Transportation study receives outstanding paper award

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Got a train to catch? The walk to the nearest stop has been put under scientific scrutiny, looking at distances involved and the environment along the way.

The findings, which include the discovery that people often walk farther than they had thought despite their desire to minimize time and distance, are detailed in an award-winning paper by researchers at the University of Oregon and San Jose State University. A goal of the research – conducted in Portland, Ore., and the San Francisco Bay area in California – was to build on the idea that walking is healthy; it gets people out of cars and into public transportation, which helps the environment.

Marc Schlossberg, a professor in the UO department of planning, public policy and management, and graduate student Vanessa Bekkouche, along with San Jose State team members Asha Weinstein, a professor, and student Katja Irvin, were honored for their research, which they titled "How Far, by Which Route, and Why? A Spatial Analysis of Pedestrian Preference."

Their effort earned the 2007 Outstanding Paper Award from the Transportation Research Board during its annual conference Jan. 21-25 in Washington D.C. Their award was presented by the Committee on Pedestrians, which selected two papers out of 52 entries. The paper investigated pedestrian access to light rail transit sites in the two West Coast urban areas.

In part, the study suggests the importance of proximate destinations and an absence of major walking barriers, rather than beautifully designed pedestrian environments, Schlossberg said.

"Perhaps the key to increasing the number of walking trips is not to design pedestrian environments full of amenities such as benches, tree cover, awnings and wide sidewalks," he said. "While there is no doubt those assets can enhance the pedestrian experience, the real key is to have somewhere to walk to and to have an environment that isn't horrible."

A lot of communities around the country are looking at walkability issues. There are a growing number of state and federal initiatives on Safe Routes to School, as well as concerns over a national obesity epidemic and a wide range of policy initiatives designed to convince travelers to switch from automobiles to more environmentally sustainable bicycle and walking trips. Policymakers recognize walking as a key mode of travel, Schlossberg said, and they believe that increasing the number of walk trips is a key goal.

"Despite the seeming simplicity of the goal, we know very little about how far people actually walk or about how street design affects people's willingness or capacity to access their desired destinations by walking," he added.

The researchers looked at activity near five rail transit stations in both areas and sought to uncover how far pedestrians walk to light rail stations and what environmental factors influence their routes.

The paper concluded with five major findings:

- Pedestrians walk farther to access light rail stations than commonly assumed, with a mean distance of about a half-mile

rather than the prevailing notion of a quarter to a third of a mile.

- Pedestrians say that their primary concern in choosing a route is minimizing time and distance.
- Secondary factors influencing route choice are safety and, to a lesser extent, attractiveness of the route, sidewalk quality, and the absence of long waits at traffic lights.
- Pedestrians vary considerably in how accurately they estimate the distance of their walks.
- Asking respondents to trace their walking route on a local map is an effective research technique.

Source: University of Oregon