Walking at Norfolk State: Student Voices on Walkability, Safety, and Health

Norfolk has invested citywide in walking, biking, and transit, but Dr. Yuying Shen of Norfolk State University (NSU) wanted to know how those investments felt to students on and around campus. With support from the Virginia Walkability Action Institute (VWAI), Dr. Shen surveyed more than 200 NSU students about walking, biking, scooting, and taking public transit. The survey examined how neighborhood walkability and access affect students' health and well-being,identify barriers, understand lived experiences, and inform future campus and community improvements.

Team:

This project was led by Dr. Yuying Shen, Sociology Professor at NSU, with support from university colleagues and students.

Goals and Vision:

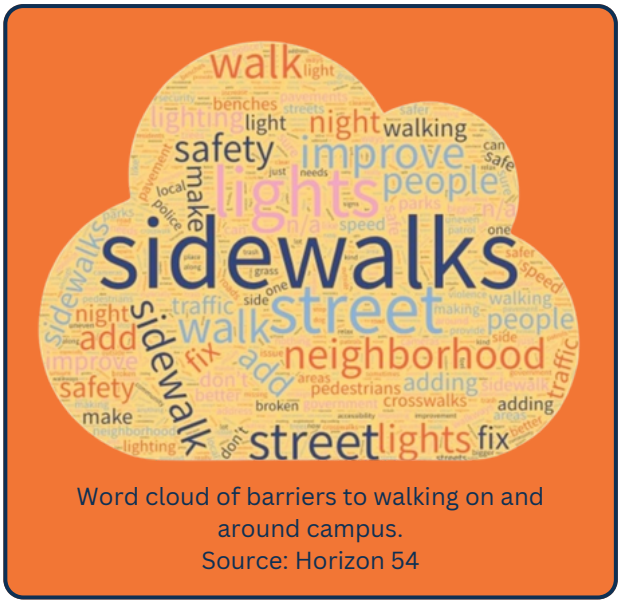
- Collect student-centered data on neighborhood walkability, safety, access, health, and well-being
- Identify physical and perceived barriers to walking, including sidewalk condition, connectivity, and concerns about personal and traffic safety
- Share findings with campus and community stakeholders to inform actionable programs and initiatives for equitable infrastructure, mobility, safety and public health

A student completing Dr. Shen's survey.
Source: Dr. Yuying Shen

Background:

Norfolk has built a strong foundation for improving walking, biking, public transit, and micromobility through local and regional planning and partnerships. The City's Bicycling, Pedestrian, and Active Transportation Commission and long-range Walking, Wheeling, and Cycling Strategy support safer, more accessible active transportation. Initiatives such as Multimodal Norfolk, Norfolk Bike Month, and regional transportation demand management efforts demonstrate continued investment and collaboration. Even so, residents still face safety concerns, gaps in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, aging infrastructure, and unequal access to high-quality sidewalks, crossings, and transit connections.

The VWAI project addressed an important gap between those citywide goals and conditions at the neighborhood level. The team's VWAI action plan identified historic redlining, disinvestment in predominantly Black areas, and uneven infrastructure development as factors contributing to persistent differences in mobility, sidewalk quality, park access, and transportation safety. Focusing on NSU students living on campus or in surrounding neighborhoods, the formative evaluation utilized a survey instrument to examine how sidewalk conditions, perceived safety, access to active transportation and nearby destinations, and other neighborhood conditions relate to health and well-being. The goal was to understand how these broader efforts are being implemented on campus and how NSU could position itself as a leader in addressing active transportation concerns.



Word cloud of barriers to walking on and around campus.
Source: Horizon 54

Outcomes and Impact:

- Achieved survey recruitment goal of 200 participants and documented measurable conditions related to walkability and health
- Identified greater sidewalk connectivity, lighting, and public safety as major priorities for students walking to get around campus
- Found that fewer than half of respondents, 46%, reported walking every day, due to perceived safety issues and inadequate infrastructure
- Established an evidence base for continued campus and community discussion
- Developed an academic article on walkability at NSU and shared key survey findings with stakeholders, community members and campus partners