

Kitching, Darcy Varney (Ph.D., Geography, Planning and Design)

Understanding the Role of Community-Generated Data in Planning for Equitable Youth and Family Access to Active Transportation Options

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Carrie Makarewicz

ABSTRACT

The weekday transportation choices and behaviors of public-school students and their families can be a “black box” for transportation and community planners, who have limited ways of collecting reliable and consistent data about students’ and caregivers’ mode choices, trip configurations, and latent demand for different travel options. At the same time, planning professionals are expected to evaluate the effectiveness and equitable distribution of plans and projects designed to facilitate active transportation to schools and other destinations, and to increase safe, accessible, multi-modal options for all residents. This mismatch between the resources and objectives of transportation professionals represents a gap in planning practice and in the research on active transportation to schools. It also presents an opportunity for development of new data collection methods for routine use with diverse families to inform creative, multigenerational, and context-sensitive solutions for school-related transportation.

In response, I developed a three-phase, mixed-method multiple case study with 23 transportation and planning professionals and 44 diverse families (47 adults, 62 students) across two school districts in Boulder County, Colorado. I found that professionals want to know more about the choices and behaviors of diverse students and caregivers, but that most lack the time, resources, and political support to collect meaningful data on a regular basis. Some also believe they cannot meet families’ diverse needs due to travel distances and limited funding for new projects. Through 15 small-group interview sessions with the families using two exploratory methods, I also found that students and caregivers have much to share about the complexity of their school-related travel and preferences for various alternatives, but that many feel simultaneously resigned to their situation and lack access to planners and decision makers who could influence change.

Building on theoretical concepts of capabilities and deliberative practice, I identified context-sensitive metrics and questions to facilitate collaborative processes between planning professionals and families, to increase mutual learning and innovation. This research has implications for planning theory and practice, providing evidence for investment in transdisciplinary collaboration and partnerships to collect meaningful data with diverse multigenerational residents on the influence of transportation, education, housing, and other factors on families’ travel.