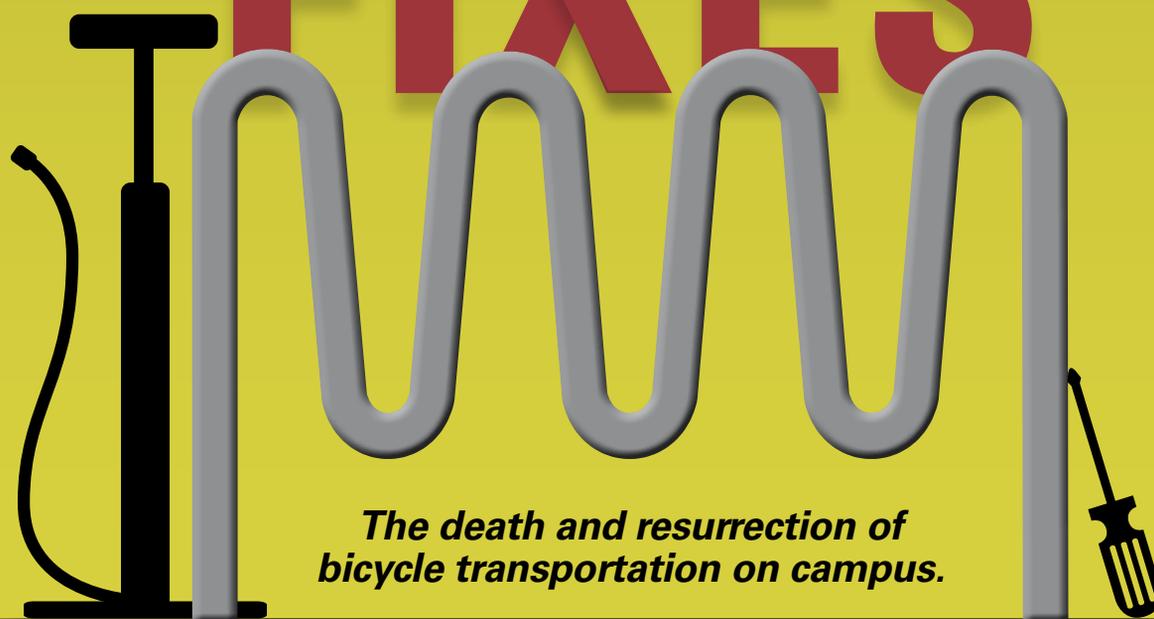


Simple FIXES



*The death and resurrection of
bicycle transportation on campus.*

By Ron Steedly, CAPP, MEd, LCI

Let's face it: Bicycle transportation on a college campus is essential. No matter if the campus is 5,200 acres like Texas A&M University (10th in the nation in overall acres) with nearly 56,000 students or 14 acres like Thomas More College of Liberal Arts with its 84 students, you will find bicycles at school.



If you have ever looked closely at the bicycles parked in college campus racks, you might have seen a fleet of metal and rubber dying a slow death. Rows and rows of “Bicycle-Shaped Objects” (BSO) fill the racks, showing the effects of weather and a lack of maintenance. Rust on most metal parts such as the chain, chain ring, and cassette (gears); flat tires; exposed tubes; melted grips; disintegrated seats; and missing parts are common. If you listen carefully, you may hear a faint “help me” groan coming from the bicycle parking area. These bicycles want to be used and seen as reliable transportation for the owners, but they need proper care.

A very small percentage of these bicycles is owned by cyclists who are cognizant of the need for bicycle maintenance to keep their bikes healthy. In an ongoing informal poll conducted by me when I am out and about on campus, the response to, “Before college, when was the last time you used a bicycle on a regular basis?” is a resounding “middle school,” at least 90 percent of the time. That explains a lot about understanding the essential need for maintenance (in addition to the disregard for traffic laws, the scary driving tactics, and the need to practice for the bicycle slalom Olympic event using pedestrians as slalom poles).



Students can learn to fix their own bikes or get referrals to local repair shops from The HUB.



The HUB sits in a central campus location that's a natural gathering point.

So how do we make a dent for the better in this reality? Education! After all, college is an institution of higher education, right? That is what we set out to do at Texas A&M University. Bicycles on campus do not equal bicycle transportation—bicycles being useable and properly used do.

Bike-Friendly University

For those unfamiliar with the Bicycle Friendly University evaluation criteria through the League of American Bicyclists, there are five Es that make up evaluation categories (engineering, enforcement, encouragement, evaluation, and education). All the Es affect each other in some way, but mitigating the maintenance problem so many of us observe at school begins with education.

At Texas A&M University, the Department of Transportation Services has an alternative transportation unit that I have the pleasure of managing. The university bicycle program falls under my purview and earned me the nickname “The Bike Guy” because we have more than 11,000 privately owned bicycles on campus. We also have a department of recreational sports with an Outdoor Adventures unit that happens to teach a basic bicycle maintenance class.

Outdoor Adventures’ main location is a bit remote on campus, so attendance for the bicycle maintenance class was consistent but small. I attended the class to see what it was like and found it to be valuable in teaching basics such as keeping the drive train clean and lubed, repairing a flat tire with a patch kit or new tube, and other basic upkeep maintenance items, including proper tire pressure and brake checks. It occurred to me during

the class that if more bicycle owners knew how and did the basics, they could have a huge effect on the health of the bicycles on campus.

Partnering

In the summer of 2013, a partnership was formed between the alternative transportation unit and Outdoor Adventures to address the need to educate the masses regarding all things bicycle. Bicycle maintenance seemed like a major component of embracing bikes as real transportation. Students can’t and won’t ride bicycles that aren’t maintained, so we needed to get the bicycles healthy. The existing bicycle maintenance class covered the basics and the necessary tools were available for the students, but attendance just wasn’t there.

During the course of the next year, we brainstormed marketing ideas and an operations plan. We knew we needed an area on main campus that was more accessible to customers than the existing class, and we needed to find a better location. We learned that’s easier said than done. Finding available real estate on a college campus for something new is like looking for gold sifting through your cat’s litter box.

The dining services department had possession of a small building that was originally a parking lot attendant booth. For many years, it was a Chinese takeout location and then a hot dog stand. The building eventually became vacant, and the dining services department returned it to transportation services for our use. We struck gold. This building would be great for our project. Not only was it under our control, but the best part was its location—directly across from an on-campus housing



“Whether you need to fix a flat, adjust your seat, rebuild your bottom bracket or tweak your brakes, we have the tools to help you.”

area with more than 6,300 students. It was a perfect location, in our opinion, to house a new do-it-yourself (DIY) bike maintenance facility.

After some clean-up, repairs, paint, signage, and planning, the location we call “The HUB” was ready for use. Jason Kurten, assistant director for Outdoor Adventures, describes it:

The HUB is a drop-in location that offers students, faculty, staff, and general public access to the specialty bike tools that are needed to fix your own bike. Whether you need to fix a flat, adjust your seat, rebuild your bottom bracket or tweak your brakes, we have the tools to help you. In addition, we have Internet access in case you need to look up a good DIY video. We’ll also have a few convenience items for sale if customers need to patch or replace a tube or pick up a light to ride at night. In addition, we are working to create a space around The HUB that is attractive to the bike and outdoor communities at large. We’ll be offering various outdoor programs and clinics on the grounds around the HUB including farmers market bike rides, outdoor lecture series, and slackline demonstrations. As we go along, The HUB will be partnering with various on- and off-campus partners to better serve the A&M Community.

The HUB was open last fall on a limited basis. This was done to work out any bugs with having an off site location for Outdoor Adventures. Technology, payment processing, and facility operations were tested and continually improved during the semester. As the landlord,

it also gave me an opportunity to ensure the facility was at the level it needed to be for my new tenants. We did some grassroots marketing through both departments, but nothing complicated. Business was steady throughout the semester despite the fact that we did not heavily market the service.

The costs to use the facility are very reasonable. For \$5 for the day or \$20 for the entire semester, customers have access to specialty bicycle tools that include bottom bracket removal tools, chain tools, truing stand, spoke wrenches, assorted bicycle wrenches, and many other bicycle-specific tools.

Beyond DIY Repair

Not everyone wants to wrench on their own bicycle, so The HUB established partnerships with local bicycle shops to refer customers for fee-based maintenance. The shops provide fliers and coupons to The HUB that are handed out to customers who are not DIYers so they can be informed of their options. We are definitely on track to raise the awareness for the need to keep bicycles healthy.

On occasion, the university police department sets up engraving services at The HUB. This allows students to have their university ID number or driver license number engraved on their property and helps students get the necessary information from their bicycles so they can register their bikes online.

The HUB is also a location where the students can sign up for other Outdoor Adventures activities and events. The location of The HUB is in the heart of campus so the activities it offers are sure to attract the attention of the Aggie community. The hope is the facility will self-market, not only for bicycle maintenance but for all things outdoors.

To expand on the education for bicycle owners, we have also partnered with the City of College Station to offer bicycle safety classes to teach the rules of the road, basic maintenance, and on-road skills. We use certified instructors through The League of American Bicyclists League Cycling Instructor (LCI) program. We offer a three-hour quick class and an eight-hour full class through the city’s parks and recreation department.

To sum it up, we are educating to encourage bicycling as legitimate transportation so the Aggie community can confidently use the engineering (bicycle facilities) and other resources within the law so they are not negatively affected by enforcement, all of which allows us to constantly evaluate the program to make it better.



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