



Maneuvering Through Parking Cones: More Than an Inconvenience

Roger Anderson
Ohio, USA

Abstract

An international student studying in the United States must navigate the challenges of both studying and living abroad. Students must find adequate housing, establish new social networks, and often enroll children in school. What's more, in a sprawling country like the U.S. where most communities accommodate automobile transportation, international students may opt to acquire a driver's license in order to meet the demands of a spouse's or family's hectic schedules. Yet such students may face the additional obstacle of having no space available for practice driving within their university. While having space may seem a trivial issue, the real-life ramifications having no space can be tremendously negative. This essay highlights one large university's consideration of this issue and student-led advocacy, and its demonstrated leadership in meeting students' needs. Such an example of successful redress of an equity issue facing international students may prove to be a model for other American universities.

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More than a mere inconvenience

At a research university in the Midwestern region of the United States where I am currently pursuing my doctorate degree in Foreign Language Education, the problem of finding space to practice driving proved to be more than an inconvenience. The university boasts a large number of international students, and the ability to drive in the large city greatly facilitates integration into the community. While the university incentivizes students' use of public transport, an international student with a family and all associated extracurricular obligations may find it challenging to rely entirely on city public transit. Like out-of-state domestic students, international students seeking to drive in Ohio must pass all parts of the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicle's (BMV) exam, including the maneuverability test. The test consists of maneuvering slowly through five traffic cones.

Prior to our advocacy, no space within its university's vast parking lots had been made available for students to practice for the maneuverability test. Practice driving remains banned in all university-owned lots, as clearly designated by signage (see Figure One). In these and similar lots around the university area, international students had reported having negative encounters

with police officers who enforce the ban. The majority of international students live in one concentrated area around the university, and student family housing is located adjacent to the lots. Similarly, it is legally considered trespassing to practice driving in lots owned by grocery stores, churches, and department stores (despite that locals sometimes do so). Like many Ohioans, international students are often unfamiliar with Ohio laws on these issues. What was transpiring were their repeated attempts to practice driving in the university owned and privately owned business lots, which ultimately resulted in negative interactions, frustrations, and the potential for criminal charges.

Regarding the state's driving law, it isn't totally clear that holders of valid licences from other countries (e.g. international students) must obtain an Ohio license, nor is the timetable in which they must do so. Together, the law's ambiguity and the lack of space for practicing amounted to students opting to drive without having obtained an Ohio license, the results of which were distressing. According to the legal experts of the non-profit agency contracted by the university to assist students, each month approximately twenty international students were being charged with driving while not possessing an (Ohio) driver's license (No Operational License). This crime is a first degree misdemeanor, carrying the potential of jail time. From my conversation with the university police chief, he asserted his view that all drivers should have an Ohio license, but that police officers can use their discretion in choosing to issue a citation or not, (again, a first degree misdemeanor). Contacting the city's chief prosecutor, we learned that the unofficial policy is to avoid prosecuting international students who have been charged with this crime if the student initiates the necessary steps to obtain an Ohio driver's license. While such leniency is appreciated, the problem is recurrent. While no direct cause-effect relationship exists between not having a designated space to practice driving within the university lots, failure of the exam, and citations issued, to claim that no relationship exists would be incredulous.



Figure 1: Athletic event parking lots, which are most often empty

Citing an actual example, a Korean colleague and his wife arrived in Ohio in late August to begin a doctorate degree. In the autumn, he initially failed the maneuverability portion of the exam due to lack of practice. The couple lives in the student housing units specifically designated for international students and families, which are located fifty

yards away from the university's large parking lots used for athletic events. These lots sit empty most of the week. Nonetheless, practice driving is prohibited "24/7," as reads the signs (see Fig. 1). This colleague's second attempt for the exam was scuttled due to his misunderstanding of the requirement of a temporary license prior to taking the exam. His third attempt was cancelled due to winter weather and the BMV office being closed. For months, his lack of a legal right to drive

negatively impacted his and his wife's daily living in many ways. Finally, after many months of living as a busy doctoral student in a new culture, he passed the maneuverability portion of the exam.

Possessing their own national licenses and driving experience, most international students need only the privilege of using a space provided by a driving school, rather than the full instructional services of a driving school, which would be a costly, extraneous investment. In brief, what was needed was a space for practicing and the right to use that space, recognized by all parties involved, including the university and the police.

Our Advocacy Efforts

Serving as Chair of the graduate student government committee tasked with the welfare of our international student population, we met to discuss this issue with university senate committees, international student office administrators, the police department and with student legal experts. Our assignment was to first investigate where the disconnect was occurring and the departments involved decision-making related to parking. Secondly, we tasked ourselves with having the problem recognized as such. Indeed the problem did not directly concern academics, but nonetheless concerned the well-being of a vast number of international students. Lastly, we proposed general ideas, but desired to leave to the university administration the development of specific proposals of solutions, since many complex legal issues eluded us. After many conversations and investigations, the major obstacles appeared to be three-fold: liability issues, inconsistent communication, and lack of market pressure.

The first obstacle we encountered was that a long-term, multi-million dollar contract was signed within the previous three years between the university and a private management company to operate the parking lots. As such, all parking lots fell under private purview. In this system, if an accident occurred while a student was practicing driving, thorny questions of legal responsibility would arise. Moreover, my committee learned of the existence of a parking advisory board that issues exemptions to the aforementioned contract. The board permits community groups external to the university to hold special events, some annually, in the same parking lots in front of the international student housing units (in which the aforementioned Korean couple lives). One such event is an automobile race, which is ironic since enrolled university students are barred from driving at a crawl through five cones in these same lots. The issue of whether these groups provide for their own liability coverage remained unknown to my committee.

Our advocacy succeeded in reaching members of the parking advisory board but unsuccessful in receiving responses. Next, we turned to one creatively-minded administrator, who proposed that we seek a space owned by the university but the operation of which was not included in the aforementioned contract, such as a bus turnaround or underused runway at the university airport. We were eventually informed by another university administrator that an analysis of ten peer institutions yielded that none offer space for practice driving within their respective parking lots. As such, an additional obstacle surfaced: no real need existed for our university to provide for this issue, as it is ancillary to an international student's academics, and as such, no threat existed of falling behind competing universities in the quality of services provided. As time passed without any progress, we remained cognizant that the gears of a large institution grind slowly. Frustration set in as it appeared our advocacy was stalled after one year of advocacy.

Through constant efforts at communication, our committee remained optimistic. The leadership of the graduate student government greatly enhanced our efforts by taking up the issue directly with the university president. The president, relatively new to the university, was spearheading several initiatives aiming at increasing diversity and issues of equity. After one year and three months of advocacy, my committee received a notification of a plan being developed. A location within the campus parking lots, equaling approximately sixty individual spaces, would be available for practice driving, the details of which were still being forged. The plan was even mentioned as one of the university's successes in creating a welcoming, diverse student atmosphere during the president's State of the University address.

Ultimately, an additional two months passed before an official system was established. The system requires students/ their spouses to register in person on campus to use the space and receive a paper pass to legitimize their presence in the lot. Because the lot is used by university employees during business hours, practice driving was restricted to daytime, weekend hours. A maximum number of students able to register each day is set, and cones are not provided. Nonetheless, merely having a space with available times is a major asset to the community of international students. Happily, the system seems to work as international students have reported using the space for practice driving without worrying about violating statutory or customary laws.

Conclusions: Mutual benefits and an inclusive-minded university

Many lessons can be drawn from this example of student-advocacy. Our advocacy demonstrates the benefits of patience, constant communication, and working within the mechanisms of university governance through student government. While a seemingly petty issue, involved parties had to come to recognize that the ultimate consequences for international students of not having such as space for practice driving are serious. Moreover, lack of space presented a public safety concern, an economic issue for the university, and above all, it is an issue of student equity. For the city, it seems obvious that safer drivers on the road means a safer community for all. Regarding the university, it is no secret that international students' enrollment in American universities represents a sizeable source of revenue. International students are valuable, deserving members of the university community whose presence enriches the community in numerous ways. Personally, their presence provides me employment and a core cadre of friends.

When universities fail to provide space, they increase the potential for international students to have negative experiences, such as interactions with police or experiences inside American courtrooms. Universities should not underestimate the power of word-of-mouth references abroad, as international students have networks of friends, family, and compatriots which disseminate anecdotes from studying overseas. As such, any negative experience, even one as trivial as failing the maneuverability exam, can only harm the reputation of the university, of the state, and of the U.S. more broadly. This reflection was authored in the hope that American universities remember the "living" aspects which inherently accompany the "studying" experience of studying in America. While there are undoubtedly limits to the services that can be provided to international (and domestic, out-of-state) student populations, prioritizing this specific issue yields high-impact results for the community broadly. Finally, this university administration should be commended for its willingness to ascertain students' concerns and for demonstrating leadership on this issue.