

DATE: April 24, 2017

TO: Honorable Mayor John Rey
City Council

FROM: Anne Marie Gaura, City Manager
Patty Hoppenstedt, Assistant City Manager
Lauren Stott, Management Analyst
Jason Michnick, Economic Development Planner
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SUBJECT: Downtown Student Community Conversation

I. Summary

On February 1, 2017, the City of DeKalb, Northern Illinois University (NIU) and Proudly DeKalb collaborated to bring NIU students downtown for a community conversation. The conversation centralized around targeted student feedback related to downtown DeKalb revitalization, economic development and other community topics relevant to the student population. This was a direct initiative from the City to involve NIU students within local governance. Approximately 65 students attended the community conversation in downtown DeKalb.

II. Background

In April of 2016, the City Manager initiated an outreach to NIU Student Leaders in order to establish a direct communication link between the City and the students. The purpose was to receive feedback from students on a variety of issues. The NIU Office of Community Affairs assisted in the establishment of this group and the subsequent outreach.

The collaboration identified the need to form a student work group to serve as a professional liaison for NIU students. Primarily working through the Student Association, which serves as the voice of the student body to the administration, the NIU Student Leaders Group was created. The Group is comprised of Student Association members and other student leaders on campus.

In September 2016, at the start of the new academic year, the City Manager and other staff members began monthly meetings with the NIU Student Leaders Group. These

meetings established that there was a general lack of student knowledge regarding downtown DeKalb. Students did not know what stores or events existed in the downtown and many lacked the knowledge of the downtown business district boundaries. With this knowledge in mind, staff began planning a downtown student community conversation to help identify how to bring students to the downtown and how to make DeKalb, in the words of NIU President Doug Baker, “a cool college town.”

The City assumed the responsibility of providing students with access to the downtown by collaborating with TransVAC to provide a bus tour of the downtown business district. The bus tour began the student community conversation event on February 1, 2017 with pickup at the Holmes Student Center. Facilitators on each bus gave a 15-minute tour of the downtown highlighting landmarks and community businesses. The tour ended at O’Leary’s where additional facilitators were waiting to begin discussions. The group of facilitators consisted of City staff, NIU staff and Proudly DeKalb members. Each facilitator was assigned to a table of students and provided with questions to encourage organic conversation. Table discussions lasted approximately an hour and a half, and the event ended with representatives from each table presenting discussion highlights to the entire group.

The questions provided to the facilitators focused on what would bring students to downtown DeKalb, as well as how NIU and the City could work together to make DeKalb “a cool college town.” Additional discussion areas included downtown transportation, weekend activities, shopping in DeKalb, college town comparisons, student housing and local entrepreneurship.

The student feedback gathered by the facilitators was reviewed by the City and the NIU Student Leaders Group and compiled into a report, which is included as Attachment A. A total of five themes were derived from the student community conversation. The themes include:

- Communication;
- Street and sidewalk lighting;
- Downtown transportation;
- Weekend activities; and
- Sense of community.

The report also includes data gathered from a survey that was sent to the student attendees after the event. The students who completed the survey were primarily seniors at 42% and juniors at 39%, with 55% living in off-campus housing within the City. After clarification of downtown boundaries during the event, 71% of students stated they had been downtown previously. The top reasons for downtown visits include restaurants at 69% and retail shopping at 28%.

Eighty-eight percent of students indicated they plan on returning to the downtown in the future. Students were asked what changes could be made to increase the likelihood of downtown visits. Sixty-eight percent of students indicated the need for a bike sharing



program. Seventy-six percent of students expressed interest for bike sharing stations to be located throughout downtown and 71% on Lincoln Highway and Annie Glidden Road. Eighty percent of students indicated they would use a bus service to the downtown if it was more readily available. Roughly 71% stated that improved lighting between campus and downtown would increase their likelihood of walking or biking downtown.

Ninety percent of students preferred receiving communication regarding community events through student email, 61% through Facebook and 48% by text messages. Ninety-seven percent of students indicated that food related community events would be of interest to them, in addition to 81% expressing interest in music related events and 61% for art related events. Seventy-one percent of students also expressed interest in live music venues, in addition to 68% expressing interest in a low-cost movie theatre and 68% in outdoor recreation venues. In closing, 90% of students indicated that they learned something new about DeKalb during the event.

The five themes derived from the student community conversation event strongly align and are addressed within the DeKalb 2025 Strategic Plan's Vision of a Sense of Place, Vision of Community Vitality and a Vibrant Downtown and Vision of Accessibility. The student feedback confirms goals, strategies and actions in the Strategic Plan are truly representative of the community's vision for DeKalb. Due to the success of the community conversation with NIU students, discussions are under way to schedule the event annually in February and September. The City and the NIU Student Leaders Group will continue to work to advance the initiatives outlined in the report during regularly scheduled meetings. The City and the NIU Student Leaders Group will also discuss and consider what action items should be planned for inclusion in the City's future Strategic Plan Action items. This will require planning for the future and including intended Strategic Plan Action items in the annual budget process.

III. Community Groups/Interested Parties Contacted

The downtown student community conversation event was a collaborative effort. City staff, in cooperation with the NIU Student Leaders Group, coordinated and marketed the event to NIU students. City of DeKalb staff, NIU staff and Proudly DeKalb members served as event facilitators. Mayor John Rey, City Manager Anne Marie Gaura, NIU President Doug Baker, NIU Speaker of the Senate Christine Wang and Proudly DeKalb member Cohen Barnes gave brief presentations throughout the event. Transportation for the students was provided by TransVAC.

IV. Legal Impact

The legal impact of departmental tasks related to the Strategic Plan will be evaluated when presented to City Council.

V. Financial Impact

The total cost for the event was \$2,067.50. This cost includes \$1,822.50 for the venue and meal at O'Learys and \$245 for transportation from TransVAC. Proudly DeKalb



donated \$500 to cover costs of the event. The financial impact of future department tasks related to the Strategic Plan will be evaluated during the budget process which will be presented to City Council for final approval of the budget.

VI. Options

No action is needed on this item.

VII. Recommendation

No recommendation is given.



Downtown Student Community Conversation Review and Results



Executive Summary

On February 1, 2017, the City of DeKalb, Northern Illinois University (NIU) and Proudly DeKalb collaborated to bring NIU students downtown for a community conversation. The conversation centralized around targeted student feedback related to downtown DeKalb revitalization, economic development, and other community topics relevant to the student population. This was a direct initiative from the City to involve NIU students within local governance. Approximately 65 students attended the community conversation in downtown DeKalb.

In this report, information can be found on the following three sections: Downtown Student Community Conversation Event alignment with the DeKalb 2025 Strategic Plan, Event Key Themes and City Action Items and Student Survey Results. Section One of the report outlines how the conversation event aligns visions, goals and strategies within the strategic plan. The three visions include Vision of Sense of Place, Vision of community Vitality and a Vibrant Downtown and Vision of Accessibility.

Section Two of the report outlines the key themes that were identified during the student downtown community conversations and how the City is strategically working on tasks that incorporate student feedback. The five themes identified are communication, street and sidewalk lighting, downtown transportation, weekend activities and sense of community.

Section Three of the report presents findings from a student survey that was sent to student attendees after the event. A total of survey question results are presented that cover topics such as demographics, transportation, event preferences and likelihood to visit the downtown.

Section 1: Downtown Student Community Conversation Event Alignment with DeKalb 2025 Strategic Plan

Collaboration and partnership with NIU is a critical component of the DeKalb 2025 Strategic Plan. The downtown student community conversation event aligns with the three vision statements within the DeKalb 2025 Strategic Plan. The three visions include Vision of Sense of Place, Vision of community Vitality and a Vibrant Downtown and Vision of Accessibility. In this section, the goals and strategies within each vision are highlighted.



Vision of a Sense of Place

- Goal: Bridge NIU and the City, whenever feasible, to create a mutually beneficial environment
 - Strategy: Identify opportunities to visually and programmatically link NIU and the City.
 - Strategy: Promote and encourage further collaboration between NIU and DeKalb.
- Goal: Integrate students into the fabric of DeKalb.
 - Strategy: Promote cross-community events such as NIU's and DeKalb High School's homecoming celebrations.

Vision of Community Vitality and a Vibrant Downtown

- Goal: Position Downtown DeKalb for long-term success.
 - Strategy: Improve the pedestrian and aesthetic environment of downtown.
 - Strategy: Support enterprises that enhance the vitality of downtown.
- Goal: Facilitate a business-friendly environment that supports existing merchants while attracting new investments to areas in need of commercial development.
 - Strategy: Promote and encourage local business collaboration.



- Strategy: Foster local entrepreneurship and business development and sustainability.

Vision of Accessibility

- Goal: Expand the availability of safe, secure, affordable, accessible, and timely transportation options within DeKalb.
 - Strategy: Connect and enhance the various transportation modes in DeKalb for vehicles, pedestrians and bicyclists.
 - Strategy: Enhance existing transportation planning resources.

Section 2: Downtown Student Community Conversation Event Key Themes and City Action Items

A total of five themes were derived from the student community conversation. The themes include communication, street and sidewalk lighting, downtown transportation, weekend activities and sense of community. These themes, which were gathered by event facilitators and reviewed by the NIU Student Leaders Group, are outlined below.

Theme 1: Communication

During the community conversation, a number of students indicated they lack knowledge on businesses and events in the downtown. Students suggested more targeted advertising and a more student friendly atmosphere to bring additional students downtown. The students believe they are not being advertised to by downtown businesses and that the Downtown is not well-known by the student population.



Students are interested in receiving more communication via social media from both the downtown businesses and the City. Students expressed interest in a smart phone app that highlights downtown events, special deals being offered, as well as NIU student discounts. Students also mentioned the desire to utilize Huskie Bucks at the downtown businesses.



City Strategic Plan Action Items Related to Communication

Vision of a Sense of Place

- Action Item: Provide comprehensive and timely communication about all events of interest to people who live, go to school, or work in DeKalb.
 - Department Task: In March 2017, the City launched its first addition of DeKalb E-News. DeKalb E-News is a bi-monthly electronic newsletter dedicated to sharing information and resources with the community via email. DeKalb E-News highlights information on community interests, events and activities, as well as updates and reports on major City projects. Newsletter editions are released in January, March, May, July, September and November. The City will explore ways to inform the students of this new communication tool.
 - Department Task: On November 10, 2016, Chief Gene Lowery and Officer Kelly Sullivan organized and attended “Coffee with the Chief.” Members of the community met with Chief Lowery and Officer Sullivan and discussed issues of concern in an open dialog. This ongoing event is an example of community policing and helps to build an open line of communication with the residents of DeKalb. Students are encouraged to attend as residents of the City. The City will gather student input as to the best way to market this event to the students.
- Action Item: Use the City’s official channels for communication to share and disseminate balanced information and updates on developments in DeKalb.



- Department Task: In January 2017, the City launched official accounts on Instagram and Twitter. Staff is working to manage and build follower bases on both accounts. The City plans to gather student feedback on how to best reach out to the student population on these platforms.



- Department Task: City staff is researching the feasibility of expanding its social media presence to the Snapchat platform. The City will also gather input from students on other ways they can be reached.

Theme 2: Street and Sidewalk Lighting

Students indicated they do not feel secure walking from campus to downtown after dark. Students said they tend not to follow major roadways (such as Lincoln Highway) to access the downtown, and instead cut through neighborhoods and across the lagoon property. Almost every facilitator mentioned student desire for additional lighting on paths to the downtown. Additionally, students would like to see higher Police presence on downtown routes, as well as more emergency call boxes.



City Strategic Plan Action Items Related to Street and Sidewalk Lighting

Vision of a Sense of Place

- Action Item: Implement improvements to landscaping, signage, facades and lighting.
 - Department Task: City staff is exploring the feasibility of additional lighting throughout nontraditional pathways to the downtown. The Information Technology Department (IT), Police, and NIU IT are currently collaborating on multiple downtown projects. Further discussions will take place during the FY 2018 Budget process and future fiscal years as resources permit.
- Action Item: Bridge the downtown and NIU via the Lincoln Highway Corridor with specific infrastructure enhancements to increase utilization of the downtown and businesses near campus.
 - Department Task: City staff is researching the infrastructure enhancements to increase utilization of the downtown and businesses near campus. This will be discussed during the FY 2018 Budget process and future fiscal years as resources permit.

Vision of Community Vitality and a Vibrant Downtown

- Action Item: Implement a Complete Streets policy in future City planning to improve safety, accessibility, and aesthetics.
 - Department Task: The City adopted a Complete Street Policy in FY 2016.5. This policy encourages goal setting that considers the needs of all users through the planning, design and implementation processes for construction, reconstruction or retrofit of streets. The City will incorporate student feedback during implementation of the Complete Streets Policy.
- Action Item: Explore technology solutions to enhance public safety and quality of life.
 - Department Task: The Police Department and Information Technology Department are currently working to examine and implement new technologies to supplement public safety personnel. Further updates are expected in the second quarter of this fiscal year.



Theme 3: Transportation

Students claim they do not have easy access to the downtown, which affects their ability to patronize businesses in the downtown business district. Students indicated their desire to visit downtown during different points of the day for both shopping and nightlife purposes.



Students expressed appreciation for both the Molly's and the Fatty's busses and said they would be extremely interested to see a similar model for the downtown. Students would also like bus routes introduced that travel to the downtown during the day so students could visit and patronize businesses. Students would also like to see more options for rideshare transportation such as Uber and Lyft.

City Strategic Plan Action Items

Vision of Accessibility

- Action Item: Bring alternative transportation services, such as Uber, to DeKalb.
 - Department Task: The City has investigated the models used in a number of other communities and has made contact with Uber's corporate offices, directly. They have proposed a memorandum of understanding that could be utilized to memorialize an arrangement. Further research is being done to determine if a local regulation is needed.
- Action Item: Embrace the “Complete Streets” philosophy in future transportation and planning initiatives, i.e. Long-Range Transportation Plan.
 - Department Task: In FY 2016.5, DeKalb Sycamore Area Transportation Study (DSATS) began to coordinate the development of a Transit Development Plan that analyzes the transit operations of TransVAC and Huskie Bus. This plan will help NIU, City of DeKalb, and other DSATS member organizations identify ways to improve transit throughout the region.
- Action Item: Encourage collaboration between local transportation systems to evaluate routes and hours of service.
 - Department Task: NIU, the City's Department of Public Works and DSATS are continuing to collaborate to evaluate opportunities to increase efficiency of both TransVAC and Huskie Bus Lines.



Theme 4: Weekend Activities

Students would like to see more DeKalb activities and events that do not involve alcohol. Students indicated that their main activities on the weekends include patronizing non-downtown alcohol establishments or attending parties, and they desire more options.

Students also commented that nightlife options for under-21 students are needed. Students indicated they would patronize alcohol establishments and nightclubs that admit customers who are under 21 as an entertainment option to frequent the downtown. Other weekend activity options include: musical acts, clubs, arcades, Frisbee golf courses, mini-golf, a bigger shopping center/retail experience similar to Aurora and Fox Valley, and more open air markets/food trucks.

City Strategic Plan Action Items Related to Weekend Activities

Vision of Community Vitality and a Vibrant Downtown

- Action Item: Support initiatives developed by business owners, i.e. restaurant week, shop local, summer shopping hours, coordinated shopping promotions.
 - Department Task: The City and NIU are working collaboratively to implement a City Events feature on the already existing NIU student smart phone app. The City's IT department is working to populate the Special Events calendar on the City website. The calendar will be linked to the smart phone app to help keep students informed about what activities are occurring within the DeKalb area.

Vision of a Sense of Place

- Action Item: Implement innovative ways of supporting existing entertainment venues throughout the City and broadening their utilization and appeal.
 - Department Tasks: City staff is researching innovative ways to support existing venues in the downtown. This will be further discussed during the FY 2018 budget process and future fiscal years as resources permit.
- Action Item: Expand available downtown housing options to help create a nighttime population and support a thriving downtown.
 - Department Task: City Council approved the construction of a roughly \$7.5 million development located at the southeastern corner of Lincoln Highway and First Street, at the site of the former Otto's. The development will include a four-story mixed-used facility with extensive first floor commercial inclusive of a proposed upscale bar/grill and the relocation of the existing Barb City Bagels. The development will also include 51 one-bedroom, premium apartments located on the upper three floors.



Theme 5: Sense of Community

Students expressed a desire to feel more integrated within the DeKalb community. Many students did not know where the downtown was located, or where it starts and ends. They indicated more visual landmarks and marketing tools are necessary. Students feel a disconnect between NIU and the rest of the community.



Students said they would be interested in internship opportunities with downtown businesses as well as access to volunteer opportunities with non-profits in the area. Additionally, students mentioned how the marketing signs and photo clings around campus make them truly feel like they are a part of an NIU community, but those items should be expanded to other parts of the City. It was mentioned by several students that NIU marketing concepts could potentially be incorporated into the downtown area to help bolster a sense of community pride.

City Strategic Plan Action Items Related to Sense of Community

Vision of a Sense of Place

- Action Item: Seek field learning programs and other ways to continue the City's 50+ years of offering internships to students and explore opportunities for City personnel to extend their education through University programs.
 - Department Tasks: The City and NIU are exploring the feasibility of a DeKalb job and internship fair for NIU students which would include the downtown businesses.
 - Department Tasks: The Human Resources Department is collaborating with NIU to enhance a talent pipeline and further diversify the applicant pool for City positions, internships and volunteer opportunities. The City recently recruited four NIU students as IT Technician and IT Data Specialist volunteers.

Vision of Community Vitality and a Vibrant Downtown

- Action Item: Co-sponsor events with NIU to introduce and attract students to downtown DeKalb.



- Department Tasks: Due to the success of the downtown community conversation with NIU students discussions are under way to schedule the event annually in February and September.
- Department Tasks: The City will work with NIU to include community tours for students as part of the Welcome Days programming.

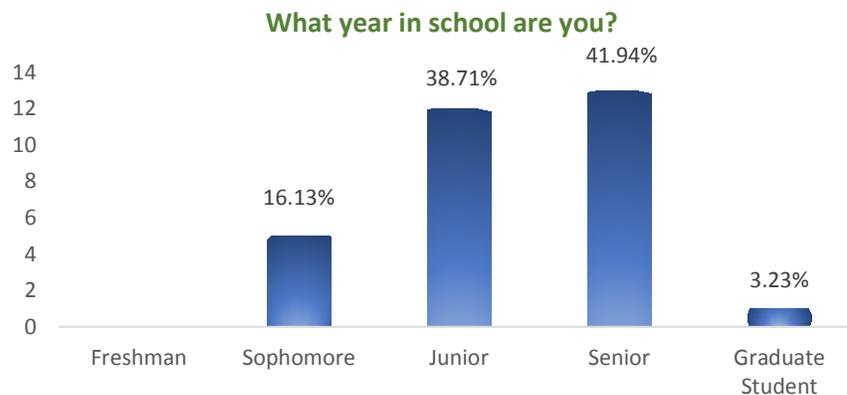


Student Survey Results

A follow-up survey was sent to all student attendees of the event. A total of 13 survey question results are presented that cover topics such as demographics, transportation, event preferences and likelihood to visit the downtown. A total of 31 students completed the survey, which is approximately half of the student attendees. City staff has reviewed the following data and will use it to inform planning and decision-making in the future. The results of the survey questions are included below.

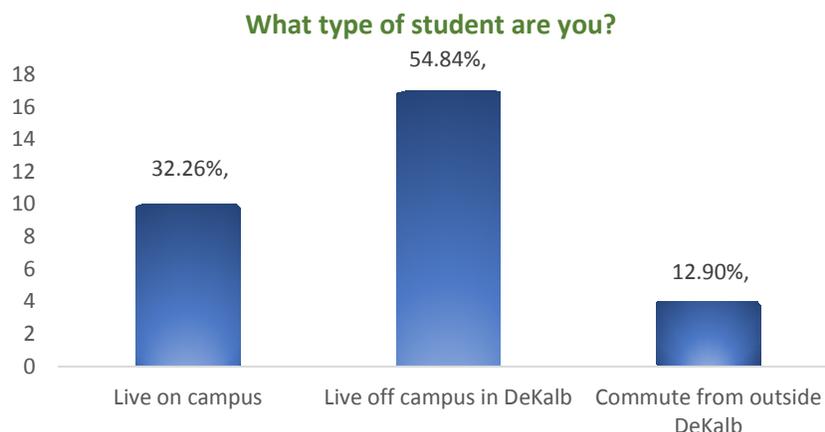
Question 1: What Year in School are You?

Demographic questions were asked to get an understanding of the attendees. The students who completed the survey were primarily seniors at 42% and juniors at 39%.



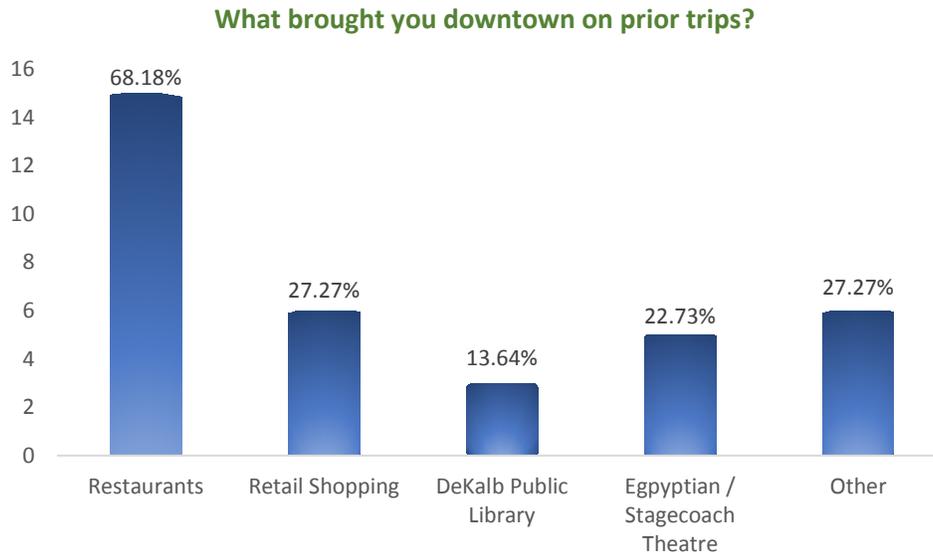
Question 2: What Type of Student are You?

Student demographic questions were asked to gain a better understanding of the community conversation attendees and for future conversation planning. Fifty-five percent of students who took the survey live off campus within DeKalb, followed by 32% living on campus and 13% commuting from outside of the City.



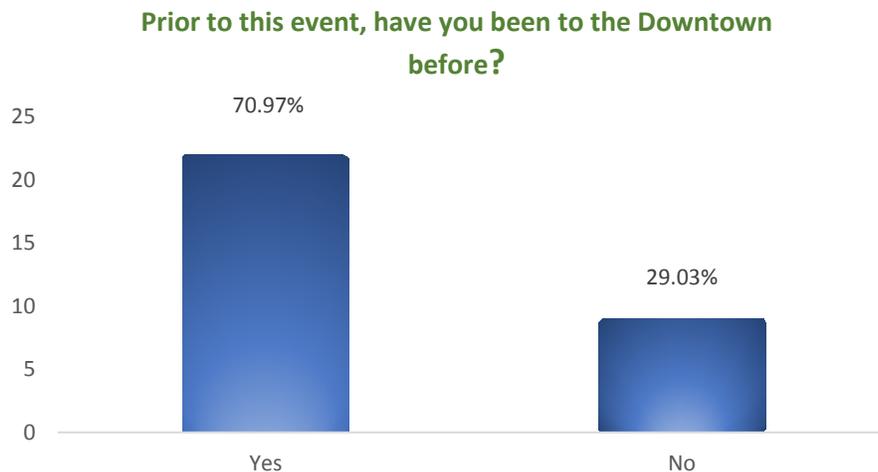
Question 3: What Brought You Downtown on Prior Trips?

To better understand the shopping habits of students, they were asked what brought them downtown on prior trips. Sixty-eight percent of students indicated restaurants was the reason for their visit, followed by 27% indicating retail shopping.



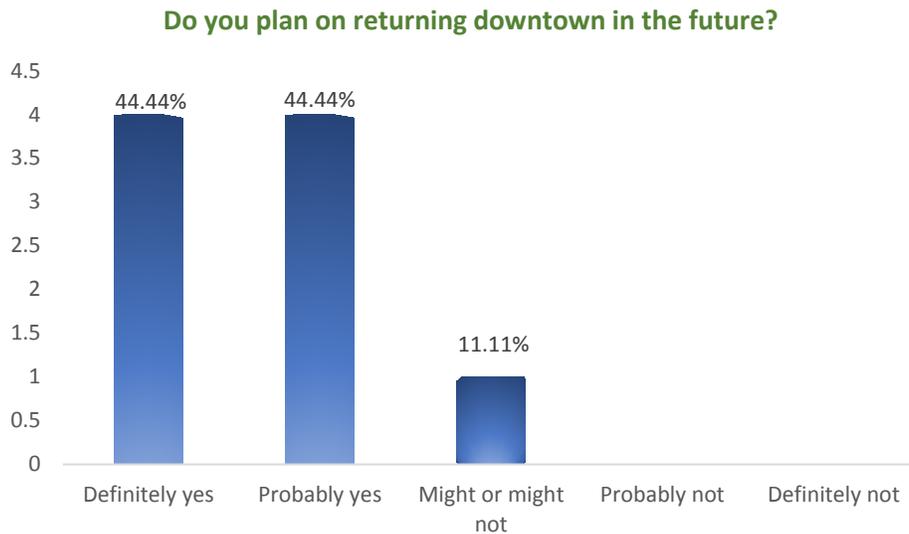
Question 4: Prior to This Event, Have You Been to the Downtown Before?

To get a better understanding of their base knowledge of the downtown business district, students were questioned on whether they had been downtown before. Students did not fully know the boundaries of the downtown. After clarification of the boundaries during the event, 71% of students indicated they had been downtown before and 29% indicated the event was their first time coming downtown.



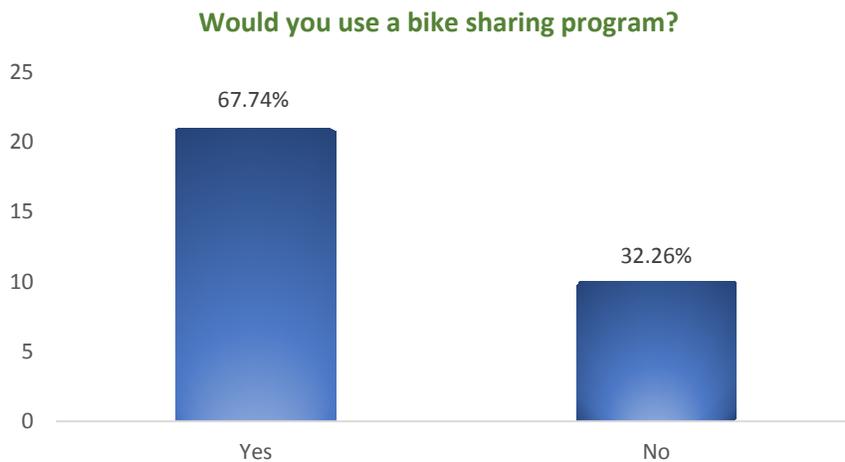
Question 5: Do You Plan on Returning Downtown in the Future?

As a metric to track how successful the event was, students were asked if they now plan on returning downtown in the future. Eighty-nine percent of students responded definitely yes and probably yes, while 11.11% responded they might or might not. None of the students responded probably not or definitely not.



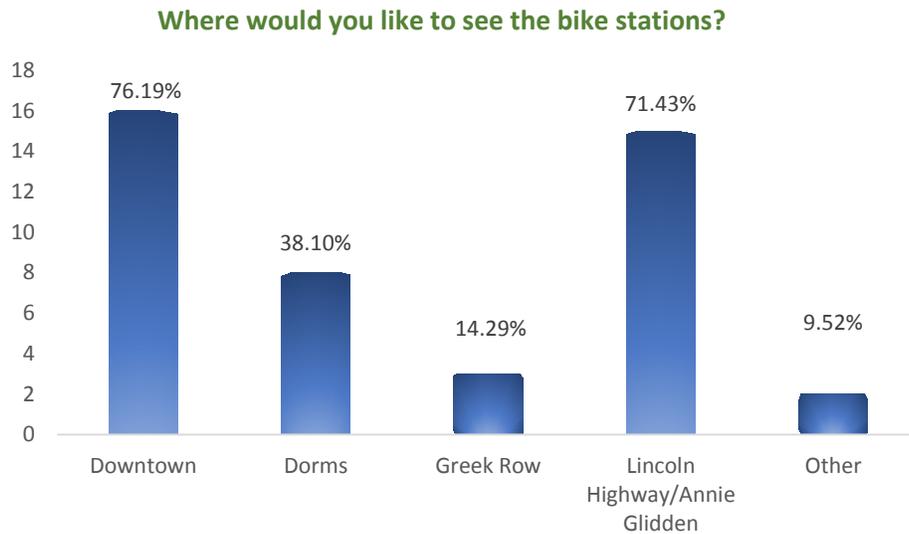
Question 6: Would You Use a Bike Sharing Program?

To better understand student's transportation desires, survey takers were asked whether they would use a bike sharing program. Sixty-nine percent of students responded yes, with 32 % students responding no.



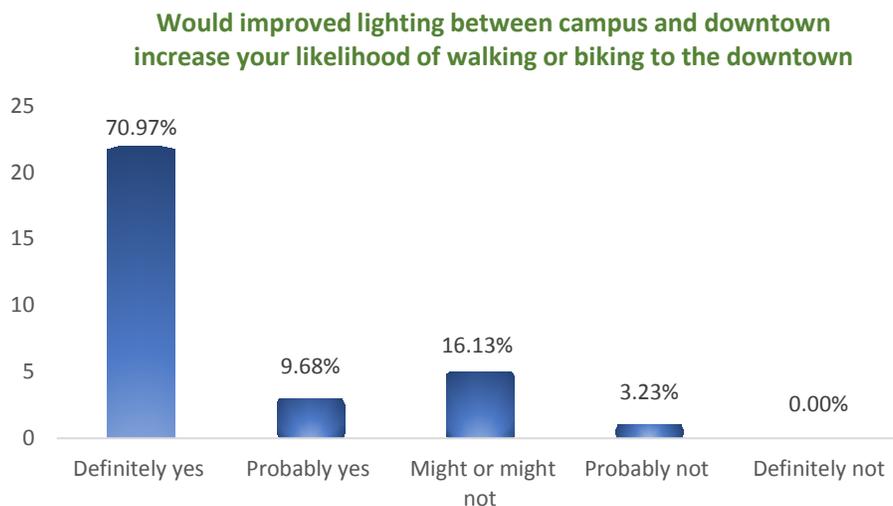
Question 7: Where Would You Like to See the Bike Stations?

As a follow up to the question above, students were asked where they would like to see bike stations be located. Seventy-six percent of students said downtown, 71 % said Lincoln Highway/Annie Glidden, and 38% said the dorms.



Question 8: Would Improved Lighting Between Campus and Downtown Increase Your Likelihood of Walking or Biking to the Downtown?

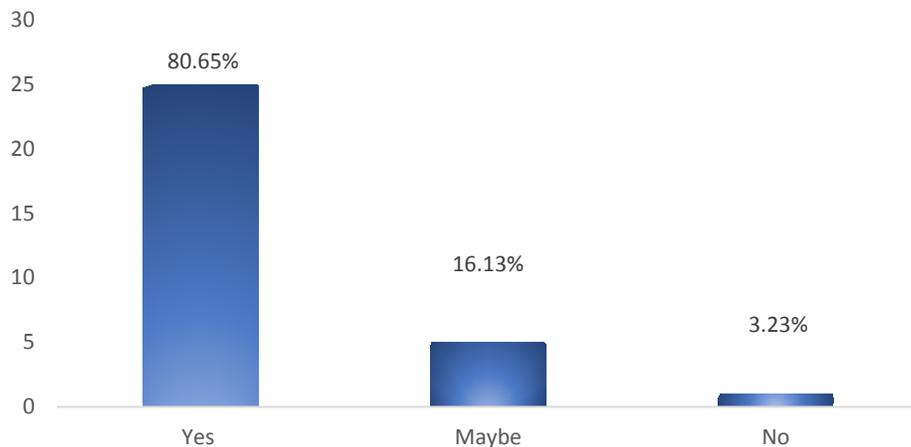
Lighting was one of the main themes identified in the community conversations. When asked if improved lighting between campus and the downtown would increase their likelihood of walking or biking to the downtown a clear majority of students said definitely yes with a 71% response. 10% responded probably yes, 16% responded might or might not and 3% responded probably not.



Question 9: Would You Personally Utilize Bus Service to the Downtown if More Readily Available?

One theme identified from the downtown conversation involved a lack of transportation for students to get to the downtown. When students were asked if they would personally use a bus service to the downtown, if it was more readily available, 81% indicated yes with 16% indicating maybe and 3% responding no.

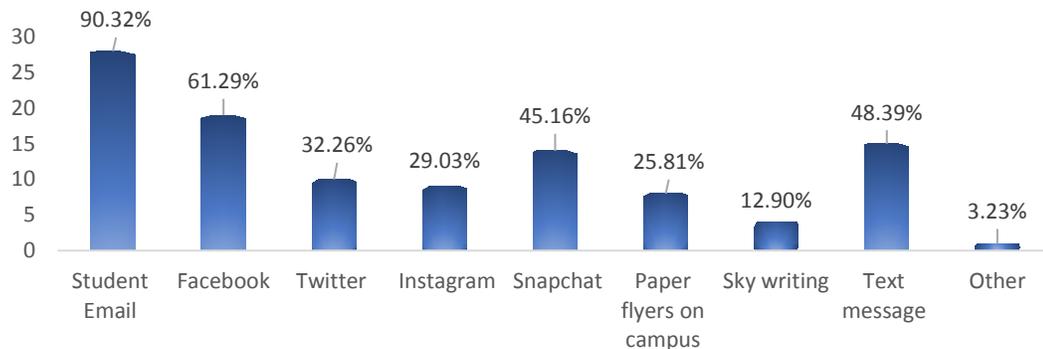
Would you personally utilize a bus service to the downtown if more readily available?



Question 10: What is the Best Way to Communicate and Share Information with You?

A major theme from the downtown conversation related to communication efforts between the City, the Downtown businesses and students. With this in mind, students were asked about their preferred communication channels. Ninety percent of students preferred receiving communication regarding community events through student email, 61% through Facebook and 48% by text messages.

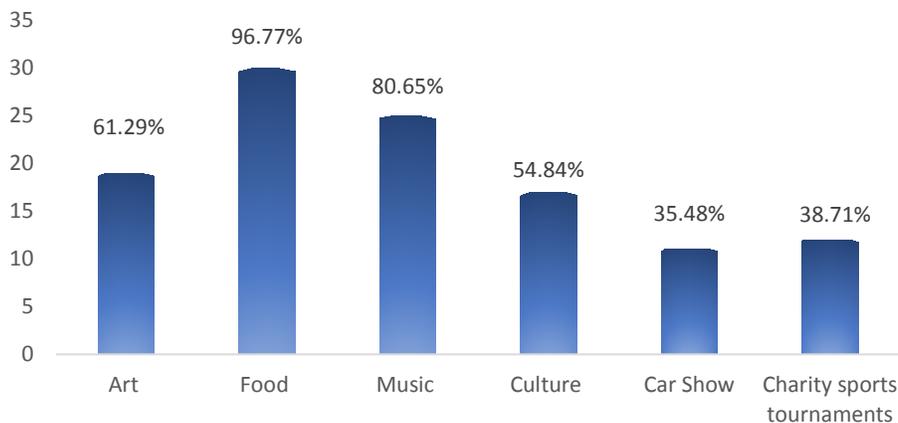
What is the best way to communicate and share information with you?



Question 11: What Types of Community Events and Festivals Would You Attend?

Students were asked what types of community events and festivals they would attend. Ninety-seven percent of students indicated that food related community events would be of interest to them, in addition to 81% expressing interest in music related events and 61% for art related events.

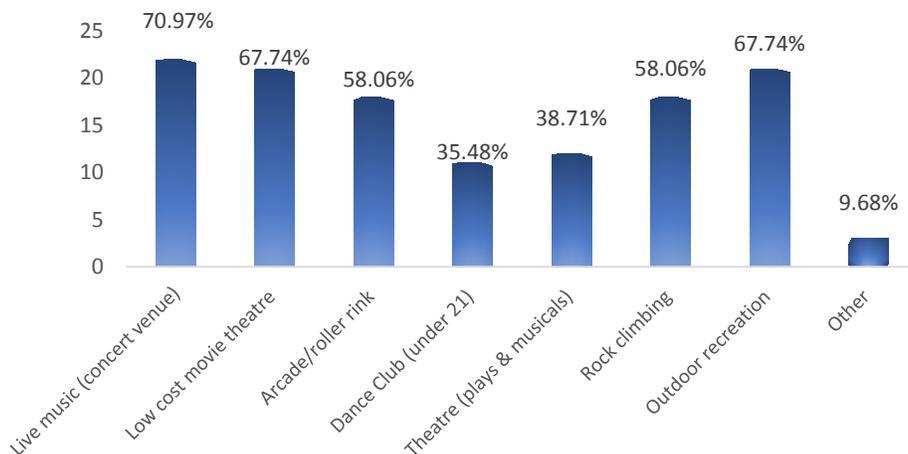
What types of community events and festivals would you attend?



Question 12: What Types of Entertainment Venues Would You Like to See in DeKalb?

Students indicated a wide range of entertainment venues they would like to see come to DeKalb. Seventy-one percent of students expressed interest in live music venues, in addition to 68% expressing interest in a low-cost movie theatre and 68% in outdoor recreation venues.

What types of entertainment venues would you like to see in DeKalb?



Question 13: Did You Learn Something New about DeKalb During the Event?

As a metric to track how successful the event was, students were asked if they learned something new about DeKalb during the event. Ninety percent of students indicated learned something new, with 10% of students stating they did not.

