

Technology takes guesswork out of catching the bus

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Getting to her 6 p.m. class last semester felt like a guessing game for Kerry Dietz.

Should she walk or ride the bus?

The 20-year-old University of Delaware junior would get to the stop near her dorm at 5:30 p.m. If she saw no bus in sight at 5:40, she started the 15-minute walk to her criminal evidence lecture.

This semester, Dietz doesn't have to guess anymore.

Last month, the university's Transportation Services launched a Web site that tells riders the exact location of each bus. The technology also gives users the estimated arrival time for each stop, tracked in real time using GPS.

"The Web site would have been really helpful last semester," Dietz said. "If I could see that one was coming, I could have known whether to walk."

The university is one of 13 nationwide, along with the University of Pennsylvania, using the technology developed by Syncromatics, a California-based transit technology company.

To use the service, passengers simply visit www.udshuttle.com and choose to view a list of estimated arrival times or a streaming map of each bus route. On the map, the bus' position will appear as an arrow inside a dot. Hovering a mouse over the icon shows the time the bus will arrive at the next three stops.

Large municipal transit systems, such as the city of Los Angeles Department of Transportation, have used the bus-tracking system successfully, said Syncromatics President Josh Bigelow.

"It makes transit far easier," he said.

The technology will benefit bus drivers as much as passengers, said Bill Fitzpatrick, director of Supporting Services at the university.

Before the new technology, Transportation Services sometimes struggled to manage its bus routes, which resulted in "bunching." One bus would fill up and the next one, close behind it, would be empty, Fitzpatrick said.

Empty buses are also a poor use of fuel and labor. Dispatchers can use the GPS tracking to reroute drivers where they are needed. With ridership growing, Fitzpatrick said, he wants to make the buses more efficient.

Transportation Services estimates the number of passengers has increased 46 percent since the 2003-04 academic year. About 1.1 million passengers used the bus service in 2008-09 compared to 762,000 in 2003-04.

"When the weather is bad, like it's been, that's when these things come in handy," Fitzpatrick said. "You don't have to stand out at the stop. ... That's when our ridership increases -- when the weather is bad."

The Delaware campus doesn't have shelters at every stop, making bad weather especially inconvenient for bus riders, Dietz said. She and her roommate have already decided how to handle the next cold or rainy day.

"We plan to have the [bus-tracking] Web site up and running," she said, "so we can stay inside as long as possible until the bus comes."

A GROWING NEED

Estimated number of passengers for University of Delaware Transportation Services for each academic year:

2008-09 -- 1.1 million

4/1/2011

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2007-08 -- 852,000

2006-07 -- 785,200

2005-06 -- 909,500

2004-05 -- 810,200

2003-04 -- 761,900

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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