NOTES FROM THE DISMAL SCIENCE
My Theory of the Oakland University Parking Problem

Sherman T. Folland

Actually, I think that parking at OU isn't really a problem, instead it's more of a tragedy. What I have in mind is what Garrett Hardin years ago called "The Tragedy of the Commons." He described a poor farming village where most farmers eked out a living by tending sheep. In the center of this village was a common expanse of grassy field. The villagers gathered together to discuss the use of the commons, a very valuable pasture for feeding their sheep. All agreed that it would be unfair to charge for its use, because they thought that then the poor would be harmed. They concluded that the best and fairest method would be for all sheepherders to use the common pasture freely, no one would be hindered in any way.

Hardin's "tragedy" arose because everyone used this free resource to the maximum extent, whenever possible they substituted more of the free commons for the more costly alternatives. Soon the commons was overrun with shepherds and sheep and soon thereafter it was destroyed by this overuse. The moral of this story is probably transparent, and it can be stated in economic jargon very precisely and then translated

clearly into normal English, though with somewhat less precision: "If you're giving it away, expect a lot of company."

It also applies to our OU parking problem, though some adjustments and alterations to the theory have to be made. First of all, one can always say that parking is not a problem for us at OU because we can in principle always find a spot to park. In fact, during mid-semester the outlying lots are often nearly empty. Furthermore, a little walk could do all of us some good.

My claim is that the problem is not the availability of spots but the lack of an efficient mechanism to ration them. Anytime during the semester, and especially at peak times, we see cars milling around in the parking areas, hunting. We see students arriving late to the main lot and dealing with the dilemma: go directly to a distant lot or hunt hoping to find a spot. Finally, we see drivers lurking, perhaps holding up other cars behind them, waiting to pounce when they see a spot opening up. These activities are literally a waste of human time, and for many people they are probably frustrating as well.

Even if many or most students show little or no irritation, we should remember that many Soviet citizens waited in line patiently for bread, often joking about their difficulty; but, the official, bureaucratic practices still unnecessarily wasted the citizen's time, a valuable human resource.

We can loosen up and eventually dispense with this problem if we are patient and apply principles that are well known in econ and are often applied at other schools. There are several workable approaches, but I will sketch a solution that I like best.

Step 1: Identify sublots of our total parking supply according to their walking time from the major classroom centers. For example, paint an area near the North and South Foundations with a green borders and green parking slots. Paint the next more distant subarea orange and so on.

Step 2: Sell correspondingly colored parking decals for the semester to students, staff and faculty. Naturally, the premium areas must cost the most and so on.

Step 3: Make random passes through the parking areas ticketing people who are mismatched or lack a permit entirely.

Step 4: Make the outlying lots free all the time and for anyone.

Step 5: Provide a reserved space for university guests, and also provide departments with guest tags for their guests, tags that apply anywhere.

Step 6: Practice by trial and error to find the subarea prices that result in the "parking magic." What I mean is that we set goals so that regardless of which sublot permit you purchase, you will rarely fail to find a spot in that sublot—say 95% or more of the time you will find a spot quickly and easily.

How do we benefit the community of staff, students and faculty if we ration parking more rationally? Some benefits: a) we know a space will be available; b) those who more strongly need or desire a close-in space can finally get one; c) we employ the total parking area; d) students can plan reliably on the length of time it will take to get to class; e) faculty and staff who either desire a close-in space or are necessitated by their work to drive here and there during the day will be assured of reasonable parking; f) even during the peak times all subareas will be in use with relatively little milling around for spaces; and g) if there is revenue left over this can be applied to improving parking and parking regulation.

But, the goal is never to make money, it is to manage our parking problem. Too high a price for close-in lots means that students are angry and the lots don't fill up either. Too low a price for close-in lots means that these lots are jammed much as before.

Can students afford to pay $20 to $50 for a semester parking sticker (if that's what it takes)? To provide a safety net for poor students, we should always charge zero price for the outlying lots. Will these lots get completely jammed up seeing as how our student body is by and large all "poor"? If you believe this, let me take you on a guided walking tour of the OU parking lots. Personally, I am very proud of my 1995 Accord, its engine purrs. Our walking tour, however, would dispel any illu-

sions you may have of student incomes. Here you will see BMWs, some Corvettes, few if any cars of vintage 1995 or older, but lots of fine recent year Civics, Malibus, Jeeps, Tauri, Corollas, Saturns you name it. If the class of student cars gets maybe just one or two notches higher, we will need valet parking.

Like any scheme that a firm does, whether it is a for-profit busines or a non-profit university, it is a matter of trial and error. Any remedy to OU parking problems will necessarily require a more efficient rationing system than the first-come-first-serve we have now. But, whatever system we adopt and apply we will learn only by experience how to make it work. The exception, of course, is the status quo.