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U-Pass Program Provides Big Traveling Discount to Public College Students in CT: Cameron on Transportation

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Imagine having an unlimited-rides pass on all public transit in Connecticut, including Metro-North. Then imagine this pass only costs \$20 a year.

Such is the reality of [U-Pass](#), the transit pass given to almost 15,000 community college and state university students in Connecticut. Not only does U-Pass give them affordable access to mass transit, in some cases the pass is a life changer.

Morales relies on her U-Pass to get to classes at Norwalk Community College, where she’s studying early childhood education.

The daughter of a single mom who doesn’t own a car (and also relies on the bus), Morales takes a bus, train and another bus for her 90-minute one-way commute. She also uses the pass to run personal errands like doctor’s appointments, which is fine with the state Department of Transportation and transit operators who devised the U-Pass.

Some students use their U-Pass on the [CTFastrak](#) busway system, journeying from campus to downtown to party. Better they be on a bus than on the highway if they’ve had a couple of beers, right?

[Created in 2017](#) as a brainchild of then CDOT Commissioner Jim Redeker, U-Pass costs every student enrolled at Connecticut colleges \$20 a year, whether they use the pass or not. Most of the 26% of students who use the pass are first-generation college students coming from homes like Morales’ that rely on public transportation.

U-Pass sales generate \$800,000 annually for CDOT and the transit operators, far less than the individual rides would cost a la carte.

“U-Pass is a great way of introducing public transportation to the next generation,” said CDOT’s Lisa Rivers. And the response has been phenomenal, enjoying a 47 percent increase in usage in its second year of operation.

Students just flash their U-Pass and college ID, and they’re on their way. This fall, the U-Pass is being redesigned to show the student’s name and school, making the check of the ID even easier.

U-Pass is honored on the bus and the trains, including Metro-North, but only within the state.

“If you travel beyond Greenwich to New York City, you pay the local fare,” Rivers said.

Students can also use U-Pass on Shore Line East from New Haven to New London and on the new CTrail [Hartford Line trains](#) from New Haven to Hartford. That’s how 20-year-old Daniel Pinto, a University of Connecticut student, got to his summer job in New Haven where he was applying his civil engineering studies toward a career.

Trouble with U-Pass on Amtrak Trains

- But the Hartford Line trains, jointly operated by the state DOT and Amtrak, have been having problems with U-Pass riders. Though both the state DOT and Amtrak tickets can be used on either Amtrak or CTRail trains, Amtrak has been refusing service to U-Pass holders on busy afternoon trains due to a lack of seats.

- In some cases, U-Pass holders have been [kicked off the train](#) so their seats could go to Amtrak riders with reservations.
- That's not supposed to happen and it really speaks to how little Amtrak cares about this line or the service it provides. Amtrak trains have fewer cars than the CTrail trains, the conductors aren't properly trained and when the state DOT complains, [Amtrak basically doesn't listen](#).

Some have suggested the U-Pass program be extended to state workers, though Rivers points out that, unlike struggling college students who often choose between eating and going to school, the state employees get a paycheck — and free parking.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.

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