

Columbia Commuter Student Experience & Demographic Profile

A commuter student is defined as a student who lives off-campus and commutes at least fifteen minutes to get to classes from their residence. In Spring 2023, a survey was sent out to all enrolled students between February 17 to March 3 to gain a better understanding of the commuter student experience and those of their non-commuting peers¹.

Survey questions focused on four main themes: 1) Housing type and contributing factors; 2) Commute types and lengths; 3) Perceptions of safety traveling to and between classes; and 4) Sense of belonging. The following report summarizes these themes and compares responses between commuter students and those who live on-campus.

Key Takeaways:

- [Commuter Population](#): One in every two Columbia students commutes to campus for classes. Compared to their non-commuting peers, these students are more likely to be students of color, Pell recipients, from Chicago/Chicago Metro, and transfer students.
- [Living Situation](#): Commuter students are most likely to be living with others off-campus compared to living alone, with 88% indicating they lived with roommates, family, or friends. Cost was the most common factor cited for choosing to live off-campus.
- [Commuting Type](#): Commuter students are most likely to commute to campus by the CTA “L” Train or by the CTA Bus, with many indicating that they use multiple types of commuting across a week or within a single day.
- [Commuting Length](#): Commuter students are most likely to take between 30 to 50 minutes to travel to classes, with the next most common travel length of 1 to 2 hours.
- [Perceptions of Safety](#): While commuter students tended to feel very or moderately safe inside campus buildings (94%), perceptions of safety decreased when it came to traveling between classes (52%) and from campus to their residences (43%). More than half of commuter students said earlier class start and end times (54%) and expanding the SafeRide Program (53%) would increase their feelings of safety.
- [Sense of Belonging](#): The majority (>60%) of Commuter students experience a sense of belonging at Columbia, with students most likely to strongly agree that all of their identities are celebrated, and it is possible for them to succeed at Columbia.



¹ A response rate of 18.9% was achieved reflecting 1,120 respondents. Results have a 95% confidence level (+/- 3% margin of error). That is, if the survey was conducted 100 times, the actual percentages of the population would be within 3 percentage points above or below the percentages reported here in 95 out of 100 surveys.

Demographics and Academics

Overall, 1,120 enrolled students responded to the survey in Spring 2023. Of those students, 53% were identified as commuter students, meaning that they did not live on on-campus housing and traveled at least fifteen minutes to get to classes from their residence. Their demographic and academic characteristics are presented below:

Demographics	Commuter Students	Non-Commuter Students	All Respondents ² (N=1,120)
IPEDS Sex			
Female	60%	62%	61%
Male	40%	38%	39%
IPEDS Ethnicity			
American Indian and Indigenous Peoples	<1%	—	<1%
Asian	5%	2%	4%
Black/African American	14%	18%	16%
Hispanic	35%	16%	26%
International	8%	6%	7%
Multiple Races	3%	5%	4%
Native HI and Other Pacific Islander	<1%	—	<1%
Unknown/Other	<1%	<1%	1%
White	34%	52%	43%
BIPOC	58%	41%	50%
First Generation	41%	37%	39%
Pell Recipient	49%	33%	41%
Place of Origin			
Chicago	39%	8%	24%
Chicago Metro Area	32%	25%	29%
Other IL	2%	5%	4%
Midwest Core	8%	19%	13%
Other States	11%	37%	23%
International	8%	6%	7%

² Academic Class Standing, IPEDS Sex, BIPOC identity, First Generation status, and Pell Recipient Status were adjusted in the sample with calibration survey data using iterative proportional fitting. The weighted survey results reflect the student population and strengthen generalizability. All responses reflect the weighted results to best represent the overall campus student population.

Academics	Commuter Students	Non-Commuter Students	All Respondents³ (N=1,120)
Transfer Student at Entry	31%	18%	22%
Academic Class Standing			
At Large	<1%	1%	1%
First Year	18%	31%	24%
Sophomore	20%	27%	23%
Junior	27%	21%	24%
Senior	30%	20%	25%
Graduate Student	5%	1%	3%
School and Department			
<i>Fine and Performing Arts</i>	54%	50%	51%
Art & Art History	6%	2%	4%
Business and Entrepreneurship	10%	8%	9%
Dance	1%	1%	1%
Design	14%	7%	14%
Fashion Studies	7%	7%	7%
Music	4%	6%	5%
Photography	6%	3%	5%
Theatre	7%	15%	11%
<i>Liberal Arts and Sciences</i>	8%	5%	7%
American Sign Language	2%	1%	2%
English and Creative Writing	6%	4%	5%
Humanities, History, and Social Sciences	<1%	—	<1%
Science and Math	—	<1%	<1%
<i>Media Arts</i>	36%	43%	40%
Audio Arts and Acoustics	5%	5%	5%
Communication	5%	7%	6%
Cinema and Television Arts	16%	26%	21%
Interactive Arts and Media	10%	6%	8%
<i>No School</i>	2%	2%	2%

³ Academic Class Standing, IPEDS Sex, BIPOC identity, First Generation status, and Pell Recipient Status were adjusted in the sample with calibration survey data using iterative proportional fitting. The weighted survey results reflect the student population and strengthen generalizability. All responses reflect the weighted results to best represent the overall campus student population.

Living Situation Choices and Perceptions

Off-Campus Housing Type

Commuter students were most likely to be living with others off-campus compared to living alone, with 88% indicating they lived with roommates, family, or friends:

Which of the following best describes your current living situation?		
	Commuter Students	Non-Commuters
Living off-campus, alone	12%	3%
Living off-campus, with others	88%	11%
Currently unhoused or in transition	0%	1%
Living on-campus	—	85%

Additionally, commuter students tended to either be renters of their residences or be living for free in a house that someone else owned/paid housing costs for, with few owning their own homes:

What best describes your living situation off-campus?⁴		
	Commuter Students	Off-Campus Non-Commuters (within 15 minutes)
I am renting (alone or with others)	47%	90%
I own my home (alone or with others)	2%	4%
I live with family members or others and do not pay to live there	51%	7%

Reasons for choosing off-campus housing

Commuter students were most likely to cite on-campus housing costs, already existing residences, and sense of safety as reasons for choosing to live off-campus:

What best describes your living situation off-campus?⁵			
Reason for Living Off-Campus	Commuter Students	Off-Campus Non-Commuters (within 15 minutes)	Overall Off-Campus
Off-campus housing was more affordable	73%	48%	69%
Currently living with family	51%	3%	44%
Already had a house/apartment/condo off campus	22%	8%	20%
Off-campus housing felt safer	18%	8%	16%
Off-campus housing was closer to my work or other obligations	17%	9%	16%

^{4,5} These questions were limited only to those who indicated they lived off-campus. This therefore includes all Commuter students (N=577), and for comparison only Non-Commuters who lived off-campus but within a fifteen minute travel distance (n=67, compared to the overall Non-Commuter population of N=544).

What best describes your living situation off-campus?⁶

Reason for Living Off-Campus, Cont.	Commuter Students	Off-Campus Non-Commuters (within 15 minutes)	Overall Off-Campus
I could not have my pet with me in on-campus housing	16%	12%	16%
Style or layout of on-campus housing was less appealing than off-campus choices	14%	23%	15%
Felt I would not fit in at on-campus housing communities	13%	14%	13%
Not enough options for on-campus housing	12%	17%	13%
I didn't know about on-campus housing options	2%	1%	2%

Additionally, qualitative responses indicated that some students also chose to live off-campus because:

- it did not require them to move during the summer;
- they felt there were limited options for those in relationships/those who are married; or
- they felt off-campus housing allowed them more independence due to the lack of Resident Assistants and policies.

Commuting Type and Length

Commuting Type

Commuter students were most likely to commute to campus by the CTA “L” Train or by the CTA Bus, with walking indicated as the next most frequent travel method:

During an average week, which of the following ways do you commute to campus?	
CTA "L" Train	66%
CTA Bus	51%
Walking	42%
Driving or Carpooling	28%
Metra	21%
Ridesharing (Taxi, Uber, Lyft)	14%
Pace	5%
Biking	4%
Skateboarding or Scootering	3%

Additionally, the South Shore Train from Indiana was written in by 1% (n=6) of students as their way to commute to Columbia.

⁶ These questions were limited only to those who indicated they lived off-campus. This therefore includes all Commuter students (N=577), and for comparison only Non-Commuters who lived off-campus but within a fifteen minute travel distance (n=67, compared to the overall Non-Commuter population of N=544)

It is important to understand that students often indicated that they used multiple commuting types across a week or within a single day. For example, data and qualitative comments indicate that some students drive to the nearest station, use the bus or train, and then walk the remaining distance to their class.

As one student put it: “[I use] a mix of everything to get to campus.”

Length and Frequency of Travel

Overall, commuter students were most likely to take between 30 minutes to 50 minutes to travel to classes from their place of residence, with the next most frequent travel length being one to two hours:

How long does it take you to travel to Columbia’s campus on an average day?	
Time	% of Commuters
15 to 29 minutes	21%
30 to 59 minutes	45%
1 to 2 hours	31%
Over 2 hours	3%

These times understandably varied by commute type. For example, 17% of students who indicated they commuted by CTA “L” Train said their overall average commute time during a day was 15-29 minutes, compared to 21% of students who used the CTA Bus indicating the same:

Commute Length Based on Commute Type				
Commuting Type	15-29 min	30-59 min	1-2 hours	Over 2 hours
CTA "L" Train	17%	53%	27%	3%
CTA Bus	21%	47%	29%	3%
Walking	16%	39%	39%	6%
Driving or Carpooling	22%	40%	34%	4%
Metra	4%	25%	60%	12%
Ridesharing (Taxi, Uber, Lyft)	24%	55%	17%	4%
Pace	3%	16%	63%	18%
Biking	43%	43%	10%	4%
Skateboarding or Scootering	38%	31%	25%	7%

Students across all commuting lengths often indicated that they used multiple commuting types. Therefore, it is important to understand that those who travel significant lengths (such as over an hour) likely are not doing so with just one method.

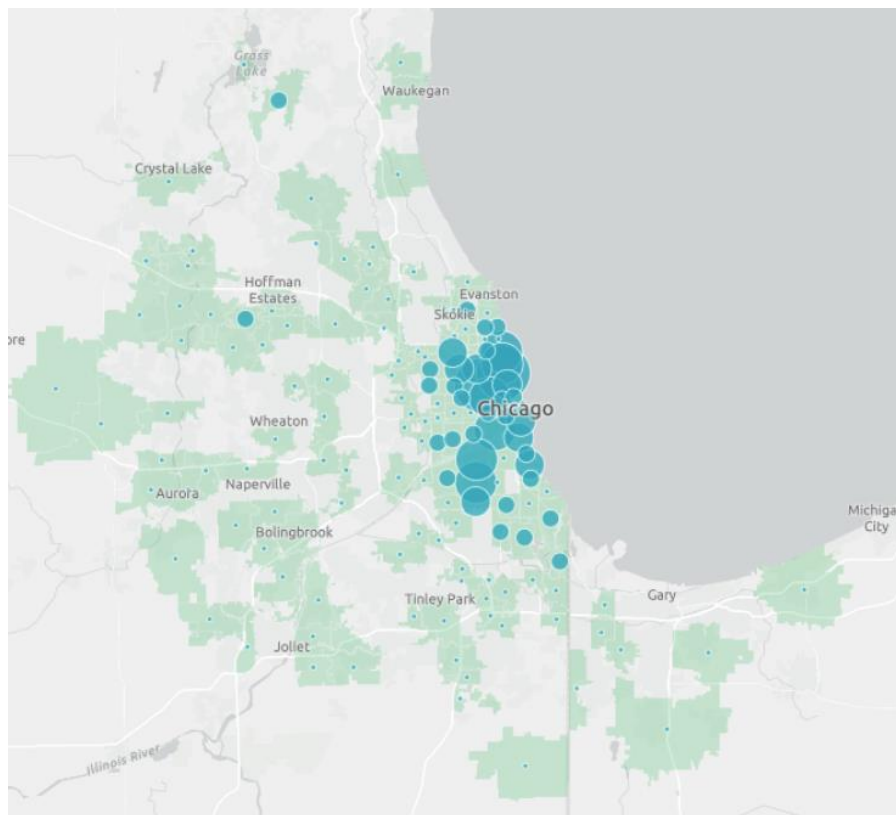
Lastly, commuter students were most likely to commute to campus three to five times a week:

During an average week, how often do you commute to campus?	
Once a week	3%
Twice a week	12%
Three times a week	29%
Four times a week	29%
Five times a week	20%
More than five times a week	5%

Common Commuter ZIP Codes

Survey respondents were asked to provide the ZIP code of their current residence to better understand the areas from which commuter students travel to and from campus. These self-reported ZIP codes were used as the most updated address available. Response rates were exceptional, with 97% of commuter student respondents providing a ZIP code to analyze.

Most commuter students travel to classes from residences within Chicago (69%) or the Chicago Metro Area (29%), represented below with the increasing blue circle size indicating more students commuted from that ZIP:



Most common suburbs included Berwyn and Skokie (n=6 each), followed by Elgin, Naperville, Cicero, and Joliet (n=5 each). For a full list of all suburbs and cities, please see [Appendix A](#).

Perceptions of Safety

Overall Perceptions of Safety

Students were asked how safe they felt inside campus buildings, traveling between classes, and traveling from campus to where they live. While commuter students tended to feel very or moderately safe inside campus buildings (94%), perceptions of safety decreased when it came to traveling between classes (52%) and from campus to their residences (43%):

Please state how safe or unsafe you feel on average when you are...			
	Commuter Students	Non-Commuters	All Respondents
Inside campus buildings			
Felt Very or Moderately Safe	94%	92%	93%
Felt Slightly Safe	4%	4%	4%
Felt Slightly Unsafe	<1%	1%	1%
Felt Very or Moderately Unsafe	2%	3%	2%
Traveling between campus buildings			
Felt Very or Moderately Safe	52%	60%	56%
Felt Slightly Safe	29%	24%	27%
Felt Slightly Unsafe	13%	11%	12%
Felt Very or Moderately Unsafe	6%	5%	5%
Commuting to classes from where you live			
Felt Very or Moderately Safe	43%	59%	50%
Felt Slightly Safe	28%	26%	27%
Felt Slightly Unsafe	18%	11%	14%
Felt Very or Moderately Unsafe	11%	4%	8%

*Commuter students differed significantly from non-commuters when it came to their perceptions of safety between campus buildings ($p < 0.05$) and commuting to classes from where they live ($p < 0.001$).

When asked to specify what makes them feel unsafe in these situations, Commuter students often pointed to:

- Having to use public transportation at night when it is dark due to class scheduling
- Walking alone through areas that they perceived as high crime, violent, or “risky”
- Perceptions of their own identities and the sensation of vulnerability or unequal power dynamics with others due to those identities, such as identifying as a woman or identifying as a student of color
- Unpleasant experiences with non-campus individuals on busses, trains, and other public transportation (often on the “Red Line”), such as being followed, harassed, threatened, and robbed
- Overall crime in the city of Chicago and the campus area

As can be seen above, most qualitative comments about feeling unsafe focused on commuting from classes to where they lived or between specific areas on campus that are considered “high risk”.

Perceptions of Safety by Commuting Type

Given that most commuter students' main concerns when it came to feeling unsafe were based on commuting to campus from where they lived, an additional analysis was undertaken examining perceptions of safety with commuting type.

Overall, students were most likely to report feeling safe when biking or driving/carpooling, while least likely to feel safe when ridesharing or taking the Pace bus:

Sense of Safety during Commute by Commuting Type		
Commuting Type	Safe	Unsafe
Biking	79%	21%
Driving or Carpooling	75%	25%
Metra	73%	27%
Walking	68%	32%
CTA "L" Train	67%	33%
CTA Bus	65%	35%
Skateboarding or Scootering	61%	39%
Ridesharing (Taxi, Uber, Lyft)	59%	41%
Pace	49%	51%

Increasing Perceptions of Safety

Student commuters who indicated they felt unsafe inside campus buildings, between campus buildings, and/or traveling back to where they live were asked what would increase their feelings of safety.

More than half of commuter students said earlier class start and end times (54%) and expanding the SafeRide Program (53%) would increase their feelings of safety, followed by additional security outside buildings (46%) and expanding the Evening Security Escort Program (45%):

Which of the following would help increase your feelings of safety?	
Earlier class start and end times	54%
Expanding the SafeRide Program	53%
Additional security guards outside of campus buildings	46%
Expanding the Evening Security Escort Program	45%
Adding more blue light emergency phones outside	42%
Increased lighting	38%
Establishing a student safety hotline	38%
Additional security cameras on campus	35%
Increasing the self-defense workshops	34%
Increasing the bystander intervention trainings	24%
More clear signage for campus buildings	18%

Sense of Belonging

Overall Sense of Belonging

Students were asked four questions to measure their sense of belonging, creating a four-question Sense of Belonging Scale based on survey items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which asked them to rate their level of agreement on the following statements:

- 1) I feel valued by Columbia College Chicago
- 2) I feel like part of the community at Columbia College Chicago
- 3) All of my identities are celebrated at Columbia College Chicago
- 4) I feel like it is possible for me to succeed at Columbia College Chicago

The internal consistency of these questions was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which measures how closely a set of questions relate to each other as a group ($\alpha = 0.7882$).

The majority (>60% in each category) of Commuter students experience a sense of belonging at Columbia, with students most likely to strongly agree that all of their identities are celebrated and it is possible for them to succeed:

Sense of Belonging Among Commuter Students				
Belonging Statement	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel valued by Columbia College Chicago	18%	49%	22%	11%
I feel like part of the community at Columbia College Chicago	19%	41%	29%	12%
All of my identities are celebrated at Columbia College Chicago	34%	46%	14%	5%
I feel like it is possible for me to succeed at Columbia College Chicago	39%	49%	8%	4%

Responses between commuters and non-commuters were not significantly different for the majority of belonging statements. However, commuter students were significantly less likely to strongly agree to the statement "all of my identities are celebrated at Columbia College Chicago" compared to their peers (34% of commuter students, 44% of non-commuters)⁷

Responses did not differ between commuter students based on how long it took them to travel to campus or commuting frequency.

⁷ Pearson chi2(3) = 9.3000, $p < 0.05$ (Pr = 0.026)

Appendix A: Full List of Commuter Student Residence ZIPs

Survey respondents were asked to provide the ZIP code of their current residence to better understand the areas from which commuter students travel to and from campus. Response rates were exceptional, with 97% of commuter students providing a ZIP code to analyze.

Below is the complete list of commuter student residence ZIPs.

City	# of Commuter Students	% of Commuter Students
Chicago	387	69%
Berwyn	6	1%
Skokie	6	1%
Elgin	5	1%
Naperville	5	1%
Cicero	5	1%
Joliet	5	1%
Bolingbrook	4	1%
Round Lake	4	1%
Oak Park	4	1%
Elmwood Park	4	1%
Schaumburg	4	1%
Evanston	4	1%
Streamwood	4	1%
Tinley Park	3	1%
Aurora	3	1%
Oak Lawn	3	1%
Homewood	3	1%
Worth	3	1%
Maywood	3	1%
Waukegan	3	1%
Prospect Heights	2	0.4%
Milwaukee	2	0.4%
Matteson	2	0.4%
Carpentersville	2	0.4%
New Lenox	2	0.4%
Hammond	2	0.4%
South Elgin	2	0.4%
Harvey	2	0.4%
Bartlett	2	0.4%
Highland	2	0.4%
Morton Grove	2	0.4%
Hoffman Estates	2	0.4%
Crystal Lake	2	0.4%
Burbank	2	0.4%
Wheeling	2	0.4%
Des Plaines	2	0.4%
Griffith	1	0.2%
Midlothian	1	0.2%
Richton Park	1	0.2%
Elk Grove Village	1	0.2%
Arlington Heights	1	0.2%

City, Cont.	# of Commuter Students	% of Commuter Students
Harwood Heights	1	0.2%
Palos Park	1	0.2%
Hazel Crest	1	0.2%
Hanover Park	1	0.2%
Calumet City	1	0.2%
Glendale Heights	1	0.2%
Hobart	1	0.2%
North Aurora	1	0.2%
Elburn	1	0.2%
Palatine	1	0.2%
Hometown	1	0.2%
Posen	1	0.2%
Chesterton	1	0.2%
Rochelle	1	0.2%
Forest Park	1	0.2%
Melrose Park	1	0.2%
University Park	1	0.2%
Gilberts	1	0.2%
Westmont	1	0.2%
Mount Prospect	1	0.2%
Fox Lake	1	0.2%
Glenview	1	0.2%
Darien	1	0.2%
Crown Point	1	0.2%
Schiller Park	1	0.2%
Oswego	1	0.2%
Franklin Park	1	0.2%
Palos Hills	1	0.2%
Summit Argo	1	0.2%
Plainfield	1	0.2%
Dyer	1	0.2%
Beecher	1	0.2%
Maple Park	1	0.2%
Riverside	1	0.2%
Markham	1	0.2%
Romeoville	1	0.2%
Freeport	1	0.2%
Geneva	1	0.2%
Broadview	1	0.2%
Dolton	1	0.2%
Lincolnwood	1	0.2%
Downers Grove	1	0.2%
Lockport	1	0.2%
Dundee	1	0.2%
Lombard	1	0.2%
Machesney Park	1	0.2%
Addison	1	0.2%
Wheaton	1	0.2%
Lake Forest	1	0.2%

City, Cont.	# of Commuter Students	% of Commuter Students
Wilmette	1	0.2%
Lake Zurich	1	0.2%
Lansing	1	0.2%
La Grange	1	0.2%
Grand Total	558	100%