

Embracing Growth Through Greater Mobility at Ole Miss

By Mike Harris, CAPP, MBA

For those of us fortunate enough to work on a college campus, days can arrive with many challenges that range from parent and student interactions to construction plans that view every surface lot as the next construction site. At the University of Mississippi, we are facing growth at an unprecedented rate. From 2007 to 2017, the university's student body increased 39 percent, which has made it necessary for our administration and parking teams to look at various ways to accommodate a lot of change.

The only constant on a college campus is change, and we have had to embrace a lot of changes during the past few years, including construction of five new residence halls and two parking garages. These changes have created several new options for our campus community—as change goes, this is a good thing. The more options people have, the better decisions they can make about what works for them.

Expanding Options

One of those changes has been to expand our biking options, which include free bicycle registration for bike owners as well as an expanded bike rental program and a newly launched bike-share program through Gotcha. These expand-

ed options have proven very popular with our students. We all know the benefits of increased bike use: a reduction in the number of vehicles on campus and a healthier community. However, we could not just expand bike programs without also looking at infrastructure to make sure the programs were safe and convenient to use. To accommodate more bicycling, we removed on-street parking on several main arteries on campus and created bike lanes. We also added more bike racks throughout campus to handle the increased number of bicycles.

Reducing Traffic

We considered campus streets and cross-campus traffic. How could we eliminate as much cross-campus traffic as possible while still maintaining emergency, bus, and delivery access? This was accomplished by installing gates that work with emergency strobe sensors and bus clickers, as well as a keypad with an intercom system to accommodate unexpected deliveries. This decision contributed not only to less cross-campus traffic, but also created a much safer environment for our pedestrians and bicyclists and helped develop a more efficient bus operation.

This brings us to buses and the enormous effects they have in helping us manage the growth we have experienced. The bus system, which is known as Oxford University Transit (OUT) has been a life preserver in a sea of growth. What began in 2008 as a small system with two routes and five buses has grown to 14 routes and 31 buses with two more on order. This past year saw ridership in excess of 1.4 million people.

Hubs

Some changes in the past few years have helped create a more efficient transit system. One of the biggest changes was to create two transit hubs on campus. One is located at Kennon Observatory, which we call our South Hub, and one is located at our newly constructed student union, which we refer to as our North Hub. Prior to this change, the bus routes all ran from the city with stops around campus. As you might imagine, this was inefficient. The buses would get bogged down on campus due to traffic and pedestrians. This was extremely problematic during class change, when vehicle traffic came to a standstill at certain intersections as masses of students crossed campus.

Our goal was to create two locations that would serve as destinations for the buses coming onto campus. Those routes entering campus from the north would drop off students at the North Hub, and those entering from the south would drop off students at the South Hub.




We, as parking professionals on college campuses, should never lose sight of our overall goal, which is to support the mission of the university. This starts by improving transportation for our students, as well as faculty, staff, alumni, families, and visitors, so they can get to where they need to go to take the next steps in their lives

These hubs increased the speed of our turnaround time tremendously and helped the buses leave campus and stay on route without slowing down by going through campus. Along with this change, we added internal campus bus loops to help transport people to classes and offices. The campus loop is composed of two routes and four buses: Rebel Red goes counter-clockwise, and Rebel Blue goes clockwise, making various stops around campus across from each other. People choose the route that is closest to their destination and, therefore, arrive

at their destinations quicker. The hubs serve as transfer points for all routes. The gates mentioned above really do help with keeping the buses on time and eliminating traffic interference for a more efficient transit system.

Our campus has come a long way, and a lot of the changes have been due to construction and the growth we have experienced. We, as parking professionals on college campuses, should never lose sight of our overall goal, which is to support the mission of the university. This starts by improving transportation

for our students, as well as faculty, staff, alumni, families, and visitors, so they can get to where they need to go to take the next steps in their lives. Thanks to the various options available now on our campus, I think we have helped make this possible. 



MIKE HARRIS, CAPP, MBA, is director of parking and transportation at the University of Mississippi. He can be reached at gmharris@olemiss.edu.



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