Jackson Scher
GEOS 206
May 14, 2013
Prof. Dethier, Stephanie Boyd

Purple Bikes: The Present Situation &

Future Outlook on Bicycling at Williams College

I. Introduction

When asked to describe a "classic" college campus, many people will list features such as old and majestic buildings, a large quad and students tossing a Frisbee. Perhaps, they will imagine students reading books on the lawn or walking to and from class with friends. Finally, people will often mention students biking around campus as an element of their idyllic college campus picture. During the early fall and late spring months, when the Berkshire winter subsides, Williamstown tends to fit this bill quite well. I'd like to look closely, however, at the "biking students" element at Williams.

I would like to examine the cycling environment on campus both in terms of the present situation and what could be (and how to get there). I will begin by describing the actual bikeability of Williams College as it stands now, and I will then turn to ways in which the administration and student groups can make the College more bike-friendly. This is a relevant goal in society today, as more and more communities are adopting bike-friendly measures to cut down on the influence of automobiles in urban centers. Williams does not experience the congestion or pollution of an urban center like the ones in question, but encouraging alternative and sustainable transportation methods seems like a worthy goal for a school that purports to prepare its students for life in the "real world." Outdoor air pollution is surely going to be one of the most important problems of the near and distant future, and many Williams students will end up living in a crowded urban center.

Exposure to sustainable transportation on campus may see its influence carry into the lives of students outside of the Purple Bubble.

II. Current Bikeability of Williams College

Williams College, at first glance, does appear generally bike-friendly. Most dorms and major buildings have bike racks, the roads are well paved and the threat of theft is relatively low. However, a further analysis may tell a different story. The Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center has created a checklist that determines the level of bikeability in a community. Using my own cycling experience, I filled out the survey for Williams College and noticed a few fixable flaws.

First and foremost, bikers are forced to share the road with cars or the sidewalks with students. There are no designated bike lanes anywhere on campus. Luckily, the roads are relatively wide and sparsely populated. Route 2 is problematic, though unavoidable. It is also not necessary to spend much time riding on Route 2 as there are sidewalks adjacent to the road and crosswalks at all relevant points.

The roads are well paved, and the intersections are very tame, thanks to mostly excellent driver behavior. There are not many street signs directing the way, but after a short time on campus, students figure out the names of buildings very quickly. As a junior, this is not a relevant problem for me. The Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center's checklist can be found online, but in my personal analysis, the College scored in the 21-25 point range out of 30. We have room for improvement, though we are doing a good job so far. I would now like to point out a few specific points on campus that are worth avoiding on a bike.

First of all, many students take classes in Hopkins Hall and Griffin. For students that live on the north side of campus, the route to Griffin is a very dangerous one on a bike. The paths adjacent to Hollander (Library Drive) are well maintained and wide, but as soon as the cyclist reaches the plateau near Sawyer, things become more dangerous. First, the construction site at Stetson Sawyer creates varying problems, depending on the day. The fence that is erected has created a constant blind spot for bikers and pedestrians alike. Biking around this turn with any speed is certainly dangerous. Figures 1 and 2 show this blind spot from both sides. As the cyclist makes his or her way past this spot, around Hopkins hall, and towards Griffin, he or she passes by the backside of Thompson Memorial Chapel. This turn is yet another completely blind turn that is very dangerous from both sides for pedestrians and cyclists alike. Figures 3 and 4 exhibit this danger.

On the other side of campus, many students will travel from Paresky to the ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance or Greylock Quad on a regular basis. One potential route for cyclists is along the sidewalk adjacent to Route 2, turning at the ’62 Center. This route is mostly safe, though the unmarked intersection with the ’62 Center’s parking lot is cause for some concern. The other, more problematic route is a more direct one. Students can exit the backside of Paresky, cross Park Street, and descend the stairs beside the Rectory towards their destination. Of course, cycling down stairs is not feasible, so an informal path has sprouted due to simple erosion. This path has a dangerous entrance point, pictured in figure 5, as cyclists are forced to maneuver their way around the staircase or literally jump their bikes off of the ledge at the entrance to the Class of ’37 House. Once the cyclist is on the path, he or she

must be on the lookout for the drainage pipes popping up in the middle of the path. Especially in the dark, these hazards have the potential to seriously injure a cyclist. The hazards and the larger path are pictured in figure 6.

Finally, the whole cycling infrastructure around Driscoll, one of only 3 dining halls on campus so obviously a popular destination, is insufficient. When approaching from Currier Quad, there is no reliable route down to Driscoll on a bike. Cyclists are forced to leave their bikes at either Fitch or Prospect house and pick them up on the way home. If students approach from the Towne Field House parking area or Spring Street, they are faced with a daunting hill that, while a paved path exists, is at too great an angle for most cyclists. Finally, if a cyclist intends to approach Driscoll from the side of Prospect, he or she must contend with a narrow path and unexpected pedestrians exiting the building. This route is the safest by far, but the number of people using this route is very limited, since only a small fraction of the College actually lives in Prospect.

Dealing with these dangerous points on campus should be on the immediate agenda of the administration if we are committed to the goal of encouraging alternative and sustainable transportation on campus. The interventions required are, for the most part, not too difficult to imagine or implement. The fence issue can be solved in a moment, by simply moving the fence to provide some space between it and the sidewalk. The hazard is unnecessary and dangerous, with a quick fix possible. The second hazard, the blind spot by Thompson Memorial Chapel, is more difficult to remove, as the Chapel obviously cannot be moved. However, a simple sign denoting the fact that the turn is blind and travelling slowly is advisable will

certainly alleviate a few accidents a year. Bikers learn quickly about this turn, and they act accordingly, but first-time bikers, especially freshmen, may still be in danger on this turn. A sign would alert first-time bikers to the danger. It is clear that the third hazard, the informal path to the '62 Center, will persist because of its convenience. If the administration recognizes this fact, they should either create a paved path without steps in the long-term, or place a cone by the drainage hazards. Again, bikers learn about these hazards quickly, but first time bikers on this path certainly have an unmarked hazard in front of them. The administration should recognize this fact and do something about it, whether by a quick band-aid intervention or a more permanent infrastructural one. The elimination of these three hazards will quickly improve the current bikeability of Williams College.

III. Cycling Incentives in the Future

When observing cycling patterns at Williams, one has to wonder why we don't see more people riding their bicycles. A few reasons present themselves when thinking personally and polling students formally, as in the Purple Bike Coalition's recent all-campus poll. Let us address each reason one by one and describe ways to overcome them.

First and foremost, the weather must be taken into account. The winter in Williamstown is cold and icy, and nothing can be done to alleviate it. Bicycling in the winter is dangerous and difficult, and it is no surprise that international cycling studies only deal with "cycle-able months" in their studies. Next, some have complained that the ride is simply too far, and that their legs get tired. Not many have employed this excuse, and it simply does not hold much water. The whole of

Williams College campus is 450 acres, and the distance between Susie Hopkins House and Cole Field, (the farthest points I could think of on campus) is a mere 1.3 miles. The center of campus is obviously situated atop a hill, so biking from Susie Hopkins to Cole would imply climbing the hill and then descending. Still, 1.3 miles is (albeit subjectively) not a strenuous ride, and every other ride on campus is of lesser distance. Next, some have complained that cycling is too dangerous, often citing various blind spots and tricky intersections on campus. Fixing the three major hazards above will address this problem, and continued diligence at intersections, encouraging good driver behavior, should result in the alleviation of many safety concerns. Some willingly admit that they are simply too lazy and that they would rather drive to class or practice, etc. Unfortunately, this sentiment will likely persist, since decentivizing driving on campus will require significant infrastructural investment. So few people drive on campus, and the driving infrastructure in place is already quite good. This means that to cut down on the number of cars on campus, major changes must take place that are simply beyond the scope of this paper and the administration's agenda. The costs of such adjustments probably outweigh the benefits, though a formal cost-benefit analysis would be undertaken if the administration were truly interested.

Next, I will turn to the two most compelling reasons people are not biking. First, bikes break. If a student's bike needs repairing, he or she must find a ride to The Spoke, in North Adams, and pay a significant price for repair. This is often beyond many students' willingness to pay, so they instead decide that the costs of repair, both in time invested and monetary costs, are greater than the benefits of

again having a bike on campus. They decide to live without their bike, perhaps looking into repairs closer to home. Fortunately, the Purple Bike Coalition, a student run organization, has formed and is rapidly maturing. This organization gets funding from College Council to pay student employees as well as purchase new tools, etc. These resources go into providing an inexpensive, on-campus bicycle repair shop for student use. Mechanics are amateurs, but they can fix most basic bicycle problems. The group's funding has tripled in the last two years, and young employees have been brought on to the team to ensure its persistence once its founders graduate. The continued support of this student group should be an administrative priority, as their existence solves the problem of broken bikes leading to a decline in the number of bikers on campus.

Next, and most importantly, many students do not bike on campus because they simply do not have a bike. Any student who takes a plane to campus cannot take their bike to school. If the student simply does not own a bike or does not have the necessary equipment to get their bike to school, they will tacitly join the non-biking community on campus. However, many of these students *want* to bike. The Purple Bike Coalition has entertained the idea of expanding into the world of bicycle rentals, taking on the name Purple Bike Rentals. In April 2013, the PBC sent out an all-campus survey regarding bicycle rental interest. For the purposes of this paper, it would not make sense to perform a second survey, since many of the same questions would be asked, and the respondents would likely overlap to a significant degree. Therefore, let us analyze the results of this survey.

It is important to note a few things about this data at the outset. Selection bias is a major problem here. If people were to answer, "No, I am not interested in this program," they probably would not take the survey at all. As such, it is more informative to observe the magnitude of responses in raw numbers rather than percentages of respondents. Next, weather bias must be factored in. The weather in mid April in Williamstown is just starting to get nice, so optimism about the prospect of biking to class and around campus is high. Therefore, we must approach these results with the assumption that some positive responses may be overstated. Finally, senior bias is an important factor that must be accounted for as well. If a senior, about to graduate, sees a survey regarding a future program, the likelihood that he or she will have a strong opinion on the matter is not very high. We do not have data about the class year of respondents, but it can be assumed that seniors generally did not respond unless they had high intensity of preference. There are a few seniors on campus that are strongly associated with the Purple Bike Coalition, so we may expect those students' senior friends to reply favorably, since their responses have no personal ramifications on their time at Williams. Given these biases, we can now approach the results of the data.

First of all, 245 students stated that they would "definitely" support a bike rental program. Only 10 said that they would not support it, while 39 said the program is irrelevant because they own their own bike, and 87 students were unsure. Of the 10 not supporting the program, 6 of them said so because they were planning on bringing a bike to campus next year. We can therefore count these responses in the "program irrelevant" category and not as students actually

opposed to the program. 257 students said that they would utilize bike rentals on weekdays, going to class or practice or running simple errands. Similarly, 243 students stated that they would utilize rentals on weekends, running errands or going for rides for pleasure and/or exercise. These figures are incredibly robust, as they both total around 12% of the entire Williams College student body. Many students (105) stated that they would utilize bike rentals to travel from "their faraway dorms" to other campus locations. More study is required, but it is theoretically possible that these students overlap with students who opt to drive on campus out of convenience. We could see a slight dip in the number of cars on campus by replacing them with bike rentals. Students were divided on the idea of a deposit requirement for bike rentals, with 33% of respondents saying the bike was still worth it, 19% saying they would not pay a deposit and 42% saying their usage would depend on the magnitude of the deposit.

These survey results should signal to the administration that there is significant unmet demand for bikes on campus. Fortunately, it appears that the administration has recognized this and has acted accordingly. The PBC has convinced Campus Safety & Security to provide them with bicycles left on campus over the summer after their 6-month storage period for refurbishing. These bicycles will have purple handlebars and a yellow seat, denoting that they are PBR bikes and that vandalizing them will result in a fine. Their coloring should also encourage bicycle awareness on campus. These practices take advantage of a recycling program unique to Williams (CSS providing old bikes) and ideas put in place at other schools (coloring the bicycles to denote membership). The stock of

PBR bikes is growing, as student mechanics are paid to repair and refurbish them. The administration has declared support for this program, and the Purple Bike Rental will have a trial run this summer and (hopefully) have a full launch in the fall of 2013. If all goes according to plan, this service will help alleviate the biggest determinant of non-bikers: not having a bike to use.

III. Conclusion

Well-paved roads and generally friendly drivers make bicycling on Williams College campus during bike-able months a mostly pleasant experience. Some notable hazards do exist, and various short and long term solutions for such hazards have been presented. The figures that follow will show photographic evidence of the spots in question and the bike routes required. Improving the atmosphere for current cyclists should be on the administration's agenda, though they have already shown support for increasing the overall number of cyclists on campus. The experience of the Purple Bike Coalition and the newly formed Purple Bike Rental programs lends hope for the future of bicycling on campus. Williams purports to prepare its students for life beyond the "Purple Bubble," and encouraging sustainable transportation by providing infrastructure for campus cyclists should be a priority for the College going forward.

References

1. Personal conversation with Erich Trieschman, president of the Purple Bike Coalition and member of the Purple Bike Rental "team"

2. Survey results from PBC survey, obtained from Erich Trieschman

3. Henry, Cameron, Rick Redmond, and Nora Morse. *Cars on Campus: Reducing Unneccessary Car Use on Williams College Campus*. Rep. Environmental Planning (ENVI 302), Fall 2013. Web.

4. Google Maps search, "Directions from Susie Hopkins House, Williamstown MA to Cole Field, Williamstown, MA"

5. "Fast Facts About Williams" page on Williams College website, Office of Communications

6. "Bikability Checklist" published by US Department of Transportation, Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center

7. "Purple Bike Coalition" page on Willipedia, Williams Student run online encyclopedia

8. Personal cycling experience, figures 1-6 are my own personal photographs

9. Guevarra, Leslie. "College Bike Share Programs Gearing Up for New School Year." *GreenBiz.com*. GreenBiz Group, 11 Aug. 2008. Web. 14 May 2013.

10. Posner, Andrew. "Bike Share Programs Becoming Increasingly Popular on College Campuses." *TreeHugger*. MNN Holdings, 21 Oct. 2008. Web. 14 May 2013.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

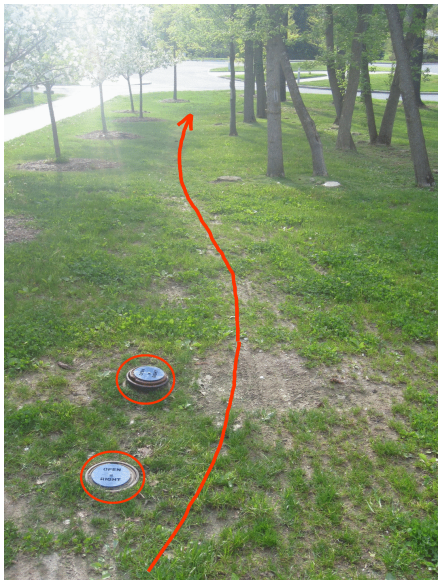

Figure 6