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Sam Houston State University Campus Parking Focus Groups

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Abstract

A lot has been written in the Houstonian (the campus newspaper) over the last 2 years about the parking situation at SHSU. A quick database research revealed over 30 articles in the campus newspaper since October 2002. Approximately 80% of the articles were critical and perceived parking to a serious problem at the SHSU campus. Also, during this time frame, a new parking facility (i.e., parking garage) has been built.

To assist in the conducting the focus groups, a general outline of the focus group discussions was created. It included the following topic areas:

- Parking at SHSU in general
- Solicitation of specific problems with parking at SHSU
- The new parking garage
- Future expectations

The study provides direction for future strategies for both surface parking and the new parking garage.

Sam Houston State University Campus Parking Focus Groups April 26 - May 5, 2004

Final Report

Background

At the request of Colonel Dennis Culak (Assistant Director of UPD), Drs. John J. Newbold and Sanjay S. Mehta (faculty members within the Department of Management and Marketing) conducted 10 *focus groups* for the University Police Department (UPD) of SHSU (from April 26-May 5, 2004).

Focus groups are generally conducted (in a round table setting) with participants who are concerned with the issue at hand (which in this case was parking at SHSU). Each focus group consisted of between 4 and 10 undergraduate business students. For consistency from one focus group to the next, Dr. Newbold served as the moderator of each of the focus group sessions and Dr. Mehta as the administrative assistant. All focus group discussions were recorded on an audio tape. Most of the information in this report is a transcription of the audio tape. The focus groups were conducted during different days and time periods so as to give every student the opportunity to participate.

Respondents for the focus groups were undergraduate business students participating in Dr. Mehta's Market Research Class (MKT 472 sections 1 and 2). Students were required to participate in one of 10 focus group sessions as part of the course requirement (89 of the 95 students participated). Snacks and drinks were provided during each session. No monetary compensation was provided to the participants. This information is important, as *care should be exercised when generalizing beyond the business school* for issues such as where students park, where they take classes, when do they come to school, etc. However, generally, it is felt these findings are projectable to the university student population at large.

A lot has been written in the *Houstonian* (the campus newspaper) over the last 2 years about the parking situation at SHSU. A quick database research revealed over 30 articles in the campus newspaper since October 2002. Approximately 80% of the articles were critical and perceived parking to a serious problem at the SHSU campus. Also, during this time frame, a new parking facility (i.e., parking garage) has been built.

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Summary of Key Findings

- A. While there were some complaints, students were generally satisfied with the parking situation at SHSU. In many cases this was based on their experiences at other schools or horror stories told to them by friends/relatives at other academic institutions (UH, UT, A&M).
- B. Most students agreed that, when they receive tickets and/or fines, they knew they were breaking parking rules, and the ticket and/or fine were deserved.
- C. Students understand potential plans to raise the fees of parking. However, they would like to see the hikes combined with the continued involvement of and positive improvements to the parking situation on campus.

- D. Students emphasize the need for UPD to communicate effectively about changes in the parking situation and/or parking policy (e.g., if a particular parking lot was not going to be available during a particular day due to a particular event like a career fair). While no one medium of communication was recommended, it was felt that the information should be provided well in advance (i.e., they should not find out the day of the event because then they can not plan for it).
- E. Awareness of the garage was low to nonexistent prior to the topic being introduced by Dr. Mehta in class. Of those who had used the facility, they were very pleased with its proximity to their classes and the facility itself (keep in mind that these were senior business students who take most of their classes in the Smith-Hutson building).
- F. The singular manner of payment at the garage was problematic (i.e., Bank One Card, credit card), and is likely inhibiting its use. Coming up with alternative methods of payment was strongly recommended (e.g., cash, prepaid cards, etc.). Also, increasing the daily cost of the garage from \$4 maximum to \$5 maximum was seen as reasonable and affordable by the masses.
- G. Upon hearing it explained, students expressed some interest in the reserved spaces in the parking garage. Some students even expressed an interest in purchasing the reserved spots. Many who would not consider buying the reserved spots gave the difference between alternatives available on campus as the primary reason (i.e., “if I can park for \$45/year, why would I pay \$450”).
- H. When presented with the possibility of securing a secured space on a surface lot (e.g., behind the library), for roughly half the price of the garage (\$200/year), students expressed a good deal of interest.
- I. In terms of paying for a reserved spot (or any significant expenditure), students are looking for alternatives to a single, one lump sum payment (e.g., maybe a monthly plan).
- J. Students expressed a desire to see improved accommodation for short-term parking (e.g., parking meters or 15 minute parking spaces). Apparently, many of the occasions whereby students receive tickets are when they are taking chances by parking illegally because they have a “quick trip” (e.g., print something at the computer lab, turn a paper in to the professor, etc.).

Specific Findings

General Parking Issues

- A. Overall, students are satisfied with the parking situation at SHSU
 - 1. Fees are considered low relative to experiences at other places (i.e., other schools, hospitals, etc.)
 - 2. Until recently, tickets and fines were considered to be low. Currently, fines provide a disincentive for breaking the parking rules.
 - 3. Spaces are still considered to be plentiful, if not always in the location students prefer. Students know they can park in the upper stadium lot, and they do not consider this walk to be too far, unless they are pressed for time (this may explain why they did not use the bus service).

4. Specific “crunch times” for parking on campus appear to be for 9:30 and 11:00 classes. Students showing up for 8:00 AM classes and classes beginning after 12 noon do not report particular problems finding a parking spot.
 5. Similarly, the specific “crunch area” for parking appears to be the lot across the street just east of the Coliseum (this issue may be specific to business school students).
- B. Most students agree that, when they receive tickets and fines, that they know they are breaking parking rules, and the ticket or fine is deserved. They are motivated to break parking rules by the combination of :
- a. Unforeseen special events (e.g., Career Fair) which monopolize their usual parking situation.
 - b. Bad weather, causing them to be late or to desire a spot very close to campus.
 - c. Running late: Sometimes students are simply running late for class and do not have time to look for a space.
 - d. Short-term parking: Sometimes students are visiting the campus for just a short period of time (e.g., to drop off an item), and they take a chance by parking where they should not.
- C. Students understand potential plans to raise the fees of parking. However, they would like to see the hikes combined with the continued evolvement of and positive improvements to the parking situation on campus (*in other words, it is not advisable to simply begin to charge more for the same service*). Some of the recommendation that were given include:
- a. Increases in the number of spaces available to students. Make these spaces in convenient locations.
 - b. Potential programs to make reserved spots available, including 2-day (T-days) and 3-day rentals (MWF). Many students commute and take classes on certain days only.
 - c. Better busing around campus (the bus during spring 2004 was not utilized due to the route). Some specific comments given include:
 - i. Reasonably priced bus service (students were willing to pay \$0.50 for bus).
 - ii. Perhaps pickup in adjacent housing areas (many students who live around the university in private housing would use the bus service).
 - iii. Both adequate schedule (at least till 2:00pm) and reliability were important for patronage.
- D. Students emphasize the need to communicate effectively about changes in the parking situation and/or parking policy:
- a. Signage around the campus prior to the event.
 - b. Communicate through Emails or other electronic medium
 - c. Articles in the Houstonian prior to the event or construction.

- d. In general, students do not read the materials given to them at the time they purchase their stickers (most read it once when they were freshman and have relied on their knowledge for information).
- E. Students would like to see some form of hierarchy to the sticker system. That is, if one purchased a “premium” sticker (e.g., a contract spot in the Parking Garage), they would also like that sticker to allow them to park in other student lots as well. They expressed a willingness to pay more for a sticker that had such flexibility built in to it.
- F. Students do not like the idea of paying twice for parking. That is, if they have paid for a sticker, they resent having to pay at the parking garage, or if they have paid for a contract spot, they resent having to pay for a sticker to park on the surface lots as well (they considered this as double jeopardy).

The Parking Garage

- A. For most, awareness of the garage was low prior to the topic being introduced by Dr. Mehta in class.
 - a. Students generally agreed with the notion that the garage needs to be publicized more (may be through more signage around campus).
 - b. In addition, some students expressed difficulty understanding how to get to and enter the garage.
 - c. Also, signage like “do not take a risk getting a \$25 ticket, park at the garage for \$1 per hour” was considered acceptable.
- B. Of those who have used the facility, they are very pleased with its proximity to campus and the facility itself. They provided some ideas for stimulating trial. These included:
 - a. Giving away coupons and/or cards good for one free day of parking.
 - b. Having specific times when parking would be free (e.g., weekends, holidays, finals week).
 - c. Leasing the facility to some campus organizations for some events (e.g., party at the top floor of the garage with a live band)
- C. The singular manner of payment is problematic, and is likely inhibiting its use.
 - a. Not all students have a credit or debit card.
 - b. Some students are not interested in paying small amounts, such as a short-term parking fee, with their credit card (since many carry balances over, they do not want to pay interest for parking).
 - c. Some of the alternative methods of payment discussed include:
 - i. Place a person on site to receive cash payments

- ii. Place a machine that accepts cash or tokens
 - iii. Sell stored value cards at the campus bookstore and other locations. These cards would function like debit cards which would reduce the amount from the card when exiting the parking garage.
- D. Increasing the daily cost of the garage from \$4 maximum to \$5 maximum was seen as reasonable. Increasing from \$4 to \$6 was seen as too big an increase (for the time being) to take at one time (50%).

Reserved Parking Spots

- A. Upon hearing it explained, students expressed some interest in the reserved spaces in the parking garage.
- B. When presented with the possibility of securing a secured space on a surface lot, for roughly half the price of the garage (\$200/year), students expressed a good deal of interest. However, they did express some concern over enforcement.
- C. Finally, when presented with the possibility of securing a reserved spot on a 2-day (TT) or 3-day (MWF) basis, students also expressed strong interest (since many students have classes on Tuesday and Thursday only).
- D. Although they may have a reserved spot, students expressed an interest in having their stickers work in other lots, so they can occasionally park somewhere else on campus when necessary (i.e., the hierarchy sticker concept indicated previously).
- E. Students understand and are amenable to the notion of *variable and/or differential pricing*. That is, the closer you park, the more you pay for your sticker or reserved spot. They felt that if the university implemented this policy, there should still be some economical spots around campus, even if they are far from the buildings (e.g., Bower stadium)
- F. In terms of paying for a reserved spot (or any significant expenditure), students are looking for alternatives to a single, one lump sum payment. Among the alternatives discussed:
 - a. Some would like to break the lump into parts, and make multiple, smaller payments (e.g., monthly).
 - b. Some would like to see it as a check-off item on the online registration, so the fee is lumped in with tuition, fees, etc., and paid by their parents.

Short-term Parking

- A. Students expressed a desire to see improved accommodation for short-term parking (similar to one in front of the post office and cashier). This may simply mean more spaces available at different location around campus. This issue probably needs to be examined more closely to determine the best solution (e.g., metered vs. free spots).
- B. Apparently, many of the occasions whereby students receive tickets are when they are taking chances by parking illegally because they have a “quick trip”.

Summary and Conclusions

This could be the first time UPD has commissioned a formal Marketing Research study the parking issue at SHSU. While this may not be a scientific study, it gives the university an opportunity to hear from the students directly (most of the time students communicate through the Houstonian). What we have tried to present in this report is a summary of the discussions.

As evident from the discussions above, it is obvious that numerous issues were raised and discussed during each of the focus group sessions. In fact, some issues were so important that they were brought up multiple times during the different focus groups sessions. While some vocal students have expressed themselves at informal settings and written editorial columns in the Houstonian, it is our professional belief (as unbiased researchers) that parking is NOT a serious problem at SHSU. The reason why some students complain is because there are some tactical things that need to be done to improve the situation. For example, since we have no differential pricing on campus, everyone wants to park the closest (when they park at the stadium, they feel they are not getting what they paid for). Also, since the campus does not have too many short term spots, they feel that it takes longer to find a parking spot then to drop off the assignment at the professors' office.

Since we are researchers and not policy makers, we have tried to minimize our recommendations. If you need any clarification regarding this report, please do not hesitate to contact either of us. It is our beliefs that the report, while not conclusive, will assist administrators make better decisions. We appreciate the opportunity to assist the UPD and the University community at large in this study and look forward to assisting UPD and other departments on campus in the future. We would recommend that UPD conduct a formal study that is more scientific (a survey that includes faculty, staff, and students from other colleges) before implementing any major recommendations.