a calming effect

Parking anxiety is a real thing for drivers. Here are some ways industry professionals can help mitigate it.

by Victor A. Hill, CAPP, MPA
It was the third time the employee insisted our parking garage was full, but I knew we had spaces on our upper levels because I’d sprinted up the stairs moments earlier to be sure.

“You expect me to park up there?” she asked, incredulous to the suggestion.

“Your permit's valid on levels one through three,” I said. “I’m happy to show you the open spots.”

She reluctantly made her way to the second floor of the garage after voicing her displeasure. It wasn’t the last time I’d bear witness to the reality that parking sometimes strikes fear into the hearts of employees, students, and campus visitors, many unaccustomed to multi-level garages. That unfamiliarity seemed to exacerbate their anxiety about driving to campus.

Parking Anxiety as a Phobia

Parking anxiety isn’t unique to college campuses. Municipalities, airports, and private property owners are challenged to find ways to mitigate anxiety to provide quality service. Wayfinding, signage, social media, and educational campaigns have all been used to ease the anxiety drivers feel when entering unfamiliar environments.

“A fear of parking would fall under the category of situational phobias, like flying in an airplane or visiting the dentist,” says Ryan McKelley, PhD, chair of the department of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. “It’s also possible that parking garages and ramps can trigger the same fear response seen in claustrophobia (fear of confined spaces) or agoraphobia (fear of a public place where making a quick exit is difficult).”

Interestingly, there are no peer-reviewed studies that explicitly use “parking anxiety” or “parking stress” as a construct, but ergonomics and assistive technology studies may offer insights into the phobia, he says. As examples, a study in 2000 suggested that commuter college students found parking more stressful than their coursework, while another study considered how assistive technologies used to help with backing up or parallel parking could reduce driver stress. Wayfinding or informational signs could, potentially, play a role in assuaging anxiety as well. McKelley points to a study that sought to improve seatbelt use among residents in a retirement community. Reminder signs were placed around the community, and seatbelt use increased. Creative signage, possibly even humorous in tone, might help mitigate parking anxiety, he adds.

“At its core, anxiety is most often fear or uncertainty about something that hasn’t happened yet—even if based on a past experience,” McKelley says. “In other words, it is when our stress response is activated as it should be if we were in a dangerous situation, but it kicks in during times of uncertainty or at the thought of an adverse situation that might happen. For parking, it could be anxiety about finding a spot, getting into a minor collision if paths seem narrow, or uncertainty about your ability to park efficiently when someone is looking.”

The Perception of Safety

Safety is another cause for anxiety, particularly in urban areas, or areas that are perceived to be blighted. An overflow parking lot used for resident students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse is frequently thought of as unsafe by students and parents due to its proximity to a cemetery, a perception of poor lighting, and the quarter-mile distance to the main campus. The lot is often the only choice for incoming first-year or transfer students who have no other alternatives when parking lots closer to residence halls sell out. The lighting along the street to campus was improved with more intense LEDs, and university police offer rides, most often at night, but safety concerns remain, despite consistently low crime rates on campus and efforts to improve the lot and surrounding area.

“Perception is, unfortunately, sometimes reality, but we make ourselves available any time of day and do our best to help our students feel safe,” says Scott McCallough, chief of university police. “We’re fortunate to have parking available even if it’s not in an ideal location. Our ongoing challenge is to educate our students and their parents about all of their options and address their concerns.”

Parking staff and police officers use social media to educate students and meet every year with incoming students to discuss safety and parking options. Parents with
new college students are frequently more concerned about safety and appreciate speaking directly to officers, McCullough says.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County faced the challenge of managing a perception problem when it tried to encourage students to park at a discounted rate in a non-campus garage. Students were parking at the campus’s BioPark garage, but as a result of the expansion of the BioPark complex, the parking program needed to be discontinued. This prompted the need to relocate 300 vehicles. Parking on campus wasn’t an option, given the limited space, so university officials negotiated a discounted rate at a Baltimore-owned garage. Only 35 vehicles parked there, which caused campus demand for parking to increase.

After studying the issue, officials realized the lack of parking was based on negative perceptions of specific areas around campus in the city. Meetings with the student government association and other stakeholders led to the creation of a walking tour program to address the students’ concerns and educators park about the quickest and safest travel routes to and from the garage while walking across campus. The program’s purpose was to, ideally, change their perceptions and consider the garage as a parking alternative.

The program worked. While initially only 85 students participated, word spread in time, and the city-owned garage now regularly sees 300 vehicles in it, along with additional student vehicles parked at a similarly discounted location nearby. Another stakeholder that benefited from the partnership was the merchants of the Lexington Market as the tours include the market area, which has led to an increase in its foot traffic.

“We were pleased with the program’s success,” says Robert Milner, CAPP, MS, director of parking and transportation services at the university and co-chair of IPI’s Safety and Security Committee. “We feel like we took a team approach to involving stakeholders and helping them see the area in a different light.” He hopes to include the tours as part of the university’s onboarding process for new employees, and tours may be expanded to the BioPark.

Wayfinding to Reduce Anxiety

Convenient parking when tied to efficient wayfinding and transitions to other amenities can help reduce anxiety when a short car ride is the start of a long travel day into unfamiliar surroundings. Airports are challenged to provide parking options for

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Development of Program:

A group meeting was held with Parking, Public Safety, Communications, the USG vice president, and the management office of Lexington Market. The concept was developed, Lexington Market was contacted to determine availability of the garage, and student/staff traffic to its vendor stalls and offered its meeting room for a meeting with students after each tour. Lexington Market also had an interest in security personnel to be conscious of students walking in the area. Parking department staff worked with Lexington Market to create a separate tour for the student parking garage located in the northwest section of the campus community.

The program was communicated through Academic Affairs and the USG, and tour dates were set up. This planning phase took approximately two months.

Actual Tours:

The first couple of tours only had a few participants, but as the tours went on, the word spread. Communications was able to bring in a champion from Academic Affairs, and we were able to present the program at meetings with foreign students who came from countries where public safety officials have a different approach. As the tours continued, we found that the students enjoyed the program and asked if we could bring it back.

The tours consist of two groups starting from the northwest section of the campus community to travel the larger tour group then meets at Lexington Market, where the marketing manager takes the students on a quick tour of the market and points out the various vendors. Public Safety and Parking personnel point out their favorite vendors as well. The second tour ends at the BioPark garage. The students learn about the student union, the office of public safety, and UMB’s BioPark campus. The bar at the BioPark garage provides a relaxed place for faculty and students to eat and enjoy the view before being in an urban environment.

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customers, who, in many instances, are anxious about flight delays and arriving at their final destinations. The Houston airports—William P. Hobby (HOU) and George Bush Intercontinental (IAH)—made several changes to help mitigate anxiety, says Pearl Hurd, parking analyst for the airports.

LED lights above parking spaces turn red or green depending on occupancy, valet parking services are offered, kiosks were installed to provide shuttle information, and routes were changed to improve efficiency and reduce travel times. Updated restrooms even take advantage of new technologies to make the experience easier and more convenient for travelers.

“It’s all for the purpose of not only reducing stress, but adding the wow factor into the travel experience,” Hurd says. “Our goal is to celebrate the experience of flying.”

Harnessing Technology to Reduce Anxiety

Parking and transportation professionals have several ways to make parking a less stressful experience for their customers. Effective signage helps customers locate parking as they arrive. Ongoing advances in technology provide more options than ever before when combined with customer education, and the rise of smartphone apps and GPS-enabled navigation offer faster access to options that customers may not have otherwise discovered. Combined, these elements can provide valuable information to improve parking operations and make for happier customers. As important, parking professionals can harness the power of the technology to enhance efficiencies.

“It's still all about the numbers and the statistics, the workflow, the traffic flow, because that transcends into a calmer customer experience, a more inviting customer experience,” says Allan Witten, sales director for ParkHelp. The company provides parking and mobility solutions that include guidance, signage, and software. Witten is also a member of IPI’s Safety and Security Committee. “From a wayfinding aspect, the embrace of that technology has increased because it’s visual-based, and the user doesn’t really have to do much other than look around because it’s all visual and it helps with the parker’s experience,” he says.

McKelley welcomes these advances.

“Anything that helps to reduce uncertainty has the potential to reduce anxiety,” he says. “Signs that let people know how many spots are available or that clearly direct a driver to navigate through a ramp can reduce uncertainty about a parking situation. Educating someone how to park in narrow spots can reduce anxiety in a parking lot.”

Notes


*IPI’s Safety and Security Committee contributed to this article.

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