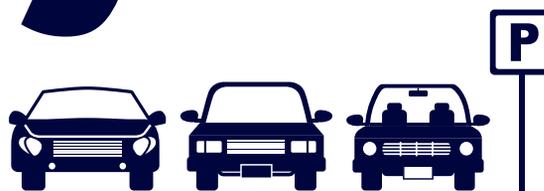


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Participation *and* Buy-in

How and why Penn State's parking chair system works to reduce campus parking pain.



By Ryan Givens, CAPP, and Dave Dorman, CAPP

WITH THE ADVENT OF PAID PARKING at the Pennsylvania State University's (Penn State) University Park campus more than 20 years ago came the development of a parking chair system with three primary purposes: distributing permits to faculty and staff members, deciding who would be issued what type of permits within allocations, and disseminating parking-related information.

As anyone working in a major university or college setting can appreciate, parking can be a contentious and politically charged subject. From university executives to frontline staff personnel—food preparation, janitorial staff, etc.—where someone parks seems to influence not only how a person's day starts or ends, but can affect the entire day. Whether a university executive, a physical plant worker, the library front-counter staff, a distinguished faculty member, or members of the university police, everyone deems his or her time valuable, and all serve important roles that jointly contribute to the overall success and

mission of the university. While all are important, there is a spoken and unspoken hierarchy and tenure, and decisions about who parks where need to be made. The tough question is who should be making these decisions?

In The Beginning

First, let's learn more about the parking and infrastructure here at Penn State's University Park campus and how we make it work:

Penn State has more than 12,000 employees (10,200 registered for parking); 44,000 undergraduate students; 6,000 graduate students; and over 1,000 people who visit the University Park campus on a daily basis. As parking professionals, we strive to work in a fair, reasonable, and consistent manner as much as possible (not that those things always go hand-in-hand) to accomplish one primary goal: ensure that everyone is able to access campus, complete daily task(s), and exit campus safely, all while maintaining established parking allocations and providing an exemplary customer service experience. Easy, right?

Parking is a limited resource not only for our campus but also for many of you. Here at University Park, we maintain 22,000+ parking spaces disbursed through 136 parking lots; 2,040 spaces are designated for resident student use, while 1,205 spaces are designated for long-term student

storage and 3,600 spaces are reserved for staff and student commuter use. As you can see, this often leaves us with more demand than capacity as the remainder of the spaces are used by faculty and staff, guests to campus hotels, true visitor parking, and students paying the on-campus pay stations.

The Parking Chair System

We employ a philosophy of granting some access to many people instead of a lot of access to just a few. Using this approach and a color and letter zone system, we look at each parking lot or deck designation separately (or at small clusters), then look at the general proximity to the numerous colleges or departments, and consider the number of employees designated within the surrounding buildings. To maximize usage, we allocate between 100 and 107 percent (for our core lots) depending on the size of the lot. For commuter lots our permit allocation is at almost 200 percent. Our allocation format does not account for all employees in any given unit, but it does provide fair and reasonable access for all units that have employees in an area.

We then establish our permit allocations across our lots and decks for the respective departments and colleges. For example, if there are six departments or colleges with employees in the buildings surrounding a parking lot, we look at the ratio of employees in each area and allocate the space based on that ratio. For example, if one college represents 45 percent of the employees, that unit would get 45 percent of the parking spaces.

All our customers are important to us, and if you ask them, they will let you know their need is greater than everyone else's. Students are fairly easy and fall into basic categories: those residing on campus, long-term on-campus and off-campus storage, and commuter, with each residence determining what permit each student is eligible to purchase. Faculty and staff, however, present a more complicated situation given the various positions and levels within the many positions.

University Park has a network of more than 100 designated parking chairs—people. Parking chairs are selected by each college or department; typically these “volunteers” are within the human resources or faculty coordinator offices from each area. These are appointed positions, so the respective college or unit leadership has a vested interest in seeing this task performed as well as possible.

Parking chairs make the decisions within their departments as to who does or doesn't receive a permit in high-demand parking areas. Transportation services does not have ready access to employees' personnel records, so we do not know which faculty member may have tenure over another. We do not know whether a department offered parking within a lot under its allocation as a hiring incentive. We do not know the hierarchy that may exist within a department and how that dean views the pecking order when it comes to issuing parking permits. So we (happily) allow

each college or unit and the parking chairs to determine their own criteria for assigning parking and to make those politically charged parking assignment decisions.

Advantages

This system allows us to focus on the overall allocation and management of the parking spaces. It also allows chairs to be able to communicate directly with faculty and staff within their respective units, as the chairs provide a network of onsite representatives to answer questions and assist their staffs. Also, it removes the need for 10,000 faculty and staff to come to the parking office. One of the biggest advantages is that transportation services does not have to make all the small decisions; it allows us to focus on the overall allocation and management of the parking spaces.

Challenges

Of course, no system is without some drawbacks, and the parking chair system is no exception. The system is as good or as poor as each respective chair. Therefore, it is paramount to keep in regular contact with the parking chairs and perform spot audits to ensure accurate and updated records.

A major challenge is these are appointed positions, and staffing changes affect parking chair duties. For example, the university recently reorganized and centralized the human resources department. This brought about an almost 75 percent change in parking chairs and a large loss of institutional knowledge about parking at the chair level.

This shift in parking chairs happened in conjunction with other events. We were at the end of our three-year faculty/staff permit cycle and issuing of new permits, along with the implementation of our new online faculty/staff registration process. At first, the convergence of these events appeared to be looming as a potential major crisis. However, the events gave us a reason and opportunity to immediately meet with each of the new parking chairs for in-person training. We were able to turn potential chaos into a productive opportunity to network with and establish a positive working relationship between our office and our newest representatives. These relationships are very important as we work to maintain a constant line of communication between the parking office and our parking chairs, making sure that faculty and staff permit holders have positive customer experiences.

Technology

The need to keep the data flow going and records as accurate as possible is critical not only to an efficient parking operation, but also our chair system. At first, our chairs used a two-part faculty/staff registration form to record everything related to assigning or returning a permit, keeping a copy for themselves and sending us the other copy via interoffice mail.



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We have worked the past few years with T2 Systems to find a way to better use technology for our chair system. We recently implemented a preferred parker administration (PPA) program and opened an online portal for parking chair use. The portal allows parking chairs to determine the permit they wish to assign and add the employee to their online allotment. The chair then sends a quick email containing the permit number, employee name, and ID number to one of our personnel. Our staff then goes into the portal to complete the permit assignment.

Looking Forward

In addition to our parking chair network, the processes we have developed provide for the gathering and updating of faculty/staff permit data in real time, allowing for up-to-the minute information to be added, which opens the door for future applications, such as mobile parking solutions and license plate recognition (LPR) for access control and enforcement.

We mentioned that a benefit of the chair system is that we can focus more on overall allocations. This is becoming

increasingly important as we, like many others, are faced with how to deal with the loss of parking. In addition to losing some parking recently, construction will begin this fall on a parking deck with over 1,600 spaces. This deck is being built on existing parking lots, many of which are overflow lots. Construction will result in a temporary loss of 277 spaces, and we are permanently losing 17 spaces in one of the core lots that overflows into this area.

With these two projects, between 270 and 370 permit holders will be displaced during construction; for some, that loss will be permanent. The only place we are able to handle this volume of permits is on the other side of campus. Needless to say, many drivers will not be happy. This is where the chair system really comes into place. We will work with the chairs to reduce their allocations according to the appropriate percentage of the total allocations in the lots affected during and after construction. Parking chairs will determine who is reallocated and who will remain in the lots by the construction site.

Not only will the parking chair network provide us with a means of working through and assessing the effects of the specific loss of parking, but it will be instrumental in helping to deliver important information for the upcoming parking-related changes to the building projects. In essence, the chairs will be the messengers of news many faculty and staff will not take well. At the end of the project, the parking chairs may have access and insight into information on the assignment or reassignment of office space and personnel into buildings around the construction project. This information will provide us with the opportunity to work those changes into determining future allocations and trying to stay ahead of the curve of change.

We are not sure if this system would work everywhere. In many cases, peers tell us they've never heard of such a system. Maybe we benefit from developing this system at the outset of paid parking on campus. Or, perhaps given some of the unique and complex issues the Penn State University setting creates, the parking chair system will only work for us. We have found great value from the insights the parking chairs have to offer and have found this group to be a tremendous asset in the management of parking on campus. ♦



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