CAMPUS RESEARCH PROJECT

The Wheels on the Bus go ‘Round and ‘Round:
The Faculty Response to the AUC Bus Service
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Introduction

The AUC “Another University Campus” survey was an online survey project conducted before and after AUC’s move to the New Cairo campus. Faculty completed the post-move survey in Spring 2010, which was during the second year on the new campus. Participants were asked “If you take the AUC bus service, please describe how the bus has affected your work habits, social networks, health or any other aspect of your professional or personal life.” Fifty-one faculty members filled in the survey overall; however, 37 (72.5%) were bus users who gave an answer to this question.

A majority of the participants were full-time employees, with only 6 respondents indicating they were part-time. The majority were also relocated faculty, with 12 respondents indicating they were hired on a local basis, and 2 respondents answering “not applicable” to this question.

Although there were a variety of perceived effects that the bus service has had on faculty, what it really boiled down to was geography. More than two-thirds of the participants (26 people, 70.3%) stated their transportation now took more time than it used to and only five respondents stated they had a shorter commute. About half of the respondents (20 people, 54.1%) lived in Maadi and twelve (32.4%) lived in Zamalek. For these people, the Downtown campus was a simple metro, shuttle bus, or taxi ride away that took less time, and there was always another metro, bus or taxi right behind if a person missed the first available one. On the other hand, travel to the relocated main campus in New Cairo now required a much longer commute, with the AUC bus service being the only viable option for most, which meant being constrained by its schedule. All of the other stated effects can be traced back to the now much longer, more restricted commute.

Survey Results

I looked at all of the comments and grouped them according to common words, phrases and themes. Many people commented on more than one effect that the bus service had had on them. Two respondents gave extremely short, non-descriptive answers, with one saying “Very unproductive” and the other writing “In only negative ways”. One respondent had experienced no significant change, mentioning that they used to take a bus to the Downtown campus and their commute to New Cairo was not significantly longer.

The most common theme, mentioned by twelve of the 37 who responded to this question, regarded their perceived productivity. One respondent commented that they now “work less hours for AUC”. Half of these twelve people specifically said that they cannot work on the bus, due
to space restrictions and/or intermittent Wi-Fi service and only one person said that they were able to work on the bus.

Four faculty members identified the bus service as affecting them positively, with three of the four stating that the socializing they were now able to do was what they enjoyed the most.

Although the majority of respondents described feeling adversely affected by the AUC bus service, many still acknowledged the positive aspect of being able to make friends on the bus – an opportunity they might not have normally had. One faculty members explained that they “… really enjoy connecting with people in my neighborhood …”.

Related to this was the issue of the bus ride impacting their social life outside of AUC; this was raised by eleven faculty members. Six respondents felt that their social life outside of AUC now suffered because they were too tired from the combination of work and travel time, and seven stated that they felt more tired after their commute back home and were therefore less inclined to go to social functions after work. Four people specifically mentioned that they no longer had the time or energy to go to any of the numerous lectures/ plays/ exhibitions/ etc. that AUC regularly hosts outside of working hours.

Time was another common theme with seven faculty members referencing the long commute they had. There were also the related issues of the difficulty scheduling meetings with colleagues and students that were raised by five participants, combined with feeling rushed, which four people commented on. One respondent wrote, “I have to leave before finishing my work just to not be stranded in the middle of the desert.” Another respondent lamented not having the time to stop and chat with someone because everyone is worried about missing the bus, and another explained it as thus: “I am a slave to the bus timings.” Following on from the issue of time and commute, six faculty members specifically said they now restrict the days they come to campus, so as to minimize their travel, with one person saying that having to use the bus is “ … a great disincentive to go to campus.”

Six people mentioned feeling more stressed or nervous or frustrated in response to the bus. For some, it was related to Cairo’s notorious traffic problems. Four people stated that the bus drivers were reckless or speeding and that they feared for their lives, with one person going so far as to stop using the bus and drive their own car instead. For other respondents the source of the stress came back to the problem of feeling rushed. Interestingly one person expressed feeling less stressed because they knew there would always be a bus when scheduled.

Physical health was another recurring theme, mentioned by nine of the respondents. Feeling tired, cramped or uncomfortable were commonly words used. Two people commented on experiencing body aches, while another felt that they were getting sicker from being in such close contact with others on a regular basis. Surprisingly, only one person claimed that they were able to sleep on the bus.
Conclusion

The AUC bus service was a controversial topic when the new campus first opened, and it had many ‘teething problems’. With sixteen different routes and hundreds of individual trips per day, it took some time for the bus service to iron out the kinks.

As stated in the introduction, the majority of the faculty who answered in this survey question lived in either Maadi or Zamalek, and had been previously accustomed to a more simple commute each day. The proximity of the Downtown campus enabled them to go to their office whenever they liked as well as the opportunity to easily attend cultural events on the campus after hours. It was inevitable that there would be negative impacts caused by the move to New Cairo since these people would have to now travel significantly further for their work, going through Cairo’s infamous traffic on a regular basis.

A bus committee was formed and many of these issues were raised, and dealt with wherever possible. It would be interesting to continuously do follow-up surveys to assess the faculty attitude and experience with the bus services, as well as to assess how other members of the AUC community (staff, students) have reacted. I suspect the issue of travel time would still be raised, and probably always will be for as long as staff and faculty members live in Zamalek or Six October City, or any of the other areas that are a great distance from the New Cairo campus.
A word cloud created from the faculty responses to the survey question “If you take the AUC bus service, please describe how the bus has affected your work habits, social networks, health or any other aspect of your professional or personal life.”