

Exploring JMU's Rampant Parking Issues and Potential Solutions to These Everyday
Problems

Written by: Tye Hooker

James Madison University

WRTC 200 – Introduction to WRTC Studies

Introduction

When factoring in everything your average college student does to complete a successful day of classes, parking may just seem like another necessary step to advancing your day. However, for many students at James Madison University, perhaps it isn't the lengthy tests or hefty workloads that inspire feelings of despair, but the time-consuming and frustrating process of finding a place to park each and every day that does. And while, for years, university leaders and organizers have stressed leaving your apartment just a little bit sooner or potentially arriving on campus hours before your scheduled class, could these simply be buzzwords meant to imply students are at fault for these parking struggles? It seems so, as, when using various forms of social media, it's easy to see JMU students voicing their concerns on these topics with little to no responses from the university administration. So, with many of my fellow students frustrated and confused with JMU's parking situation, I felt it would be the perfect time to begin peeling back the layers of this problem-laden onion. So, is this problem simply one of the university lacking proper parking space? Or could there be a bigger story behind it, one that involves the university self-sabotaging its students in a desperate attempt to rake in more money? And how exactly can such a highly acclaimed university struggle with such a trivial problem? That, and so much more is exactly what I will be covering in today's feature article: Exploring JMU's Parking Issues and How One Universities' Choices Have Led to Monumental Confusion and Anger.

Introducing the Problem:

In today's world, I feel like it's very easy to get lost in the sauce and just riddle off reasons the university is at fault for the current parking situation. However, I believe that would be critically unhelpful to just point fingers and not take a deeper, more in-depth look at the issues. So,

that's exactly what I did. To start, I began by researching the internet, searching for any potential research project or student study regarding the parking issues at JMU. And, through my countless hours of research, it became crystal clear what exactly the prime issue of parking is at James Madison University: availability.

Essentially, when conducting my research, I continued to come across the talking point that the issue of parking at JMU can be mostly attributed to the fact that there simply isn't enough parking space on campus to accommodate the universities students. This, you might think, is potentially the most logical of the issues with parking at JMU, but if you look closer, the problem with the availability of parking goes way deeper below the surface. For instance, if you've ever spent any amount of time in any one of JMU's parking decks, you'll know that basically the first two floors, filled with many useful spots, are sanctioned off for teachers' parking only. And, you might think that's fair, as they too need a place to park. However, especially in the last several years, it's been widely reported that on average, the "faculty only" floors almost never fill up, while the remaining floors above them have already filled up completely by eight or nine o'clock in the morning. The main takeaway here is not just that this space is unutilized in the parking decks, but also in many lots, as some of the closest and easy-to-access parking lots, which almost never fill up, by the way, are often marked off for faculty only. I think the biggest issue with this design aspect of JMU's parking facilities is that once all the student lots are full for the day, many other commuters still need to make it to class, forcing them to park in faculty-only areas. This small action, as noted by JMU's Parking Services, is no minor infraction, which could result in some nasty fines for the commuter.

When discussing the issue of parking availability at JMU, parking space availability as a whole has to be called into question. Essentially, it is well known that for somewhere around the last five to ten years, the university has sold more commuter passes than available parking spaces on its campus. And, from the outside, this just looks like the university attempting to make as much money as possible. It's important to understand just how much a key mistake like this can affect JMU's drivers. You see, when there are not enough spots to accommodate everyone desperately trying to make it to class on time, things like accidents and moments of conflict between students are almost guaranteed. For example, if you enter the Warsaw parking deck past ten in the morning most days, prior to reaching the student parking levels, the teacher parking levels will be calm and mostly empty, but just feet above, students are waging a war against each other in their vehicles as they fight for the last spot left. This lack of places for people to park and the insane number of commuter passes sold yearly by JMU causes such an issue for some students that even leaving your house an hour early won't help you reach class on time, as it's all a gamble on whether you'll be able to find a spot.

When talking about the parking issues of James Madison University, I would be remised if I didn't touch on one of the most popular issues: parking services. To those looking from the outside in, it's easy to see why an issue like this makes little to no sense. How is a department like parking services not consulting or providing assistance to university students? Well, it comes down to the age-old issue of money. For years, many students have hailed JMU's parking services as nothing more than a well-cloaked cash grab by the university. For proof of this, take one search relating to JMU's parking situation on Reddit and the first comment, and most upvoted, is one describing the department as "absolute criminals". And, to be fair, this may be a correct assessment

of the department. You see, parking services are known to ticket before asking, enforcing every rule regardless of relevancy or need. Basically, instead of helping mitigate traffic issues present on their campus every day, parking services would rather send out multiple crews of agents going car to car searching for any ticket they can print. To me, this almost seems morally wrong, as instead of fixing their problems, the university has poured more time and resources into being able to catch their students, AKA people who are already paying astronomical amounts of money to attend the university, violating the smallest of parking infractions. Another issue with parking services at James Madison is the confusing and intentionally hard-to-process language they use on their website and in student pamphlets. Oftentimes, their website will present a certain parking rule students cannot violate, but they'll present it in such a way you would need to read it several times to actually understand what the author originally meant. This, at first glance, just seems like poor website assembly to the un-trained viewer's eye. However, after taking many design and writing classes at this university, I firmly believe parking services intentionally use this confusing language to potentially lead drivers into making a mistake the university can charge their wallets for.

Finally, one of the largest problems with parking services is their appeal process, which I feel I am very generous in calling a "process". Essentially, if a student is ticketed, he or she supposedly has the ability to "appeal" such a charge if said individual believes that the ticket is unfair or unjust. However, at JMU, this appeal process is so one-sided that you almost never hear of anyone getting their tickets overturned by parking services, even if the ticket is extremely unfair. The reason for this? Money. In my opinion, the appeal process is unfair towards students, as the university has it in its best interest to never intentionally side with the student, as that outcome will yield no monetary return. I, too, have gone through this experience, as during my freshman year, I

received a parking ticket I found to be very unfair and unjust. I went on to present all of the facts in the case to parking services but was met with much pushback, as many of the employees just wanted me to pay the ticket and leave. Nearly every time I have been inside of parking services, it has been the exact same, with me receiving incredibly poor service and being treated like nothing more than an open check that the university can't wait to cash. Situations like mine and so many more can be found online by just one simple search, showing how big this problem really is.

If you ask me, one of the biggest issues facing new JMU commuters isn't some outdated policy or packed parking deck, it's simply the lack of knowledge about the parking rules on campus in general. From experience, I can tell you that when you first start commuting/parking in one of JMU's parking facilities, you'll likely be very green to many of what the university would consider being "parking violations". However, instead of working to help educate their new drivers on some of the more trap-like and tricky policies within the department, parking services often chooses to exploit these young commuters for an easy ticket. On top of this, rather than encouraging careful and mindful driving in their parking decks and lots, JMU often punishes many of these students attendance-wise, despite them being just a few moments late to class due to the insanity that finding a parking spot here can be. This fear of being punished for something that is somewhat out of their control can often prompt many drivers to round corners too quickly or accidentally park in places they aren't allowed to.

Finally, the last major issue with parking at JMU that I want to touch on is the engineering and design of the campus parking facilities. When looking at where the majority of Dukes have their classes, the location of interest would be on the quad, as it seems to be where most classes

are held. To this point, it makes little to no sense why the largest and most accommodating parking deck, Ballard Parking Deck, is located all the way on East Campus. And, while many students do have classes on East Campus, there's simply not enough to justify building the largest parking deck farthest away from where the majority of your students need to go. The same issue can be applied to the various remote lots owned and operated by James Madison University. They are simply too far away and un-accessible on foot, making their existence absolutely futile. So essentially, what you have is around two thousand to three thousand commuters attempting to shove themselves into two or three of the main parking decks, resulting in crashes, tickets, and an awful headache. Another main issue I have with the engineering of JMU's parking decks is the actual dimensions of the facilities. Take one ride to the top of the Grace Parking Deck and you'll one hundred percent understand where my hatred for this design comes from. For one, it would seem as if all the parking decks were created to accommodate only small vehicles as well as only allow one direction of traffic throughout the building. However, with the massive influx of drivers pushing their way in and out of the garage, the engineering of this building is pushed to its max, causing many accidents and close calls for drivers daily.

Identifying and Understanding Potential Solutions

While writing this research project and building my website, I was hit with an overwhelming feeling that as someone who is looking into a topic as complex as this, I would be doing my readers a great disservice if I did not include examples of solutions to our many issues regarding parking at JMU. So, that's exactly what I did. When discussing the issue of the university lacking an adequate number of parking spaces, one must take into account some of the

solutions provided by the James Madison community. Essentially, for the last ten years or so, the recommendation for the university to build another parking deck has been screamed from the rooftops by students and faculty. A quick search on any engine will prove this true, as visiting any of the top search results will take you to a page filled with students begging the university to open a new parking deck. So, if both their employees and students have been voicing this recommendation, why has the university not made the move? Well, it's actually quite simple, the university has yet to break ground on a new parking deck simply off the fact that the higher-ups feel they are strapped tightly with their land assets. Essentially, the university has no more easily identifiable land they can build another parking deck on currently at their disposal.

So, if they can't add another parking deck, then what should the university do to increase the number of parking spots available for students? It seems that the simplest answer to this problem would be to eliminate a small amount of faculty-only parking in each parking deck, returning a good number of spots back to students, and helping alleviate some pressure off the parking system at JMU. Essentially, if JMU can't afford or aren't able to construct another parking deck, they simply need to find a new way to open up more parking spaces to their students, and this option seems like the most painless for the university. At first glance, it may seem like educators and other faculty may not be in favor of this move, seeing as how it would reduce the number of parking spots available to them, however, that's simply not the case. As noted by many James Madison educators online, much of the faculty-only parking hardly ever fills up, and the majority of faculty seems like they would be in favor of the university making a move like this.

When addressing the issue of parking services at the university and how to solve it, I must first preface with there are many good people who are employed by JMU's parking services. When

having conversations like these, it's very easy to write off everyone associated as unhelpful and difficult people, when that simply isn't the case. The fact of the matter remains, however, that during my and many students just like me's interactions with parking services, we have been treated disrespectfully and been victims of archaic policies that simply can't keep up with modern-day demand. In the end, I think JMU needs to take a serious look at how parking services employees interact with their students and the process of contacting them as a whole, which can be tricky for many of my peers. Beyond that, some of the policies need a good, hard look at them by an unbiased group who can decide if the university is simply just praying on their students or actually identifying and taking action against certain traffic infractions. Above all, it is absolutely imperative that the university look at peeling back the aging appeal system, as it clearly needs some work to ensure students have a fair shot at getting their side of the story across and not just being a useless buzzword placed in writing by JMU to make students think they'll have a chance to fight a ticket. Solutions to this could include but are not limited to potentially adding a third-party "judge" who could make a ruling on this issue, versus the complaint being processed by the very people who stand to make money if one side loses every time.

Along with these prior mentioned solutions, over the years, many have come forward to present the university with potential fixes to their issues with parking. And, when combing through each and every search result during my research stage, I stumbled upon another solution that could improve the situation drastically: reducing the number of commuter passes sold each semester. As it currently stands, each semester the university sells more commuter parking passes than parking spots ever available. This overselling and rushing to just take as much cash as possible has led to some of the worst traffic and driver-decision-making I've ever been a part of. With way too many

drivers attempting to cram their way into a parking deck, a building that simply does not have the capacity to hold everyone, you're bound to find yourself in a sticky situation. To counteract this, the university should consider limiting the number of passes they sell each year, further reducing the number of vehicles on campus every day. The idea of doing this, however, is not new and has been presented to James Madison University many times. Of course, the sad reality with many of these solutions is that the university would likely take a hit on the financial side, since they're not selling quite as many passes as usual, pricing them around \$300 each.

So, if the university is unlikely to touch a solution that could affect its bottom line, what remains? Should students and educators just accept that the parking situation at James Madison is eternally awful? Well, not exactly. In many other schools' cases, they have looked beyond the goal of building more spaces for their commuters and shifted their focus to better organizing their parking to help mitigate frustrations. Essentially, many colleges are creating a sort of "reserved" parking, where a specific major or class could be responsible for parking in or on a particular floor or parking deck. While this solution works especially well on smaller college campuses, this is something that could work with a little ingenuity and creativity here at JMU. The idea of "reserved" parking essentially takes the guesswork out of searching for a spot every time you leave your apartment for class. Rather than driving through every single parking deck searching for that elusive parking spot, students would be given a floor/deck they should park on every time they commute to attend class. This would eliminate much of the in-fighting between students as nearly everyone would be much less stressed and become more tolerant of one another, far from what today's parking decks feel like.

Finally, I think it's important to include a solution to many of JMU's parking problems that wouldn't cost the school any money or take up too much of any one department's time. When it comes to the issue of educating many of the new drivers on campus, it seems like the easiest one to solve. Essentially, I believe the university could begin clearly listing on their parking services webpage many of the simple and more complicated parking infractions they commonly run into, using easy-to-understand language of course. This could help many new commuters to see exactly what the university has no tolerance for and what they should expect going forward when dealing with parking services. When I first got to JMU, I remember hearing the wildest rumours about parking rules on campus, everything from your first infraction being a \$0 charge no matter what the issue was to hearing non-commuter pass holders could park overnight in JMU lots. When hearing a lot of this stuff now, it may seem like nonsense and maybe should've been identified as such then, but with little to no publicity of the average rules and regulations of using JMU's parking facilities, I was prone to believing misinformation. Another important point I feel I need to mention in the segment is that many current commuters at the university make the parking situation much worse by driving irresponsibly and carelessly in many of the parking decks on campus. In most cases, through personal research I've found that many of the people who act like this simply are just frustrated with the slow-moving traffic and the backup of a struggling parking system, however, this does not excuse this kind of behaviour whatsoever. To avoid having many of these irresponsible and careless drivers act this way, I believe JMU could potentially put up some signage recommending commuters to watch their speed and begin promoting safer and more mindful driving on campus to begin the process of helping to alleviate some stress off the parking system. The university taking immediate action and working on some kind of plan like this could not only make many commuters happier but also make JMU's parking decks far safer for their students.

Closing Thoughts

When looking at a topic like the issue of parking at James Madison University, I felt as though the best way to go about it would be to interview many of my fellow peers and gauge what their ideas and recommendations for the school would be going forward. And when it was all said and done, many of them had come up with the exact same solutions, as they seem common sense to just about anyone who deals with this stuff on a regular basis. To put it bluntly, much of my research has led me to come to the conclusion that many of these problems were in fact created by JMU itself, with some of them being born out of pure incompetence in design and others being forged to become nothing more than shameless cash-grabs. The point of saying all of that is to highlight that one institution continues to allow an issue affecting nearly all of its students to flourish simply off the fact that it's in their wallet's interest not to care. Now, on the flip side, readers will note that I've been critical of both the university as well as its students regarding this problem, seeing as how I highlighted above the recklessness and carelessness with which many commuters operate their vehicles on campus. Overall, the idea that the parking situation at JMU is even close to being comparable with the current state of affairs at many of the universities James Madison often boasts they're in competition with is almost laughable. However, I don't think it's something the university can't come back from. In fact, I feel it's something the university could work towards in conjunction with its students to help solve at an even faster rate. So, when the heads of the university decide to make the move to assist their commuters with this situation, following at least several if not all of the above-mentioned

solutions, recommended by their own student body even, could be the perfect plan to help combat the ever-growing struggles of commuters simply looking for a parking spot.