

Opinion: The brainiest train in California

By Joe Mathews

My train line is smarter than your train line.

I ride The Brain Train, officially the L.A. Metro system's Gold Line, running from the San Gabriel Valley into downtown L.A. and back out again to East L.A. Along the way, it connects enough smart institutions to explode stereotypes about public transportation and Southern California itself.



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Yes, other parts of California may claim brainier trains: The Caltrain commuter rail connects San Francisco to Stanford; San Diego is extending its trolley to UCSD; and Sonoma and Marin counties are about to inaugurate the SMART train (although that's an acronym, not an intelligence claim).

But for L.A. County—where we're known for our good looks but not for our brains or public transportation—the Gold Line is a revelation, linking a startling diversity of intellectual institutions.

The Brain Train's eastern terminus on Atlantic Avenue is within walking distance of East Los Angeles College. From there, take the line downtown, where you pass the Japanese American National Museum, and SCI-Arc, one of the world's

leading architectural schools. North of downtown, one stop drops you at the Southwest Museum, a vital archive of Native American history, and another, Highland Park, is a bike ride away from Occidental College, one of President Barack Obama's alma maters.

When the train enters Pasadena, it goes right through the south campus of ArtCenter College of Design, a globally distinguished school, and later stops at Memorial Park, a block from Parsons, the leading engineering firm. Then the Gold Line turns east, with stops that are a walk to Pasadena City College (among the best in the state at transferring students to four-year institutions) and a short bike ride to Caltech, where planets are discovered and Nobels are won. Further east, one of the nation's top cancer centers, City of Hope, has its own stop on the Brain Train in Duarte.

For now, the Gold Line ends at two higher education institutions: Citrus College, which the Brookings Institution has called one of America's best community colleges, and Azusa Pacific, a top Christian university. But plans are already underway to take the Gold Line further east, eventually serving the University of LaVerne and the Claremont Colleges, the seven-school consortium.

The Brain Train's educational resume runs beyond universities. The line runs right through two of the state's top school districts—Arcadia and South Pasadena. The Gold Line also offers thought-provoking views of the majestic San Gabriel Mountains and of Mt. Wilson Observatory, once essential to the study of astronomy.

Do all these local nerds ride the train? No, but many cost-conscious ones do. The 31-mile-long Brain Train costs just \$1.75 per boarding, and transfers to other lines are free. With public transportation ridership flat, the Brain Train is a bright spot, registering an all-time high for weekday boardings (more than 53,000) in June.

On board, I'm often struck by the nerdiness of my fellow passengers. The Brain Train offers a smooth, quiet and comfortable ride, making it a rare public space where you'll see people reading actual books. On recent rides, I encountered people reading Benjamin Madley's "An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe 1846-1873," volumes of Richard Feynman's lectures on physics, Siddhartha Mukherjee's Pulitzer-winning "The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer," and Salvador Dali's cookbook, "Les diners de Gala."

The Brain Train is likely to get brainier, particularly if the transit connection inspires more collaboration between Gold Line-adjacent institutions. At a public event last year, a Citrus College administrator argued that the Gold Line is making it easier for students to reach the campus and complete their degrees, and the CEO of the Claremont Colleges said it would encourage field research by students and faculty.

There also are efforts by educational institutions to enhance the Gold Line corridor. Most notably, ArtCenter, in Pasadena, is preparing a 15-year master plan that would launch a new bikeway near the Gold Line and build new student housing with green public spaces, or quads, that would be directly over the rail line, linking buildings on either side.

The Gold Line is "our extended classroom," said Art Center's Associate Vice President Rollin Homer at the 2016 public event. "We're embracing it—we're going to live and create alongside it."

The Brain Train is still an urban rail line with typical problems. (I encountered a pile of human excrement on a seat one morning, and recently assisted a half-dozen fellow passengers in subduing an intoxicated rider.) But as someone who grew up in Pasadena before the line arrived in 2003, and now lives four blocks from a stop, I love the way the Gold Line connects me to familiar places in new ways.

The Brain Train, in other words, can really make you think.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.