bike, and ride transit. This collaboration made it possible to expand the main campus into the adjacent University District, which is quickly becoming an urban center for technology and innovation.

The cross-campus collaboration exhibited by the Bike2Campus Week shows a model for collaboration with which UIC and other Chicago campuses can approach active transportation initiatives. Hopefully, this model can be a starting point for a deeper, systemic shift in how Chicago’s campuses understand how to manage their transportation needs.