**Departmental Bike Fleets on Campus**

**A final report after a semester of working towards bolstering bike fleets**

This past semester working on bolstering bicycle fleets on our campus has been extremely rewarding. I am very glad I got to be part of this project and feel that the experience has been incredibly helpful. I also would like to think that I made some small dent in the University’s efforts towards sustainability!

**Importance**

On a personal level, encouraging the adoption of the bicycle fleets on campus is a culmination of several of my interests. Sustainability, environmentalism, cycling, and health. In my mind, bicycles are a perfect blend of many, many positive ideals. Cycling is healthy, promotes social positive interactions, it is environmentally friendly, sustainable, affordable, and fun! And there isn’t much a bicycle can’t do, especially on a small scale like our University campus.

For the University, the same benefits that interest me on a personal level also apply. Encouraging staff to use bicycles to get around can improve worker’s health, leading them to be more productive (Brooks, 2013). Bicycles can save the University money because they cost less to purchase and maintain than vehicles. Bicycles do not take up nearly as large of a footprint as a vehicle and can go places that vehicles can traditionally not go. The bikes can also save the University money indirectly through the reduced health care needs of their healthier employees. From an environmental perspective, bicycles are incredible. A quality bicycle will last many decades if maintained properly, longer than a vehicle, and of course do not release any emissions or use any gas. From an “image” perspective, the University would benefit immensely from reduced vehicle traffic and increased bicycle traffic. As sustainability and environmentalism become ever more popular in this country, the University could brag that its staff primarily uses bikes, walks, or takes public transit for intercampus travel. Reduced vehicle traffic would also cause less congestion on our already tightly packed campus and would improve noise and air pollution. If the University is truly committed to sustainable, long-term goals, then a bicycle fleet for employee use is an obvious improvement to what our campus has to offer.

**Barriers/Challenges**

In the past few months, I have witnessed first hand the challenges that are stopping people from adopting bicycle fleets on campus. Of course there are logistical issues that can complicate entry; people are wary about whether they will use the bikes (many people simply don’t travel across campus that often), they don’t know how they will maintain them, where they will store them, etc. There are answers to all of these issues that aren’t actually that complicated. If people not using the bikes is an issue, purchase fewer bikes for a larger number of people; there is always the chance to purchase additional ones if it becomes necessary. Bikes can be maintained through several outlets including the Bike Project of Urbana-Champaign or local bike shops. Storage can be done inside in some buildings (with permission), but bikes can be stored outside perfectly fine, they will just need some extra attention before, during, and after the harsh winter season. A simple yearly tune up and monthly 15-minute maintenance check should be enough to keep the bikes performing well.

The previous issues can all be solved – in fact, after a short conversation I think most of these worries go away. The one issue that cannot be solved through a conversation, and one that I saw coming up almost every time a discussion about bicycle fleets came up was the most obvious one: money. No one likes to hear that they have to spend money. While totally understandable, it is also frustrating that there is a lack of desire to spend even a low amount of money to purchase one bicycle for employee use. Admittedly, I don’t understand completely the financial structure of the University, its colleges, and ultimately its departments. From what I could tell it seemed that everyone was apprehensive about spending any kind of money on sustainability initiatives for its employees. I don’t feel like this should be the case – again, what are we trying to achieve at this University? If sustainability is truly a goal of our campus, why are departments not able to spend even a small amount of money on something that can make their employees healthier, happier, less inconvenienced, and of course, more environmentally friendly. If they truly don’t have the money to spend, then perhaps the University as a whole should be assigning a sustainability budget specifically to each department that they can spend at their discretion in the name of sustainability.

**Hypothetical Solutions**

If I had all the power to make change happen without consideration for financial or logistical constraints, I would propose a couple of different ideas. One obvious solution might be to simply purchase bikes for each department and have them manage them; however, I am not confident this would work out well. Each department is unique in size, needs, habits, etc. For example, some departments at UIUC need to move large items across campus on a regular basis – the same bike that they would need to move those items is different than one where its only job is to get from point A to B. Perhaps what may be more appropriate is a kind of sign-up system where, with advice from someone who is knowledgeable about bikes, departments could draft up a short application of the type of bike they would want along with what accessories they need, and the University could purchase bikes for departments based on those applications. Ensuring that that application was short enough to be approachable and uncomplicated would make it so that it would be worth it for departments to complete. I do think it would aid though in the “waste” that may occur if every department received a bike even if they did not particularly want one. This way a driven employee or two or a driven department could easily obtain a bike for use for University business. I have attempted to find out how many departments there are on campus but can’t seem to come up with a specific number. I imagine there are many…possibly almost 1,000, but of course, I am guessing. Using rough numbers, say 300 departments fill out the “application” for a bike, 300 departments at $500 per bike is $150,000. A large amount, but it would also mean that there would be 300 University owned bicycles ideally being used all over campus on a regular basis. These bikes could be heavily branded to make it obvious that these are University vehicles. This would promote the idea that the University is geared heavily towards sustainability. It would also be a nice thing to show of to visitors of the University, offering them a bicycle to use while on campus would be very attractive. It would also be attractive to potential employees and would be yet another example of a quality service that the University could provide for their employees. If that much money is too much, perhaps a “raffle” type system would work better. The University could offer placement in to a raffle for departments to enter and the winning department would have a bicycle of their choosing (within reason) purchased for them. They would then be responsible for maintenance, etc., but would avoid the initial cost of the bicycle. If the University committed to having 50 winners of this raffle, it could perhaps be a catalyst for other departments to see the usefulness and possibilities that biking on campus can offer.

I think in my ideal world, the University as a whole, through whatever avenue is most appropriate, would provide a bike for any department that wants one with the stipulation that the department maintains it. This would perhaps eliminate resistance to obtaining a bike due to the initial cost of the bike. I feel this approach combines the best of both worlds; a large funding source that covers up front costs, while still allowing the individual needs and wants of each department to be honored.

I think it would be very interesting to see a cost-benefit analysis for the purchasing of bikes for departments. Again, the bikes are relatively cheap to purchase and maintain and due to their varying benefits can reduce costs in many ways (health care, vehicle maintenance and purchasing, parking costs, emissions).

As part of these hypothetical situations, I think it would be fantastic if the University could offer some kind of winter bike storage solution for departments who do not think the bikes will get any use over winter. This will prolong the health and life of the bikes and again, can serve as a “bragging rights” point for the University, especially if coupled with a winter bike storage solution for students on campus. I also imagine that as part of this winter bike storage, the University could contract local bike shops or perhaps have an employee of their own perform a yearly tune up on the bikes. This would be incredibly convenient for departments because it would be one less thing to think about – they would not have to make an additional trip to a bike shop every year. They would make one trip to the winter storage center where the bike would be tuned up, parts replaced as necessary, cleaned, and protected from the elements until the department wished to have it back.

**Traditional Bike Share**

With ZipBike potentially coming to campus in the Spring, I think it is worth discussing why I feel departmental bicycle fleets still matter. I don’t think a traditional docking-style bike share would work to replace the benefits of departmentally operated bicycle fleets for several reasons. The biggest reason to me is convenience. If departmental bicycle fleets are to be successful, convenience needs to be king. No one is going to walk a quarter mile or half-mile to get the bike and then park it a quarter mile from their destination. In the time it took them to do that, they could have simply walked or driven to their location. Bicycling on campus is the fastest mode of transportation; however, that would not be the case if the bikes are not located conveniently right outside your door or at least at a building next door. For bike sharing dock-style to match the convenience of a dedicated bicycle at the department’s building, the docks would have to be ubiquitous across campus, quite literally outside every building. Financially and logistically, I don’t think that is possible. To me, departmental bicycle fleets would be entirely more convenient for staff needing to get around campus quickly and efficiently.

Perhaps complimentary, temporary ZipBike memberships makes sense for visitors to campus in lieu of letting them borrow a departmental bicycle. But past that, I cannot see it replacing departmental owned bikes in terms of convenience. I truly believe that if the bikes are not convenient to use, no one will use them at all, and at the end of the day, that’s the entire point.

**Conclusions**

The benefits of bicycle fleets for employee use are numerous. In my opinion, the benefits are so numerous that the University should be aggressively funding and initiating bicycle fleets on campus. The challenges to this process are there, but they are in no way insurmountable. Logistical issues largely have easy to implement, clear solutions (short of a winter storage solution, which of course would be costly, yet obviously present huge benefits). The largest issue, finances, is an issue that needs to be addressed in any sort of new program, but I think the clear, extensive benefits of departmental bicycle fleets, along with its fairly reasonable cost, make it easy to campaign for when it comes to funding requests.

Sources

Brooks, Chad. "You Are What You Eat...Even at Work." Business News Daily. N.p., 08 Jan. 2013. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.