

Step 7

Addressing A Civic Challenge on the Ground

Below find three evidenced based outcomes a *TfC* team made up of Duke undergraduates and refugee high school students in Durham generated in their effort to improve bus stops in the city.

1. Research Report.

ISSUES RELATED TO DURHAM BUS STOPS DUKE UNIVERSITY KENAN INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS CITIZENSHIP LAB

Introduction

The Citizenship Lab at the Kenan Institute for Ethics connects high school-aged refugees in the Durham community to Duke students. As the name suggests, the program focuses on instilling a sense of citizenship in these refugee students, many of whom came to the United States less than a year ago from places like Jordan, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In addition to home visits and weekly meetings, the Bus Stop Project began this year as a hands-on way to introduce our students to the spirit of civic engagement in their new home, as well as to do something for the city of Durham. We hoped that by having a hand in advancing change, however small, on a community issue pertinent to them, the students would be empowered in both their civic and personal lives to find their voice, as many of them come from environments where they are stripped of it.

Unfortunately, the project hit roadblocks almost immediately. Though we were excited to learn that GoDurham had set aside a sum of money towards a Better Bus Stops program, it quickly became clear that only the bare minimum had been done to ensure the improvements “reflect[ed] the values and priorities of the community,” as promised. We were shown, as evidence of community input, a superficial, two-question survey given to bus riders that forced false dichotomies between equally important bus stop improvements and left little room for qualitative elaboration or feedback. Further, the survey had yielded only 120 responses, when GoDurham served thousands in the city. Representatives from GoTriangle rebutted our offers to expand on their survey work, explaining that while they fully aware of the survey’s limitations they had decided that the community input portion of their work had concluded. The rest of the Better Bus Stops procedure was described in vague, non-transparent terms.

Taking matters into our hands, we piloted an interview protocol (available on request) in several locations around Durham, including the Durham Bus Station and several stops along Route 10A and 10B, which were in proximity to where our refugee students lived. About 20 interviews were conducted in total, following standard informed consent procedure. In general, bus riders were very responsive to questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the bus stops they used and many even suggested improvements unprompted.

Through the interviews, we identified five different issues that seemed to recur throughout: seating, shelter, safety, lighting, and accessibility. Our preliminary findings are below.

Issues

After analyzing our interview data, we categorized the different shortcomings bus riders identified into five areas:

- *Seating*
- *Shelter*
- *Safety*
- *Lighting*
- *Accessibility*

seating

“Seats are mostly in the...middle and high-class communities... Poor folk...they gotta stand up all the time, and they need them [seats at bus stops]” – Anthony.

Major concerns with seating discussed by interviewees:

- Irregularity of seating, large gaps between one seating area and the next.
- Current seating where available is limited. One bench holds three people maximum.
- Some people have extreme difficulty standing for long periods. Concern for the sick, elderly, and disabled. “Sometimes you just wanna sit down. People take shopping carts and flip them over to turn them into a seat, waiting for the buses.” – Sharon
- Inequality. Seating available for wealthier neighborhoods, but not for low-income areas.

Several of those who were critical of current public transportation, also made constructive suggestions for the cities. Their recommendations were:

- Have one bench per block.
- Coordinate with other cities and see what models work for them. “I used to live in Takoma, Washington, and they had seats at the bus stops. They should network with other cities and see what works for them.” – Tiffany.

shelter

“The bus shelter isn’t usable in bad weather if there’s no shelter.” – Earl

Major Concerns:

- Lack of protection from rain, snow, and cold. People have to stand out in the open, often forced to show up to work soaking wet.
- People will avoid using buses if it’s raining due to lack of shelter.

Bus Riders’ Recommendations:

- More bus shelters at more stops.
- Larger shelters for greater protection.

safety

“This is too much. I can’t do it. I don’t think buses are good for kids, period... I don’t think buses are good for nobody.” – Jamira

Major Concerns:

- Violence. People have witnessed shootings, fights, etc. occur at bus stops. Concerns about sexual assault. Some bus shelters have bullet holes in them.
- Drug-selling and drug-use. Some bus stops are daily gathering spots for drug-users and sellers.
- Particular concern for vulnerable groups e.g. children, elderly, women, etc.
- Too close to the road. Bus stops are located in places that make people vulnerable to accidents.

Bus Riders’ Recommendations.

- “There should be a blue light system like on campuses.” – Mack. This suggestion was reverberated by many.
- Install cameras near bus stops.
- Have police near bus stops.

lighting

“I have to pull out my phone at the stop because [otherwise] the bus driver won’t see me.” – Tiffany.

Major Concerns:

- Lack of lighting at night means passengers are often invisible to bus driver, often forcing them to step out into the middle of the road in order to be seen.
- Lack of lighting makes people feel unsafe.

accessibility

“If somebody’s disabled, it’s gotta be really hard, especially for someone in a wheelchair or walking around in a walker...because there’s no sidewalk.” – Devaris

Major Concerns:

- Some bus stops lack any sidewalk, not accessible for many especially disabled and elderly.
- Bus stops are far from many locations.
- Distance is especially difficult to travel for people with kids, the elderly, disabled, etc.
- The buses run irregularly and do not follow the schedule. “It ain’t easy because you always gotta walk...It’s not like it’s right there. You don’t know when the bus is coming.

It takes 45 minutes. You could miss the bus. And sometimes it comes early... and people miss the bus. That's how people lose their jobs." – Jamira.

- Bus will often not run.

Bus Riders' Recommendations

- Have more bus stops closer to where people are, so they do not have to go long distances.
- Have the buses run on time and run regularly?
- Make bus stops handicap-accessible.

conclusion

The citizens of Durham have a right to safe, convenient, and accessible public transportation. Bus stops need to have proper lighting so that riders don't have to enter the street for bus drivers to notice them at night. Bus stops need to be on concrete sidewalk so that riders don't have to stand in the mud and so riders in wheelchairs can access the stop. Bus stops need to have bus shelters so that riders don't have to wait in the rain or snow, and need to have seating especially for the sick and elderly. Finally, more work needs to be done in terms of safety in the city.

Many of the riders we interviewed responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to have their voices heard, often urging us to "please tell city council" about an issue they had. More than once, we had riders speak fervently about where and how they wanted to see specific improvements as soon as we said the words "bus stop," before even being asked any questions.

Others explained that they had provided feedback about the bus stops to officials before, but were disappointed because nothing ever came about. Clearly, our refugee students in the Citizenship Lab were not the only ones who felt that their voices had not been heard.

After hearing from several riders about their concerns with proper seating, or lack thereof, at many Durham bus stops, we decided to address this issues through our own means. Inspired by a project conducted by nonprofit Reconnect Rochester in Rochester, New York, we constructed three cubes from waterproofed plywood, designed to seat riders waiting for the bus. For many riders of the GoDurham public transit system, standing while waiting for the bus can be tiring, inconvenient, and even dangerous, especially for senior citizens, people with medical conditions or disabilities, and parents with young children. Currently, however, many if not most of the bus stops in Durham do not offer a place for riders to rest while waiting for the bus.

This cube cost \$60 to build. We understand that local government often has limited resources or different priorities, however, through this project, we hope to show city council that affordable bus stop seating is possible and easy to implement. We also hope to raise awareness for other issues concerning bus stops in Durham. While this cube is a small fix, we hope that the city of Durham will take notice and work towards broader, more permanent change.

Though the scope of this project, both the cubes and the interviews, was limited by the time constraints of full-time college students, we are optimistic that the interviews that we have conducted and the enthusiasm from riders that we have witnessed can provide a basis for a more community-oriented approach to better bus stops in Durham. Ultimately, we believe that city council and the members of this project team strive towards the same goal – service to the citizens of Durham – and we hope that our work can complement the endeavors of the city and fill gaps that the city has not.

To that end, we are excited that after months of operating independent from GoDurham and the Better Bus Stops initiative that the city has taken interest in our work, even opening the doors to

collaboration. We ask for your support, hoping that the city can amplify our efforts and expand our reach.

II.Op-ed:

“How to Build a Better Bus Stop” [The Durham Herald Sun](#) Friday, June 16, 2017

What is the value of a bus stop in Durham?

Over the course of the last year, we have been a part of a research team at Duke University that includes Duke undergraduates and Durham high school students from refugee backgrounds. Because many of our high school students and their families rely on buses for transportation, we’ve made transit our area of focus this year. As part of the project, we rode the bus lines with the students, interviewed passengers and evaluated the safety and accessibility of stops. What we saw mirrored the city’s own data: many bus stops that are serviced by GoDurham buses are without shelter, seating or even sidewalks. More troubling, though, is that conversations around transit improvements all but ignore the voices of those who need transit the most.

Though often called “amenities” by transit professionals, shelters, seating and sidewalks are essential not only to the livelihood of riders but also their safety. On rainy days, it’s shelters that protect employees from downpours on the way to their shifts, ensuring that when they arrive they are presentable and ready to work; it’s the benches that provide the elderly relief while on the way to doctor's appointments; and it’s the concrete that allows those with strollers or in wheelchairs to access what is often their only affordable means of transportation.

GoTriangle, the transit manager for the City of Durham, has developed the Better Bus Stop program to use tax revenue set aside from the Bus and Rail Investment Plan to add more of these indispensable shelters, benches and sidewalks. However, though this program reflects an understanding of the need for better bus stops, citizens have been given only very limited opportunities to express their perspectives. From our involvement in the bus project we have come to understand that the value of community input lies not only in helping GoTriangle order stops to be improved, but in emphasizing the need for urgency.

The six million people who use GoDurham transit annually are relying on buses to get to work, buy groceries, visit clinics and so on. As long-time residents are priced farther and farther out of the city’s core, it’s vital not only that we continue to invest in transit but that we ensure our investments reflect the interests of everyone. As Durham County prepares to invest in a 3.3 billion-dollar light rail plan, it’s worth questioning why this is the chosen priority. The need for more improvements to existing transit infrastructure is arguably just as great as the need for new modes of public transit.

Durham is known to be receptive to, if not appreciative of, community input. But Go Triangle’s over-simplified surveys and half-hearted efforts to get riders to complete the surveys makes it impossible for them to meaningfully capture input from riders. If we continue to ignore their voices, riders will need to continue to fashion their own creative and pragmatic solutions to bus stop problems, whether it be resting on overturned trashcans or using the light from their phones to illuminate dark bus stops and thereby make themselves visible to approaching buses at night.

We should provide citizens a place to direct their concerns and lobby for action on transit in a manner similar to that which was employed by the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission (BPAC) when it successfully pushed for more and safer sidewalks. The input and perspectives of community members, as BPAC has shown, is what will make transit projects durable and ultimately successful going forward. Listening to stakeholders reminds us that strategic responsiveness to downtown development while ignoring longtime riders in other places is short-sighted. Stakeholders also remind us that it is creative problem solving that is truly needed not another recitation of the reasons why improvements can't be made.

Better bus stops do not need to be prohibitively expensive. A good bus stop doesn't require thousands of dollars in commissioned art or to be designed by renowned architects. Bus stops merely need shelter and seating, and just as importantly, bus stops need to be improved in a manner that recognizes the responsibility that Durham has not just to its wealthy residents, but to all of us.

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III. *Bus Cubes*. In our interviews, we uncovered that riders desperately wanted a place to simply sit. Indeed, in the face of inaction by transit authority's riders were developing their own pragmatic work arounds: turning over trashcans and shopping carts for benches and bringing their own benches to stops.

After formally engaging with authorities and sharing our preliminary research we found a similar lack of urgency on the part of authorities. Our *TfC* team learned about bus cubes (see below) from a group in Rochester, New York. The cubes were cheap and effective way to provide seating. Best of all, they sparked conversations about bus stop seating and safety. We built three cubes and placed them had stops where the parents of the high school students in our lab waited for the bus. We are now working with the city to find a way to keep them in place—at least until adequate seating was provided-- and even increase their number.

1) Duke undergrads and Durham high school students building bus cubes.



2) A bus cube at a bus stop in Durham

