

The University of Mississippi's Journey to APO

By [Richard Bradley](#)

WOULD LIKE TO PREFACE THE STORY of our journey to becoming an Accredited Parking Organization (APO) by stating that many universities and colleges are facing financial uncertainty and shrinking workloads due to COVID-19. Events have been paused, academic delivery system shifts have resulted in reduced permit sales, and administrative leadership has forced many to revisit once well-funded budgets. During these times of re-imagining workload, putting together an internal team with the common goal of achieving APO status is a low-cost investment that will build understanding and confidence within your organization. Furthermore, participation in this program generates equity at both the administrative and student level.

Our journey began in the spring of 2017, when then Director Mike Harris presented the goal of accreditation to our leadership team at its regular Monday morning meeting. He did so by hanging a 36-inch by 48-inch laminated poster of the criteria for becoming an APO. The task appeared rather large, possibly due to the size of the poster. The timeframe given for completion made it seem attainable if we chipped away at it piece by piece.

Establishing firm records was the first step due to the infancy of the department being an independent auxiliary. The creation of that autonomy is where the journey really began.

Similar to many parking and transportation departments, our department was once a division of the university police department. Parking issues, due to a rapidly growing university community, had reached peak volume. In 2012, the division split and the first director of parking and transportation was hired at The University of Mississippi (UM). Strategic planning and mobility management started to take shape. Slow, incremental changes resulted in technology updates, increased ridership on the Oxford University Transit system, and the introduction of parking structures on campus.

Transition to Managed Parking

The first two decades of the new millennium saw rapid growth to the Oxford campus of UM, roughly doubling its enrollment. Always considered a quaint college town, Oxford, Miss., was starting to attract

the interest of out-of-state students, and the pressure on infrastructure started to create frustration and tension. A parking management program that didn't limit commuter permits could no longer be maintained. A single-occupancy vehicle

mindset was no longer working, and considerations had to be made regarding inventory and permit-to-space ratios. Expanding our parking inventory from a campus of surface lots to one that included parking structures required the department to rethink permit pricing and offerings.

The construction of two parking structures between 2015 and 2018 assisted UM in handling increased parking demand. The Pavilion Garage, completed in 2015, is a shared-use structure that provides reserved spaces for faculty, staff, and students during normal business hours. During basketball and football events, the garage is used as a special events parking structure, with spaces being sold to season ticket holders. The Residential Garage, completed in 2017,





was built to support six new residence halls built between 2010 and 2017.

Transitioning to a new parking management system was needed to maintain better data and create a more user-friendly environment for customers and staff. In the spring of 2014, the RFP was awarded to T2 Systems. Although the first year witnessed some growing pains regarding permit demand, the success and expansion of the platform helped us meet many of the criteria for becoming an APO.

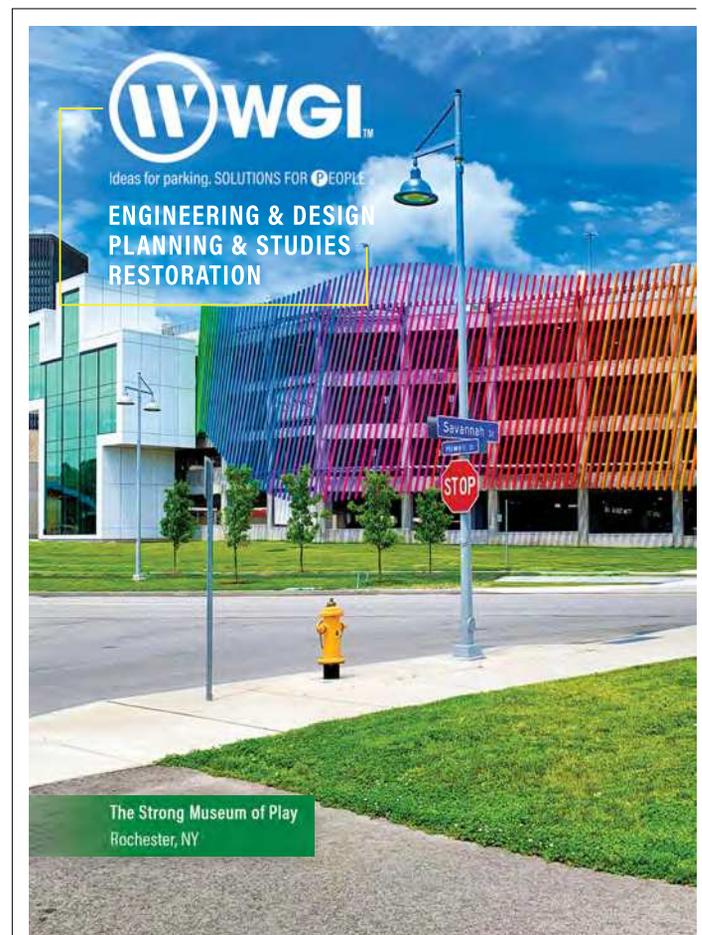
During this period, we transitioned into modern mobile enforcement, using handheld devices to issue citations. More recently, we purchased two mobile-LPR vehicles to streamline processes and provide parking enforcement in a more consistent manner. Although leveraging LPR technology has made parking violations more recognizable, we have not been able to confidently transition to a virtual permit system. Attempts to maintain a clean database for license plate information by issuing warnings and educating permit holders of the importance of keeping records up to date has not provided us with the desired results. A rule regulating license plate visibility that required vehicles to park nose-in was quickly rescinded due to the UM community's resistance.

During the last five years, the department has experimented with a number of occupancy measurement tools. The variety of technology in the market has made it difficult to determine which method is the most reliable and cost effective. There is no doubt that real-time occupancy data pushed out via an app would create a number of benefits for UM. However, the cost of such a system is prohibitive for a campus that currently manages more than 16,000 parking spaces.

Although the transition to independent management of parking has made the department more efficient, the hurdles of keeping up with innovations in technology has produced mixed results. Progress toward becoming an APO would not have been possible without practicing due diligence and taking calculated risks to advance the department in a rapidly changing environment.

Transition to Transportation Demand Management

In 2008, the City of Oxford and the university introduced mass transit to the community by establishing the Oxford University Transit (OUT) bus service. The service is managed by a third-party provider, RAPT Dev, which assists with long-term goals and strategic direction. Oversight comes from the OUT Commission which is comprised of community stakeholders. UM ridership, which is free for students, faculty, and staff, has



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mirrored the growth of enrollment. Since 2012, ridership from those affiliated with UM has increased more than 100 percent with current ridership between 1 million and 1.25 million annually on a fleet of approximately 30 buses. Although the rapid growth in ridership has presented challenges, the shared investment of the City of Oxford, UM, and federal grants has allowed the service to grow with our shared community.

As is the case with any university environment, bicycle use is essential to controlling demand of parking resources and traffic mitigation. Although Oxford is only 26 square miles in size, the southern heat and reliance on single-occupancy vehicles in rural

communities make converting community members to pedal power a challenge. However, investment in infrastructure and various programs have assisted in making this mode of transportation more acceptable. More than 20 miles of bike lanes and a number of pathways have been created throughout Oxford and UM to increase safety for cyclists and provide a more enjoyable cycling experience.

The Ole Miss Bike Shop opened its doors in 2014. The on-campus bike shop offers semester-long rentals to students. The shop sells basic bike equipment and provides inexpensive bike services and repairs. The Rebel Pedals bike rental program

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offers a mix of previously abandoned and donated bikes to provide an economical way to move around campus and throughout the city.

In 2017, UM partnered with a vendor to create the Ole Miss Bike Share. In the following years, shared mobility preferences shifted from traditional bikes to e-bikes and e-scooters. Health concerns related to COVID-19, budget consideration and the risk of introducing the new technologies required us to pause our shared, last-mile mobility program. UM plans to revisit the shared-mobility option this coming spring, with hopes of bringing an enhanced program to campus in the fall 2021.

Other TDM programs have suffered due to COVID-19. Car-share and rental services were suspended indefinitely due to decreased use and health concerns related to shared-use vehicles. UM has had to shift from opposition of single-occupancy vehicles to an attitude of accommodation. The tricky part will be to avoid stifling the progress that has been made in the past decade regarding TDM.

APO: A Strategy

Although the task can be daunting and everyone's approach will be different, consider a few of the following suggestions to help your organization accomplish APO status:

- **Give yourself time.** UM started this process in 2017 and did not put our application in front of the approval board until the end of 2019. We did not submit our application, which allows one year for completion, until we had collected all the needed materials. This will be a project you want to leave and come back to during busy parts of the year.
- **Stay organized.** The criterion are just one well-organized checklist. Departments should have one designated project leader whose strengths are in

executing and organizing. The project leader can delegate different criteria to specialized personnel for assistance, but someone needs to be in charge of compiling all the data and information in one place. Put all your materials in a digital format where they can be shared with others during the review process.

- **Pick a good site reviewer.** Do your due diligence when making the selection. UM's site reviewer was a lot more than just a parking garage inspector. They appraised all of our submitted materials and guided us through the review process. It was a relationship that made the process much easier. The reviewer was the essential link between us and the review board. Keep in mind there is not a set rate for these services. Fees vary greatly between \$2,000

and \$10,000. Get multiple quotes and discuss with the reviewer how they will approach the process.

I can't emphasize enough that this is a marathon and not a sprint. Trying to complete the process in a couple of months can be done, but there is much to be learned as you comb through data and documents and review policies and procedures. Completion gives you credibility within the industry, but more importantly, with the stakeholders in the community that rely on the services you provide each day. ♦



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